

Americans & God
Pastor Dan Erickson
September 13, 2020

More Americans believe in Satan than in God That was a headline from a recent study done by George Barna for Arizona Christian University. Barna found that 56% of American adults agreed with the statement, "*Satan is not merely a symbol of evil but is a real spiritual being and influences human lives.*" However, only 51% said they, "*Believe in a traditional, Biblical view of God as the "all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect and just creator of the universe who still rules the world today.*" And that doesn't mean that a lot of people have a belief in God that is just a little less orthodox. The survey found 6% of respondents claiming they did not believe in God, were atheists. Another 20% agreed with the statement "*A higher power may exist, but nobody really knows for certain.*" We call these agnostics. There are also 10% who adopt a new age or mystical view of God being some how part of a higher consciousness or "The force" or something, and 7% who say there are either many God's or that God is in everything. Many of these are Hindu's and Buddha's. Incidentally, Bryan Fagerstrom told me about recently meeting a white, middle aged fellow who was, yes, a Buddhist. Now if you do the math, 51% believe in God in traditional sense, 43% do not, which leaves 6% saying, they do not know or are not sure what they believe about God.

Now, I know some of you are very skeptical of surveys or polls. A common response is, "No one ever asked me what I thought." I am not going to argue about the details of the study other than to say Barna is a very respected researcher and the trends his survey finds match those of two other highly respected studies of American Religious Beliefs, Pew Research, and Lifeway Research. Though the specific numbers vary, there is complete agreement that there has been a huge shift in beliefs and attitudes about God and religion in the United States. According to Barna, 73% of Americans believed in God 30 years ago, but again that number has now declined to 51%. 30 years ago, Barna found only 1% of Americans professing to be Atheists, but that has now increased 6 fold. And whatever surveys say, I think there is plenty of evidence in almost every dimension of society that belief in God, the God of the Bible, is in decline. And friends, that is true on the Iron Range world. Whatever % we might

come up with as to how many people in our community believe in God, I can assure that number is almost certainly less then it was 30 years ago.

So, what does this all have to do with the United States, Pastor Dan? I am sure almost everyone in this room believes in God. I suspect that is true, but the Barna survey reminds us of important current realities that we as a church and individuals need to keep in mind as we seek to be faithful to the Lord today and in

the days ahead. Let's pause and pray we would hear and heed as the Lord speaks to us this morning.

"God loves you and His wonderful plan for your life." Some of you recognize that as part of the "Four Spiritual Laws." That was a popular booklet many Christians used when talking bout their faith in Jesus with others. However, if you do not believe in God, you probably do not want to hear about His loving plan for your life. So, if we have friends or family members who are Atheists and Agnostics *nothing* is more important than they becoming believers in the true and living God. Because unless they do they will never trust in Jesus Christ and will never experience His salvation. That is also why it is so important that our friends and family members *do not become* Atheists or Agnostics. I know some of you have had that horrible experience of having a son or daughter tell you that he or she no longer believes in God. Equally tragic is when someone stops believing, but for whatever reason keeps that a secret and doesn't tell others. There was a story last year about a pastor in Florida who no longer believed in G od, but didn't admit that publicly because he was afraid his congregation would fire him if he told them he was an Atheist. And he needed the job. Some congregations do not have very high standards, but believing in God is pretty much a requirement in any church.

So what can and should we do to encourage people around us, people we care about to believe in God? What can we do if we ourselves start having doubts about God's existence? Those are very important questions. Here are some answers.

#1 We should pray that God would open peoples eyes to the truth. Yes, as human beings each of us choose what we are going to believe and what we are not going to believe. However, we do not make those choices in a vacuum. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to make the choice to choose the truth. In **2 Corinthian 4:4 – Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News.** I would suggest Satan also blinds minds to truth of God's existence. There is plenty of evidence for God's existence, for example **Psalm 19:1, 2 – The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. ²Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known.** So why do only 51% of Americans not believe in God? Not because of a lack of evidence, but because they are spiritually blind. They need the Holy Spirit to remove the scales from their spiritual eyes, so they can see that reality. It is then they will realize that God is not dead, but surely alive. And when they recognize that, they might also see the glorious light of the Good News, the Gospel, and turn to Jesus Christ and experience His gracious salvation. So that is what we pray for. That the Holy Spirit will open people's eyes to truth. If we are ourselves are struggling with doubt, we should pray God would help us see the truth more clearly.

#2 We should strive to live in a way that demonstrates that God is real. The old saying is "For some people the only Bible they will ever read is you." As folks look at you, at your life they should be able to see that God really does exist. How will that happen? When they see us allowing our selves to be bitten by poisonous snakes, but we don't get sick? Probably not. Speaking in tongues will not usually do it. Rather, when someone lives a life of love, when that person is transformed from a selfish to a self giving person, that points to the reality of God. And other kinds of transformation can be ever more powerful. Right in this room we have people who have overcome addictions, and will tell you, it is the power and grace of God that made it happen. I think of Pastor Ron, who in 1973 a hard working, hard drinking man in Western Wisconsin. He would drink every night and get drunk numerous times a week. But then he met Jesus. He trusted in Jesus Christ as his

Savior and Lord, and three days later asking God to take away his desire for alcohol. And sure enough, Ron has not only never had another drink, he has never ever desired to drink. That is certainly evidence for God's existence. As one Christian writer said, "Unbelievers need to hear our stories, not just our logical arguments." Our lives should demonstrate the reality of God.

#3 We should present reasons why people ought to believe in God, the true and living God described in the Bible. Prayer is important. How we live is important. But because this is a matter of eternal life and death, it is important that we engage our friends and families in discussions about why they should believe in God. Now, some of you have already done a lot of reading and research on this topic. For others this is all pretty much new. Here is a basic outline of things you want to discuss. Some of you will be able to fill in this outline with all sorts of details, while others will do well just to focus on the outline. So, five things to talk about with an Atheist, Agnostic, or anyone who has questions about whether or not God really exists.

-1 We should explore why people don't believe in God. It is important to realize that intellect doubt or perceived lack of evidence is only one reason people say they don't believe in God. I think of my friend Joe, for example. He says, "I have not really believed in God since my daughter was killed in a car accident six years ago. I have been angry ever since." I ask, "What is it, Joe?" You can be angry at a God you don't believe in. Now, helping Joe deal with his grief and anger may not be easy, but he *really does* believe in God. Or there is my friend Bill, who told me recently that he doesn't think he believes in God anymore. I ask, "Does this have anything to do with the fact that a year ago you abandoned your wife and kids and have been living with Jane ever since?" I didn't really need to ask that question, because I knew the answer. Bill says he doesn't believe in God, because *he doesn't want to* believe in God. He feels guilty. It would be a lot easier if there was no God who has commanded "You shall not commit adultery."

The bible actually views Atheism, believing God does not exist, as a moral, not an intellectual problem. **Psalm 14:1 – The fool says in his heart this is no God.** From a Bible perspective a

fool is not someone with a low IQ, but someone who refuses to submit to the Lord. Atheism is not a result of a lack of evidence, but of a refusal to accept the evidence. In Romans 1, the Apostle Paul says (verse 18) people are guilty of suppressing the truth, because **Romans 1:20 – Ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.** And that also means, no excuse for not believing in God.

Yet, the reality is the Lord does use our words, things we say to help people move from unbelief, from Atheism and Agnosticism to a belief in the true and living God. The Apostle Peter tells, **1 Peter 3:15 – Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.** I think that includes being able to explain why we believe in God. And that goes beyond just talking about our own personal experience with God. We should be giving people objective reasons why God really does exist. Now, Christian scholars sometimes debate whether it is possible to prove God's existence. I guess that depends what one means by the word "Prove." I think absolute proof and absolute certainty are not really in the realm of human experience. We are always dependent on certain assumptions. For example, I can prove that Pastor Mark is sitting in the 2nd row right now unless I assume I am not dreaming and that my senses are reliable, that what I see is really there.

-2 We need to talk to people about how it makes sense to believe in God, and about the evidence in favor of God's existence. I am also convinced that deep down inside we intuitively know that God does exist. So what are these reasons for believing in God? Dr. Peter Kreeft has written about 20 reasons to believe in God. They include traditional philosophical proofs like the arguments causation and design, historical proofs, like the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and more unique personal proofs, such as the music J.S. Bach. It is a good idea to become familiar with this evidence for God's existence. However, if a friend of a family member is asking, "Why should I believe in God?" It is often best to respond with a question. "Would you please tell

me why you don't believe in God?" Their answer to that question will guide your response.

One of the most common reasons people give for not believing in God is a comment to what they call "Science" I call it "Scientism," because they are taking science and trying to turn into an alternative religion. This often focuses on Darwin's theory of evolution. Richard Dawkins, the Oxford Atheist, says, "Charles Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled Atheist." He means that before Darwin, believers in God would point to the world around us and say, "This all could not have just happened," and Atheists really didn't have a good response. Now Atheists can say, "Evolution made it all happen." Some of you are aware of various flaws and errors in Darwin's theory. That is great. But I would suggest focusing on the big picture, which includes the two questions that science can answer. How did the universe begin? And how did life begin? Darwin's theory supposedly explains how higher life forms evolved from lower life forms. Again, there are flaws in that theory, but the important thing to point out is that it doesn't even try to explain where that lowest life form came from. Atheists or scientific naturalists essentially make this claim: In the beginning was nothing, then for some reason, that we do not yet understand, this nothing became something. This something was non-living matter. Then for some reason, that we do not yet understand, this non-living matter became living. Science can not tell us how the universe or life began. Scientism says we have to have faith, we have to believe without evidence, that there is a naturalistic explanation, and *that it was not God.*

And yet, there is so much evidence for an intelligent designer. I was recently reading how thousands of Emperor penguins will stand in a formation that protects them from the wind and the frigid Antarctic temps. Scientists studying the penguins say it is impossible to come up with more efficient way to protect penguins from the cold. One scientist said, "It is almost like a brilliant engineer who told the penguins exactly where they should stand." Just another tiny bit of evidence that points to God.

-3 We also need to talk about what the implications would be if Atheist are correct and

there is no God. We might ask, what does it mean, that the Cosmos or universe as Carl Sagan said, "Is all there is, all there ever was, and all there ever will be?" The Atheist may reply with gusto, "Well, it means there is no God." But then we need to point out other things it means. There is no real meaning, morality or knowledge, because as Sagan also declared, "The universe doesn't care." There is no real meaning to life because we are all just "Cosmic Accidents. There is no such thing as objective right and wrong, because we as human beings are creating our own morality. The universe doesn't care whether you help a little old lady cross the street or whether you run her over with your car. There is no such thing as love, but just chemical reactions between different entities. And chemical reactions in our brains also explain our thoughts.

There is no correlation between our thoughts and reality. There is no such thing as free will because those chemical reactions determine what we choose. That is the world when there is not God Now, Atheists can believe they have found meaning in life. They can be good loving people. They will claim they have certain knowledge. But there is no reason for any of those things unless God exists.

Becky Pippert was taking a biology class in college from an Atheistic professor who claimed that human beings are nothing more than a "Fortuitous concourse of meaningless protoplasm." In other words, we are a bunch of cells that just happened to come together in a certain way. One day the professor arrived to class visibly shaken. He begins his lecture, but had to quit as tears streamed down his face. He told the class how his 18 year old daughter had left town the previous evening with a 33 year old man. He was then able to continue the lecture and before the class ended he asked if there were any questions. Becky raised her hand and said, "Professor, if your daughter is nothing more than 'a fortuitous concourse of protoplasm,' what difference does it make where she is?" He responded, "You are right. There is no reason it should matter. But it does. Maybe I do believe she is more than that."

Friends, this is why I say deep down *we know* God exists, because we know people are more than protoplasm. If we are merely another rung on the evolutionary ladder, the death of a human being is

no more tragic than the death of a mosquito. But we know that is not true. Evolutionary psychologists have described rape as a natural way for human beings to reproduce. But we know that is not true. We know rape is wrong. And because we know that human life has significance, because we know that certain things are wrong, because we know there is a connection between our knowledge and reality, we know there is a God. Whether we admit it or not. Because without God none of those things would really be possible.

This is also why people troubled by suffering and evil in the world really should not see Atheism as an answer. If there is no God, all the suffering just part of the natural process. *The universe doesn't care.* And if there is no God, evil is just a word used to describe something we find unpleasant. *The universe doesn't care.* If there is not God, genocide, killing an entire ethnic group, is maybe just part of the survival of fittest, Oh, friends suffering and evil do indeed raise questions about how and why God works in our world, but it is only because he exists that we have those questions.

Friends, a world without God would be a very dark and bleak place. Yet, for various reasons almost half of Americans do not believe the God of the Bible exists. What they need is for our lives, our words, our prayers to help them see he truly does. May the Lord enable us to reflect the true light of the triune God to show the world that he is real.