

Are You a Practical Atheist?

By Pr. William P. Terjesen

We all know what an atheist is (or claims to be). But have you ever heard of a practical atheist? An atheist is one who claims that there is no God, but a practical atheist is one who claims that there IS a God, but thinks and acts as if there were no God. There are not many atheists in the world, but there are millions of practical atheists around, and many of them are active members of churches.

How may we recognize a practical atheist? He or she is a person who professes to be a believer, but for whom God's Word, the Bible, is just one opinion among many. The buck does not stop with the Bible for the practical atheist unless the Bible happens to agree with him. You see, while professing that there is a God, the practical atheist does not believe that God speaks or has spoken, especially if God is purported to have said things that are specific or dogmatic, or out of step with reason or contemporary culture. The god of the practical atheist has got to move with the times; go with the flow.

Another way that the practical atheist may be recognized is that though he or she professes to believe in God, his worldview, philosophy of life, values, morals, are drawn from and informed by the prevailing culture of our age rather than the revealed Word of God. His attitudes and morals are drawn from TV, popular music and the secular humanism that pervades our educational institutions. While professing to believe in the sacred, the practical atheist is thoroughly secularized.

Again, we may recognize the practical atheist in this, that though he or she claims to believe in God, there is no faith that God really hears and answers our prayers. The practical atheist does not "take it to the Lord in prayer". For him, God is a do-nothing-God; a god to be formally invoked at inaugurations and such, but not a God who can be depended on to be a "very present help in trouble". To be sure, the Lord's Prayer may be said before bed, but more out of superstition than faith.

Finally the practical atheist may be recognized by his very indistinct hopes concerning the world to come. Usually, whatever ideas he has concerning heaven or hell are all wrapped up in some form of works righteousness: "If I'm good, God will let me into heaven; if I'm bad, he'll still let me in; if I'm really, really bad, maybe he won't." It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere. Christ and His cross mean nothing.

What a pitiable creature! Who would want to be like that? And yet I find that I am not immune from occasionally acting like a practical atheist. How about you? You see, our old sinful nature, the Old Adam, is a practical atheist! Left to ourselves what else would we be?

But thanks be to God, He has not left us to ourselves, but has come speeding to our rescue with His eternal forgiveness, life and salvation. God has spoken and His words are truth and life. God has acted, and in the work of Christ we are saved from sin, death, hell, and practical atheism. Because Christ is risen, we know that He is present, and that the Holy Ghost leads us into all truth and enables us to serve Him without fear. We call all of this grace - undeserved favor. In this grace of God we are enabled to turn away from sin and drown the old Adam through repentance and by faith to lay hold of the Good News that establishes our hearts in the bosom of the true and living God. No figurine gods for us! The Father, Son and Holy Ghost has made us His own!