

## **SKEPTICS: Part 2**

*Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.* (Henry David Thoreau)

Ah, yes, Thoreau, who most intellectuals today use as an example of liberal (at least politically) thinking. Doonesbury, a popular, politically biased cartoon series, often uses his beloved Walden as a backdrop, and his book by the same name was popular as a “table top” item when I was in college in the “love in” years, although it was seldom read by its devotees. Yet in my reading of his work, I have come to consider him as one of my favorite skeptics. Thoreau was a man who despised the acts of vain pursuit, which he saw in the outside world. He built a cabin on the now famous pond, Walden, from resources obtained either second-hand or from materials he harvested off the surrounding land, and he relished the freedom to be resourceful within his personal habitat. He took great pride in not pursuing the status and titles of society, and for resisting that society when it called upon him to support its conventions. In fact, he spent a brief period in the local jail for refusal to pay the “pew tax” assessed against his father at the local Methodist church. Thoreau, in U.S. history, is the ultimate example of principle, restraint, modesty, self-control, ethics, and self-determination. I could probably even think of some more glowing terms to describe him, and for all these he is worthy of human admiration. I, personally, am an admirer of his life and his writing. Yet I wish he had gone further, for despite his character he fell short in his endeavors because his ultimate pursuit was the expression of his own identity. Although he talked about and around the idea of religion, God, and the apparent need of mankind to pursue faith, he would not give up the expression of his personal goals as ultimate in his life. Still, he possessed personal qualities worthy of any pursuit of character.

Fast forward to today. We live in a world where appearance is everything, don't we? My goodness, what's new? It would be simple to point out Hollywood, fashion, automobiles, houses, and jewelry, as examples, though they're all timeworn and used up. They are also examples of the world and its emphasis on appearance first, substance later or maybe not at all. In fact, substance often clouds the issue when, in fact, vanity is the pursuit and the goal. Today we are surrounded by the “Masters of Appearance,” highly visible people who live only to promote themselves, and whose methods and messages are so well disguised as to look like ultimate pathways while being dead ends supporting more vain pursuit.

Let's narrow this down a little more and look within the framework of Christianity. I can't count the number of times I've listened to evangelists and TV preachers declaring that God spoke personally to them and gave them a special message or revelation. They speak gloriously of their encounters with God, as if they were beyond even the prophets of Biblical history in their ability to stand blithely and peacefully in the presence of the awe-inspiring One. These newly empowered and commissioned emissaries now speak to rapt audiences declaring the sanctity and power of their “ministry,” and how delighted they now are to be in such lofty service. Audiences and congregations clamor to get close to these blessed ones, that maybe a little of their glory might rub off on them. This glory, in the case of at least one well attended evangelist, includes Armani suits, Brooks brothers shoes, and a Rolex President watch. Wow, such a burden for the sake of the kingdom.

Think I'm being a little hypercritical or judgmental here? Perhaps I've gone a bit far? These men are in fact declaring the Gospel and the power of God, aren't they? Well, maybe the Apostle Paul and perhaps even Jesus can help me out. In the second letter to the Corinthians Paul was contending with a faction within that Church which claimed that his apostolic authority

was not as good as theirs. He countered by saying *“You are looking at things outwardly . . . For even if I should boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I shall not be put to shame . . . For they say ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible.’”* (2 Cor. 10:7-10 NASV). Even the church of Paul’s time looked at the outward appearance and the glory of the messenger rather than the message. These factious individuals claimed the Paul was just too ugly to be a reasonable representative of Jesus, and on top of that he couldn’t talk very well either. Though Paul was always cautious in his judgement of contrary leaders, considering that if the Gospel is being preached then the will of God is being done. And I’m sure that he would not want to question the Holy Spirit’s work in the hearts of men. But in this case the message had been distorted to the point of being false. *“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore, it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their deeds.* (2 Cor. 11:13 NASV). Disturbing, huh? Think this doesn’t occur today? Think again!

Most of you recall the general tenor of the encounters of Jesus with the religious leaders of his day, don’t you? How many times did he bless them for their efforts to help the poor, to correctly judge right from wrong, and to declare the truth from the God of their past to the people of their day? Absolutely none, not once. Now pay attention, this is amazing. Let me make this really clear. Jesus never commended the religious leaders of his day for anything, and we know that he, in fact, issued withering and harsh criticisms against them for their self-serving and self-glorifying behavior. These are His words (in English, of course) when He went toe to toe with the Masters of Appearance, *“The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but **do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them . . . But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men;”*** (Matt 23:2-5 NASV) Now if we look at the religious leaders throughout the history of the Christian Church in all of its iterations and denominations, through its infancy in the Roman Empire, the Dark Ages, the Enlightenment, the colonization of America, and up to today, have we truly moved beyond the spirit of elitism which Jesus so harshly judged? I’m talking about my community here, not the sea of faithful believers, but the pastors, preachers, and evangelists who lead us, and of whom I am one. A little sound thinking will tell us that we do in fact see humble, spiritually mature leaders around us today. The Spirit of Christ has fallen upon us. But a lot of religion is still “business,” and the Biblical cautions should keep us on our toes. I think my concern is clear, and I’m not going to wear it out further.

So, if we admire men of character who have resisted the temptation to “be cool” as society describes, and if we must bear extreme caution in admiring our religious leaders, where does that leave us? **How are we going to get the truthful presentation of the entire Gospel message?** Let’s check out Matthew 23 again. Jesus apparently wasn’t content to stop with a little criticism of the scribes and Pharisees, but rather decided from there to really tee off on them. Except for verses 8-12, throughout the rest of the chapter He didn’t just spank them, he blistered them. This passage leaves absolutely no room for creative interpretation; Jesus was extremely disappointed with this version of religious leaders. But let’s take those four verses which were spoken to the multitude and the disciples and see what message He left us.

*But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is Christ.* (Matt. 23:8-12 NASV)

These are not easy words. In fact, its much easier to just push these to the back of our minds. But here it is. Don't be hasty to judge all pastors and evangelists as corrupt opportunists. Many of the first churches were founded or built up by Paul, yet you, as the faithful, must be diligent in observing all of those you hold in reverence as spiritual leaders today, and not just pass up their self-absorption as part of the job. We are all called, and we are all given the same Spirit. You must each take upon yourselves the responsibility for your learning. Don't expect that another human will have the knowledge and tools necessary for the preservation of your personal faith. We all have One Teacher, One Father, and One Leader.

Dallas Willard, in Renovation of the Heart, refers to Christians in the world today as "Children of Light," drawing on Ephesians 5:8-11. In his book he never once stressed, with respect to our spiritual formation, the importance of the role which our leaders play, emphasizing instead that the responsibility for our sanctification as believers falls on us. On top of that he adds "how could we possibly be excused from not taking that open path and leading others into it." (p.232) In other words, we **must** pursue our spiritual growth and sanctification, and we **must** pass this on to others. We cannot simply sit in the congregation, smile at the preacher, and go home blessed and comforted by the notion that God is using that man to pursue his plans. Nope. You and me: the believers in the crowd, we've gotta get with the program. For those of you who like using acronyms to define your church mission, add a couple of more G's to your mission: Get up, and Get going.

*Be blessed, Bill Z*