

Why Religion?

May 2006

After the lessons last Sunday on the Gospel of Judas and reference to theologians who are truly skeptics at heart, the question was asked more than once, “Why would somebody who really didn’t believe in God want to study theology?” Good question, and certainly one that has occurred to me many times before. But if we think about it, there are many Biblical examples of people who feigned spiritual interest in order to satisfy other motives.

We might think of and idolatrous counselors like the Egyptian magicians and Chaldean astrologers, but Israel had its own false prophets who rejected truth for their own interests. Isaiah decried the religious leadership of his day: *“Yes, they are greedy dogs which never have enough. And they are shepherds who cannot understand; they all look to their own way, everyone for his own gain, from his own territory”* (Is 56:11).

A hundred years later Jeremiah laments: *“Because from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even to the priest, everyone deals falsely”* (Jer 6:13).

The same self-interest manifests itself in Christianity. Paul warned Timothy of men who desired to be *“teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm”* (1 Tim 1:7). Others became *“obsessed with disputes and arguments over words ... useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain”* (1 Tim 6:4-5).

Some godless men (and women) attend seminaries and obtain theology degrees today for the same reasons: there’s money to be made via research grants, selling books and teaching at universities; there’s prestige that comes with novel discovery, speaking at conferences, and commenting on television documentaries. It’s not as if they are wholly mercenary in their actions; such people see themselves as truly enlightened, more insightful than the masses.

But what is most disturbing about this human trait is that *it might affect me in a similar way*. Satan will surely tempt all of us to bend and twist spirituality into a self-serving exercise. We might go through the motions of spirituality because we want to keep peace in the family or to maintain leverage over our children or as an insurance policy or to satisfy our need to dominate others or ...

You see, theologians do not have the market cornered on self-centered religion. Here are a few questions that may help us examine our own religious motives:

- 1) Is it likely that someone has lately mentioned your name to God in prayer, thanking Him for the encouragement you have given to them?
- 2) If your computer crashed, could a competent fellow Christian work on it and not be shocked by your website search history?
- 3) When is the last time you discovered a novel thought or idea in your personal Bible study/research?