

For the Love of God! (Professionals or Amateurs?)

“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ... God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise... the weak things of the world to shame the strong... the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” 1 Corinthians 1:20-29

I’m an “Amateur Christian.”

“Amateur” – 1. A person who engages in a pursuit on an unpaid basis. 2. Someone considered contemptibly inept or unskillful at a particular activity. Origin: from amare 'to love'.

Amateurs do what they do, not for pay but for the love of it. They’re not experts, but they do their thing out of sheer enjoyment. That pretty much describes the kind of Jesus followers I prefer to hang around. They do God’s work for the sheer love of it. They don’t expect any pay – financial or otherwise – and, as amateurs are, they’re quite aware of their ineptness at it. They dedicate their incompetence to the God they love and hope he’s blessed by it. When they think of blessings, it’s more about the kind that make God happy rather than themselves. They’re blessed if he is. Period. That’s the kind of Christian I try to be – an amateur – though still quite inept, following Jesus for the love of it.

I’m pretty content as an amateur, and have no plans to ever advance to pro. I don’t aspire to ever be a “Professional Christian,” which can be even worse than a professional preacher. “God experts” is an oxymoronic phrase if I’ve ever heard one! How can anyone be an expert at what they can’t possibly comprehend or contain? Anybody that claims otherwise is a fool or self-deceived. Regardless of how long we’ve been studying God and following him – for me it’s about forty-two years now – we’re all just amateur followers.

Amateur Christians aren’t in it for the pay...

I’m a big baseball fan. I really dig it when the season rolls around and I can listen to games on the radio on warm summer days and nights. But for all my love of the game I’ve been a hairsbreadth away from giving it up because of the all the money involved in the Major Leagues. It really gets to me that the majority of the world starves on about a dollar a day while a guy in knickers who can hit and catch a ball can make six figures per game! But I cave in every year and pretend they do it for the love of the game! Ha ha!

We all know that there are preachers who fleece the flock and live in nauseating luxury. One such unnamed phony flies around in a \$17.5 Jet, lives in a \$6 million lakefront mansion with a 1,500 acre campus and his own private airstrip. Another well-known prosperity teller of lies lives in a \$10.5 million 17,000 square foot mansion! How many kids does that guy have? These disgusting mercenaries for the gospel make it hard for the rest of us to look our friends in the eye and encourage them to believe in our Savior!

These posers concoct a doctrine of prosperity to justify their own greed and opulent lifestyles and to lure unsuspecting folk into their lair. Bill Maher nailed it when he said, “For 2000 years Christians have been lawyering the Bible.” These devious preachers wind up rich in the process and guarantee prosperity to their largest donors. The promise of prosperity is an effective way to get a crowd but not the way to please God and make healthy disciples!

A few years ago there was a provocative question circulating among church planters and pastors, “If no one paid you to do what you do would you do it anyway?” I thought it was a valid query, but I never heard so much umming and ahing among people who were otherwise such articulate communicators. Their non-communication communicated after all.

I confess that I received the financial support of generous brothers and sisters for many years as a pastor, and still do without solicitation or newsletters. But I’ve always believed that we don’t pay people to minister to us but support them when it seems necessary so they can. It’s a biblical principle. But to my mind it’s the seven-figure preacher’s paycheck that’s indefensible.

I could go on and on about this, but I really have another point to make that hits closer to home for non-preachers. As heinous as mercenary ministers are, for every one of them there are millions of *mercenary Christians*. Everyone that I know is righteously riled about the rock star preacher strutting around in his \$5000 suits and Versace shoes pocketing his poor flock’s rent money. But how is that so different when, instead of serving God for the love of it, you do it for pay? Yeah right! Wait, what? What pay? That’s next...

I think a lot of Christians follow the way of Jesus for the paycheck, the benefits. I’m not talking about collecting a salary for church attendance and good works during the week and I’m not referring to the big payoff at the end of life in heaven. I’m talking about the so-called “blessings” that we get in this life. The reason many people do Christian things is so they can get God to give them something. Maybe it’s not money they expect to get, but if they were honest about it, they live in a Christian way to get God’s blessings.

“Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?” **Romans 11:35**

It’s not just the prosperity preachers who expect to be paid, and paid well, for their efforts. Many Christians have been duped into an *entitled* sort of faith themselves. “If you do such and such, God will give you a better job, save your kids, keep you safe, and heal your body.” Sound familiar? I think this is “Mercenary Christianity.” They don’t honor God because he’s God but because there’s a paycheck in it for them at the end of the day.

It’s the “Professional Preachers” who made millions of “Professional Christians.” It’s a case of mercenaries recruiting other mercenaries! They don’t follow Jesus for the love of it, but for the benefits. It’s not always about luxury or fame that motivates people to do the right thing. It’s usually more insidious than that; their lusts are usually subtler. For their tithes, their prayers, and their work in their church they expect to be remunerated, not only in heaven, but here on earth. They see the Bible as nothing but a bankbook into which they log their good works as deposits for their health and wealth here on earth. Their faith is nothing but *Christian Karma*. They live right and God owes them. They’re not amateurs, serving the Lord for the love of it, but professionals expecting to be compensated for all their work for the Lord.

I know this is true, because when the blessings dry up, when the paycheck doesn’t arrive, when God doesn’t give them what they felt entitled to, many quit the team. They weren’t playing for the love of the game or for the Manager, but for the big contract!

“If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.” **John 14:15**

Amateur Christians, not God experts...

Like I said, the “Amateur Christian” is unequivocally neither a mercenary nor an expert. S/he follows Jesus for the love of it and does so whether or not s/he is particularly good at it. Jesus’ fiercest

opponents, Pharisees, embodied both traits of professional spirituality – they “loved money” (Luke 16:14) and fancied themselves God experts (Matthew 23:5).

Pascal said, “I don’t trust Christians. They know too much about God.” Of course he spoke sarcastically. He knew that we Christians don’t know as much as we think we know. It was to our small mindedness – claiming to know more than we know – that the philosopher objected.

When people try to appear as expert Christians it makes them – and all the rest of us – look like fools. Even the non-christian knows that the concept of the “God expert” is oxymoronic. We might have “specialists” among God lovers but we have no experts. I take my broken car to an expert mechanic and my sick body to a doctor who’s a specialist. Expertise is preferable, even admirable, in most cases, but when it comes to spirituality, though some are further along than others, we’re all on some sort of continuum of constant improvement. There are no experts.

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect...” **Philippians 3:12**

I remember that as a new believer I soon came to the ridiculous conclusion that I had come to a conclusion. Somehow I thought I had arrived. It wasn’t as satisfying a sensation as you’d think, and fortunately, it didn’t take long for me to realize the absurdity of it. The adventure of the faith is more in the journey than in the arrival (not having arrived, I can only assume).

I think a lot of Christians are under what I call, “The Delusion of Arrival.” It’s like a person travelling on a train that comes to a stop. Thinking it’s their stop, they get off only to realize that they’re still several stations from their intended destination and the next train won’t be coming for a long while. Professional Christians tend to get off the train too early.

Amateur Christians, on the other hand, admit their frailty, and when you get to know them you hear them talk more about things that they don’t know than what they do. Sure, they’re sure about some things, but more than willing to live with the tension that mystery brings. They realize that they’re in route to somewhere and that they haven’t gotten there yet.

In my opinion, when we insist on “advancing” from Amateur to Professional in our faith, instead of actual progress it’s more like stumbling backwards. It’s that sort of supposed progress that might well mark the beginning of the end of most of our revival movements, which usually begin with the Spirit descending on some unsuspecting amateurs. Do some research and you’ll find that instead of “experts,” those who’ve fostered revivals have usually been the uneducated and inexperienced.

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In the history of spiritual awakenings, though I claim no “expertise” on the matter, people have typically made concerted efforts to overanalyze the move of the Spirit and concoct strategies to perpetuate the revivals. Trying to prolong a sovereign move of God that we had no hand in initiating to begin with is like pasting flowers on a dying rose bush. When amateurs become experts it’s only a matter of time till the revival that *is*, becomes known as the revival that *was*.

It takes the breath of the Spirit right out of our sails when we organize and upgrade what God was doing quite nicely without our assistance. Not to downgrade all upgrades, but it’s been my experience that product improvements usually don’t actually improve the product. I wonder if we left revivals

alone – so to speak – and didn't try to improve them with better buildings, budgets, bureaucracies and glossier presentations that they might last a little longer? (Again, I'm no revival "expert," myself – just an amateur observer.)

It's my opinion that professionalism has not proven to be an effective way to please God or communicate Christ to our culture. I think it's a modern church world blunder to try to impress people into our ranks. Paul didn't seem to mind too much being recognized as the "scum of the earth" so why should we hope to be known for our impressive productions, properties, and institutions? Maybe we think that if we "fit in" better, if we staged a more impressive performance in our worship music, our oratory, programs, and productions that pre-christians will want to be just like us – who are just like them, except with a spiritual veneer.

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Finally, the drum I beat is for neither an "amateurish" Christianity nor an intentionally poor presentation of our magnificent Jesus. *Sloppy* isn't synonymous with *spiritual*. Neither do I advocate a perpetual spiritual immaturity. There is nothing inherently virtuous in incompetence or ignorance. We're not experts, but that doesn't mean we shoot for clueless. He told us to be childlike, not childish.

Profession Christians? No. Perhaps we aim for "**Mature Amateurs**" who live and serve the way we do **for the love of God!**