

Living for God¹

I'm sure you've noticed that atheists are all the rage these days. Most of us have seen their books displayed at Barnes and Noble, caught a morning-show interview with them, or heard them referenced at in conversation between our friends, who've discovered champions for their own skepticism.

- Richard Dawson's *The God Delusion* has sold 8.5 million copies, spending a year on the *New York Times* Best Seller List.
- Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great* became a number-one *New York Times* Best Seller and he's now making the circuit with his latest book – a personal memoir.
- Bill Maher's film *Religulous* was the highest-grossing documentary of 2008.

New atheism is hot right now ... and lucrative. On the other hand, the surge in atheism has also encouraged a common-ground, ecumenical response. Muslims, Christians and Jews are standing together, defending their faith against those who claim none.

In the listing of interfaith responses, Rabbi David Wolpe's stands out. He's known as a beloved, but controversial leader in the Jewish community. Rabbi Wolpe was named *Newsweek's* "#1 Pulpit Rabbi in America" a while back. He spiced up the life and ministry of his temple -- Sinai Temple in Los Angeles -- by doing things like holding Friday night "rock 'n' roll" services and by questioning the historicity of the exodus ... at the temple's Passover service!

Wolpe's book *Why Faith Matters* is his response to the new atheism movement. In it he says that today's atheists have completely missed the positive benefits of religion. He cites the positive, constructive power of religion's gifts to society: an interdependent community, a sense of social responsibility, a commitment to charity, believing in something larger than oneself, promoting healthy personal boundaries, and submitting to a "higher power."

According to evangelical minister "Chuck" Swindoll, few things are more infectious than a Godly lifestyle. The people you rub shoulders with every day need that kind of challenge. Not prudish. Not preachy. Just cracker jack clean living. Just honest to goodness, bone-deep, non-hypocritical integrity. In essence, we could say that these are God's ways of demonstrating God's self through those who live in God's way.

Rabbi Wolpe says that, for him, the value and virtue of living in a Godly way crystallized for him early in his ministry. In a story of inadequacy that most of us ministers can relate to, he tells of being called to the hospital bedside of an elderly woman to offer final prayers for the dying. He took the comatose lady's hand, but says that felt like a fraud. Who was he to shepherd a soul to the edge of the next world? But, dutifully, he proceeded to pray familiar words anyway, letting their power carry him.

Talking to his wife about it afterward, Wolpe confessed his feelings of inadequacy. "*You're right,*" she said. "*You are unworthy. Anyone would be unworthy doing such a thing. That's okay, though. It's not you doing it. It's being done through you.*"

Wolpe writes, "*That was a pivotal moment for me. Suddenly it became clear to me that we bring light into this world not as a source but as a prism — it comes through us. As electricity requires a conduit, so spirit moves through human beings to touch others in crucial moments. As soon as I stepped out of my own way, the prayer felt real. I could believe in blessing when I felt that it did not depend on me.*"

Novelist Edith Wharton put the same idea this way: "*There are two ways of spreading light, to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.*"

As I read him, it seems to me that the apostle Paul raises much the same thought, as he writes in Galatians 5. Listen for God's word for us.

¹ Adapted from *The Candle or the Mirror?*, Homiletics, June 2010.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery...

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Now granted this passage from Galatians does not specifically mention light. But I do think Galatians 5 raises the light or prism -- candle or mirror -- question, nonetheless. In this lesson, the fruits of the flesh or the Spirit are set up in a larger context... a context in which Paul is dealing with the influence of Judaizers in Galatia who insist on adding law to grace. Reminding the Galatians of their freedom from the law, Paul asks them to use the holiness encouraged by the law for each other. In living by the Spirit, they are to be slaves to one another, embodying the grand intent of the law, which is to be neighbor-loving.

The "fruit" or the result of living in the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and so on, and these latter qualities are the very things that mirror the light of God into the lives of others. We could rename these qualities the flames of the Spirit... not the fruit of the Spirit, but the flames of the Spirit.

You and I can't be the candle. Christ is the candle. Therefore, we can be — we must be — the mirrors.

Now in the Bible, most light metaphors fall into two categories.

- One, Christ is likened to light — "the people living in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9 or see John 1).
- And two, the followers of Christ are light — "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5). The metaphor of a candle and a mirror encompasses both.

Accordingly, Paul says that Christ has set us free, and ultimately Christ is the light of the world that we all reflect. But when God changes us — when we are led by the Spirit and produce fruit demonstrating that Godly change — then you and I reflect that light in the same way that a mirror does candlelight.

This text, then I think, clearly recognizes that God's Spirit is the one working in us. There's no doubt who the light source is. God's Spirit is the candle.

That means the response of we Christians must make is to polish up the mirror. Clean up the smudges and the water spots. Make ourselves a bright reflector of God.

So what would be the best response you and I could make to "new atheism" readers who will never read books such as Rabbi Wolpe's? Well, how about ourselves?

The most powerful argument for Christianity has always been and continues to be the changed lives of women and men who serve God in their living...Christian adherents, who proclaim God through their transformed lives in the way they love their neighbors.

You see, one of the consistent themes of the Bible is that God's first option for reaching others is through God's people of faith. Just consider:

- Genesis 12: All nations will be blessed by Abraham's family obeying God.
- Matthew 5:16: Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your God.
- 1 Peter 2:12: Live lives that silence the false accusations of pagans.

So what if we took the example of scripture and Rabbi Wolpe's appreciation of the value of faithful living seriously and committed ourselves to winning the hearts of God's skeptics by living better lives right in front of them?

Rabbi Wolpe tells of a time when he lost his own faith, when he became influenced by the writings of an "old atheist," Bertrand Russell, and when a graphic Holocaust documentary left him deeply troubled with the matter of "evil and a world without God's protection."

Wolpe says that he was enamored with the philosopher, until he began reading biographical works that showed how depraved Russell's life was: four broken marriages, alienated from his children, unabashed about his infidelity.

So despite Russell's brilliant mind, Wolpe says that the fruit of his philosophy made a far more compelling argument. Claiming "it was better to be Russell's reader than his wife or child," Rabbi Wolpe stumbled back into faith through the apologetic of virtue.

Haven't we all met that a "good" Christian whose words, actions, or attitudes caused us to doubt our own faith, as well as theirs? And by the same token, haven't we also met Christians whose lives are so compelling that their presence inspires our faith?

There's no problem with the Candle. It's the mirror that needs polishing. We aren't the source of light, but the prism. We're not the candle, but the mirror.

As long as there are neighbors and family members who don't know God, and as long as a new crop of atheists find God-bashing a fashionable and profitable thing to do, you and I need to simply and faithfully reflect God.

Source:

Wolpe, David J. *Why Faith Matters*. New York:HarperOne, 2008.