

ARE YOU AN “APATHEIST”?

By Stanford E. Linzey

We've all seen news articles about the battle over religious rights in America. Staunch defenders of Christianity are committed to reaching our society with the gospel. Equally committed antagonists to all things Christian want to see matters of faith removed from the public square. But there is a third group — people who simply don't care.

Someone coined a word for this state of affairs, "apatheism."¹ Apatheism indicates a nonconcern in the area of religion, a laissez-faire or don't care attitude. Apatheism concerns not what one believes, but how. It is not a doctrine but an attitude. One can believe anything he or she wishes and still be an apatheist.

Some Christians are apatheists. They may be orthodox in doctrine, but that does not matter. The apatheists in our churches lack a concern for their own spiritual state, as well as that of the church to which they belong.

The spirit of apatheism is a growing concern. People may believe the right things and say the right things themselves, but they are unconcerned about others. They have little or no interest in leading men and women to Christ, seeing the sick healed in answer to prayer, encouraging believers to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, using spiritual gifts to bless others or even living lives of consistent holiness. They just don't care.

I was command chaplain for

the aircraft carrier *USS Coral Sea*. We took on board five professors from a prominent university when the ship deployed to the Western Pacific. They set up college courses then flew home. Officers monitored the classes in the absence of the professors.

At the end of the deployment the professors flew out to Hawaii to give final exams while taking the ship back to San Diego. Participating sailors received college credit for their studies.

One night at sea after giving the evening prayers over the loudspeakers on the bridge, I descended to the officer's wardroom to snack before retiring. The professors asked that I sit with them at their table.

The conversation soon turned to religion. The psychology professor made an offensive statement about God. I asked him about his religious faith. He replied he did not believe in God.

When it came full circle I found that none of the five professors believed in a personal God. But more significantly, they simply were not concerned. Nor were they concerned as to what I believed. It just did not matter. In reality, they were members of a religious group they would never acknowledge themselves — they were all classical apatheists.

An avowed atheist will fight for his beliefs, or lack thereof. A Spirit-filled believer will speak out on behalf of the Lord and

the need for a person to accept Christ. The apatheist simply does not care.

This can be seen in the church today. One grows cold toward the things of God and the church. He becomes careless in spiritual matters. He has worked hard all week so has reason not to rise early to attend Sunday School. Bible studies on weeknights are viewed as time-consuming. Prayer meetings become optional. He

spends little time around the altar in the Sunday services. This person does not change doctrines. He still believes, but his attitude has changed. He grows cold in spirit.

May God send our nation and our churches a spiritual renewal, remove the spirit of apatheism, or spiritual carelessness, and return us to our first love.

Christ admonished the church at Ephesus, "You have forsaken your first love. ... Repent and

do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Revelation 2:4,5, NIV). **tpe**

¹"Let It Be" by Jonathan Rauch. *Atlantic Monthly*, May 2003.

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

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