

Grace is wide enough: At the funeral of an atheist

by [Ronald Goetz](#) in the [October 18, 2000](#) issue

When an atheist dies, how are Christian loved ones to respond to his or her passing? The author wrestled with this question when he was asked by two friends, brothers, to preach at a memorial service for their father, an atheist.

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:14-16).

We are gathered here in a Christian church as participants in a Christian memorial service to honor the life of Richard, a man who said that he did not believe in God. What right have we to do this? It would certainly be an affront to his memory were we, by this service, to deny him the right to have been the man he was. We cannot pretend or even suggest that he really was somehow, despite his insistence to the contrary, a Christian believer. Indeed, it would be a scandal if we who claim to honor Richard’s memory did not allow him, by his unbelief, to call into question our Christian belief.

Richard’s sons, Larry and Ray, have told me that their father had known so much pain and abuse in his life as to lead him to question not only the goodness but the very existence of God. The irony of what we do here is unmistakable. Richard rejected the eternal reality and graciousness of the God that his sons, Ray and Larry, cling to amidst life’s pains and abuses. Ray and Larry try to come to grips with their father’s death upheld by the faith their father despised.

Scholars have termed the unbelief that arises out of a deep sense of the suffering and evil of the world “protest atheism.” Even if there were a God, the protest atheist insists, the misery which is the lot of so many people would make him or her reject God. Surely Christians dare not ignore the pain which engenders such a protest. We dare not self-righteously congratulate ourselves for the faith that has been granted

us, and patronizingly dismiss as lost those to whom God has not yet so redemptively spoken.

When the protest atheist says that even if God did exist, God would have a very great deal to answer for, should we rush to the defensive and try to argue God's case? I think it's better for us to name for what they are those who have been called by God's very silence to witness to the terrible loneliness and grief that comes from the emptiness of atheism. They are God's strange prophets—prophets who unwittingly point to the necessity of God's coming into our world and setting things right.

Only by sharing our human lot in the person of Jesus can God make a perfect and complete answer to the questions raised by these strange prophets who speak on behalf of the victims of life and God's silence. For only in the crucifixion of the Son of the Father's own essence can atonement for evil, death and sin be made. What protest atheism challenges God to do—to answer for, to accept responsibility for, the suffering of the world—God indeed has done. God has truly and faithfully answered their prophetic challenge.

One hears stories of Christians who, in great anguish of heart, hover over the deathbeds of unbelieving dying relatives, hoping to hear, if only as a last gasp, a confession of faith. If only the loved one would call upon the name of Jesus, she might yet be saved.

I would hope that grace, which God intends for the salvation of all humanity, is not so fragile that it cannot stand up to human unbelief. Surely the God who dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ is both too powerful and too gracious to take our rebellious rejections for final answers. Surely the one true Holy God, who out of love has made all things visible and invisible, is not so intimidated by human rebellion as to despair of the power of God's gracious love to win us over. Surely such a God could never conclude that there is no other choice, given the trouble we make for God, but to damn all but a chosen few to eternal rejection. No, the free and sovereign God is in no sense bound or intimidated by the enormity of our sin. God, in God's freedom, has left open countless avenues to God's grace.

One such avenue is obvious to us all—the avenue that leads directly from the preaching of the gospel to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, to the emergence of Christian belief, to baptism and, finally, to lifelong membership in Christ's church. I

commend this route to one and all. However, there is a danger for those who have been enabled by the grace of God to follow this route. They may imagine that others who have not been led to the same faith journey are damned.

How narrowly such a view would restrict the freedom and love of God. It is true enough that, unlike unbelievers, Christians know of God's doings in Jesus Christ. As such, Christians are called to witness to the faith that is in them concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, the fact that Christ has died for all humanity doesn't cease to be true merely because not all people have as yet had their eyes opened by the Holy Spirit so that they can see and believe, or because some people have never heard of Jesus Christ.

Certainly, the apostle Paul did not believe that there is only one avenue to salvation. In a remarkable passage in his first Corinthian letter, Paul advises people who are married to unbelievers to remain married to them, for, says Paul, the unbelieving spouse is made "holy" through the spouse who is a believer.

In like manner, I have every hope that Richard's "holiness" is vouchsafed in the faith of his sons. We are, after all, bound together in a common humanity, united in God's love. For the grace of God has, indeed, appeared for the salvation of all humankind, and Jesus Christ has assured us that there will be one flock and one shepherd.