**Shamed By An Atheist – By Thailer Jimerson**

There’s a very interesting tradition that began with the Jewish religion as we have it contained in the Scriptures, that even carried over into the Christian faith. That tradition is what some have called “critique from within.” That is, some of the harshest opponents of God’s people have been the prophets he sent from within the very group itself to chastise the wayward people of God. We see this especially in the likes of the prophets, among them those such as Jeremiah and Elijah. As the saying goes, “From the forest itself comes the handle for the axe.”

Though this is necessary and we can learn from the great tradition of critique from those within the people themselves (and who, therefore, understand the problems as palpably as any), can it be said that we’ve something to learn from the critiques of the very enemies of God? That is, can critiques from an atheist serve to teach Christians a thing or two today? I would say yes, and such lesson would be hazardous to ignore.

One such lesson we can learn comes from the late **Christopher Hitchens**, hailed as one of the greatest opponents to the Christian faith – and all religion in general. One thing I absolutely love about Hitchens (and this truly is commendable): is his zeal in seeking, in knowing, in understanding and defending the truth (as he knows it). He’s not afraid of his convictions. And this (ironically) might be one way God is not afraid to rebuke his people with the outsider as an example. Consider an excerpt from the book *The Faith of Christopher Hitchens*:

Just as with political conservatives, he found himself liking evangelicals. They were eager to debate him and defend their beliefs, yes, but they were also inviting him out to dinner or a drink afterward. That’s what he really came to admire: the combination of deep and sincere convictions, which doctrine-waffling Liberal Christians had set aside, and a willingness to defend those convictions in polite debate wrapped in the warmth of “the justly famed tradition of Southern hospitality.” Declared Hitchens, “I much prefer this sincerity to the vague and Python-esque witterings of the interfaith and ecumenical groups who barely respect their own traditions and who look upon faith as just another word for community organizing.”

Prefer it he did. Perhaps Christopher had Reverend Al Sharpton in mind with this last remark.

“Do you know Al Sharpton?” Christopher asked me as we drove through Yellowstone National Park.

“Not personally, but I have, of course, heard of him,” I replied.

“Total huckster. I’m convinced he is an atheist. ‘The Right Reverend’ no more believes in God than I do. You ask me whom I seek to destroy in debate? There’s a start."

Hitchens debated Sharpton in May 2007 at New York Public Library. Christopher didn’t like Sharpton because the Reverend - and ordained pentecostal minister - refused to defend the Bible against Christopher’s usual attacks (mostly rooted in the violence in the Old Testament). Sharpton would simply reply that he was not defending the Bible, or any religious belief, or any particular religion, but only defending the existence of God, as a very thinly defined Supreme Being.

So many times, throughout the Scriptures, God would use an obvious outsider to the people of God as an example to provoke the people to jealousy. We see such in the book of Joshua when the outsider Rahab is brought into the fold while the faithless Achan is expelled. We see such when we read of the story of Naaman’s conversion in 2 Kings as a candle in the dark room of faithless Israel and the other surrounding stories of 2 Kings. Apparently, this point was not lost on Jesus himself since he cites Naaman’s example (along with the widow of Zarephath) as those who received God’s grace as outsiders, while faithless Israel (the insiders) were rejected by the prophets Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4.25-30).

In our particular example, Hitchens is the Naaman among unbelieving Israel. Here’s what I mean. Though not himself a believer (he died in dogged unbelief), he nevertheless serves as an example of avid conviction and dedication to seeking truth to wishy-washy, pussyfooting Christians who won’t stand up for their beliefs today.

I know that’s an example I need from time to time.