

God Is Optional

I was recently in the San Francisco Bay area, when I stumbled upon the website of a local Unitarian Universalist church. As I perused their website, looking for a belief statement, I came to a page titled “What We Believe.” Immediately apparent was a video with the title “God is Optional, but You Are Not...” Now I was intrigued. I clicked on the video. Following is a transcript of the first portion:

“I’d like to welcome you to the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco. And yes, we’re a church. We’re a church where God is optional, but you are not. We really emphasize the relational aspect of community. We like to be together. We like to have fun together. We like to make meaning for our lives. We truly believe that we are the meaning-makers, not a sacred text, not an outside source, but our community gathered together in worship and celebration on Sunday mornings at 11:00 on the corner of...”

I then read the bio of Greg Stewart, their Senior Minister. He says:

“The longer I minister, the more ambiguous my 'dominant theology' becomes. This is not due to a lack of clarity; rather, it stems from valuing the process to belief more than the product of belief. This is the place where questions really do take on more meaning and significance than do answers.”

Are we so different?

Many Christians today would be shocked to hear such words plainly spoken, but I quite appreciate the candor of this man. I was pleased to hear someone so clearly articulate what even some Christians believe, even if unconsciously. Now why would I say that some “Christians” believe that God is optional? Let’s zoom in and take a look at a typical evangelical church today. Do our sermons largely consist of Theology? Are we consistently learning biblical doctrine? When we gather in small groups, mid-week Bible studies, men’s and women’s groups, etc., do we *primarily* study about God, or is it about something else? I find that it is typically not just something else, it is *anything* else! We study about effective prayer, fasting, heaven, parenting, witnessing, marriage, sex, faith, manhood, womanhood, Armageddon, etc. Just go to your local Christian book store and see what is on the displays. They are rarely books that guide us into the depths of Scripture to learn of the character and nature of the Almighty. So often we shy away from the texts that refer to God’s Sovereignty, his purpose in election, his eternal punishment of the wicked, the qualifications of church leadership, church discipline, the hardening of hearts, etc. Why are we timid of these subjects? Many will argue that the answers are often unclear, and therefore study of these subjects will only lead to controversy and disunity. Though controversy and disunity may result at times, I don’t believe that is why these subjects are avoided. How much detail does the Bible give on subjects like Heaven, or the end times? How many opinions will you get on parenting, or what type of prayer is more effective than another? The problem with the subjects regarding the character of God is not that the passages are ambiguous—the problem is that so many of them are clear! When we are forced to study them we find ourselves gazing upon the face of God, and we are laid bare. When we truly gaze upon the face of God, we respond as Isaiah did, *“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”* (Isaiah 6:5, NIV) Recall how Peter reacted when Jesus had demonstrated

his power with a miraculous catch of fish. *When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!"* (Luke 5:8) When we choose to focus on the "needs of society" instead of theology (the study of God), we are effectively saying what Mr. Stewart is saying, that "God is optional, but you are not."

What a shameful testimony of the Redeemed. We are guilty of breaking the first commandment, for we have placed other gods before Him. We are guilty of breaking the seventh commandment as well, for we have become an adulterous church...who forsakes her husband to run after her lovers. Recall Jesus' answer to the lawyer who asked which commandment was the greatest. *Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."* (Matthew 22:37-40, NIV) Are we loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind? I pray that we would be awakened from our slumber. May God forgive our adulterous hearts. May we once again—or maybe for the first time—gaze upon the face of God, and be changed.

Questions More Significant Than Answers?

Regarding Mr. Stewart's bio above, does his statement have a ring of familiarity to you? How many times have you heard someone say "The more I study, the less I know?" That statement has always bothered me. Most of them of course don't mean what they are saying, but rather the more they study the more they *realize* how much they don't know. They were more ignorant before they studied, but didn't realize the extent of their ignorance until afterward. I agree with that, and can certainly identify with the sentiment. Even so, what I hear people say is basically what this pastor said. Mr. Stewart is not saying what many people mean; rather he says that the *process* is more valuable than the *product* (of belief). He even says that questions have more meaning and significance than do answers. Please notice how incoherent this statement is. It has the sound of a very thoughtful and deep philosophy, but upon inspection it turns out to be complete nonsense. I believe there is something for the Christian to learn here...something basic. Words are important. We Christians need to be conscientious of how we represent ourselves. We need to be able to recognize and refute this type of nonsense. The only time that questions are more important than answers is if the answers are wrong! If you are truly a Christian then you have both questions and answers. If you don't have many answers...study! If you have a lot of answers...keep studying...and share them! As a member of God's household, we have been shown unimaginable mercy through Jesus Christ. Christ himself has commanded us to make disciples. To multiply. If we are to make "true" disciples of Jesus, we must first become "true" disciples ourselves. That means we must know what He taught. We must know the Bible from cover to cover. This takes diligent study. This takes time. Jesus said *"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."* (Luke 9:62, NIV) Let the words of the apostle Paul speak to you today, *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."* (2 Timothy 2:15, NIV)