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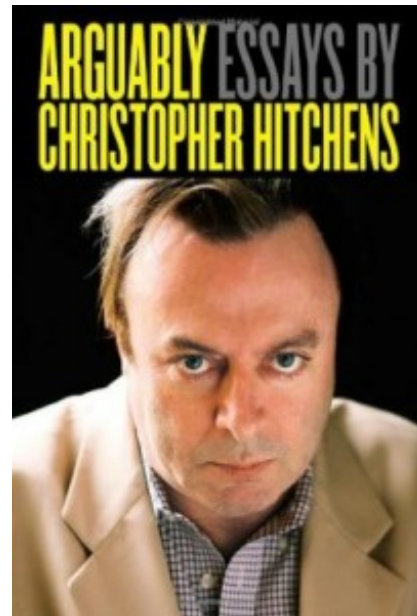
Learning from Christopher Hitchens: Lessons Evangelicals Must Not Miss



Wednesday, January 11, 2012

The death of Christopher Hitchens on December 15 was not unexpected, and that seemed only to add to the tragedy. His fight against cancer had been lived, like almost every other aspect of his colorful life, in full public view. He had told numerous interviewers that he wanted to die in an active, not a passive sense. Then again, there may never have been a truly passive moment in Christopher Hitchens' life.

Long before he was known as one of the world's most ardent atheists, he was known as a world-class essayist and a hard-driving public intellectual. Born in England, he had made his home in Washington, D.C. for three decades. His range of interests was almost unprecedented. He wrote books on subjects as varied as Thomas Paine and the Elgin Marbles. He was a predictable man of the Left when he began his journalistic career in Britain, and he remained a staunch defender of civil liberties throughout his life. Nevertheless, he broke with liberals in the United States and Britain when he affirmed the Bush Administration's decision to wage war against terrorism in both Iraq and Afghanistan.



He could write eloquent prose, but he could also write savagely. He was a self-

described contrarian, even writing a book entitled, *Letter to a Young Contrarian*. In that book, he described this contrarian stance as “a disposition against arbitrary authority or witless mass opinion.” In practice, for Hitchens it seemed to mean the right to attack any idea, any place, any time, no matter who might hold it.

In 2007 he launched a full assault upon theism and belief in God. In *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Hitchens declared himself to be the implacable and determined foe of all religious belief. Along with Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris, he became part of the Four Horsemen of the New Atheism.

Actually, his atheism had already been announced. In *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, published in 2001, Hitchens had written that he was “not even an atheist so much as I am an antitheist; I not only maintain that all religions are versions of the same untruth, but I hold that the influence of churches, and the effect of religious belief, is positively harmful.” Hitchens did not want to be confused with amateur atheists or with “the generalized agnosticism of our culture.” No, he was the enemy of religious faith and any claim of belief in God.

God is Not Great became a best-seller — a manifesto of the New Atheism and its aggressive public presence. Hitchens distilled the New Atheism to its essence. He asserted that belief in God is not only without intellectual integrity, it is also morally corrupting. He blamed belief in God for everything from ethnic strife and genocide to opposition to science and a hatred of sexuality. Along with the other New Atheists, he delivered a broadside against all theistic belief and religious expression. Whereas the older atheists had soft-pedaled attacks on Jesus Christ, Hitchens rejected any effort to sentimentalize Christ. He wrote that the New Testament was no less violent than the Old Testament and he lambasted any claim of divine revelation. He argued that religious indoctrination is a form of child abuse and denied that belief in God is necessary to morality.

At the end of his life, fighting against the cancer that had robbed him of his voice even before it stilled his pen, Hitchens pointedly asked Christians not to pray for him, and then allowed that believers might pray for him — if it made them feel better. He also warned against any claims that he might have converted at the end of his struggle. “Suppose I ditch the principles I have held for a lifetime, in the hope of gaining favor at the last minute?” he wrote. “I hope and trust that no serious person would be at all impressed by such a hucksterish choice.” He told others that, if such reports did emerge, they should be attributed to the influence of drugs, and the loss of his mental faculties.

With all that in mind, how can I claim that evangelical Christians should learn from Christopher Hitchens? Well, consider these lessons:

1. Hitchens understood the power of ideas, and he never left a field of

intellectual combat without giving his best.

Even as a boy, Christopher Hitchens understood that ideas matter. This conviction was only deepened as he was educated at Oxford University and then, as both journalist and public intellectual, entered the fray of public debate. He never ran from an idea, nor from the responsibility to defend and refine that idea in the combat of intellectual engagement. In his view, ideas rule the world, and he was determined to give his all to the cause of making certain that the superior ideas, in his view, triumphed over the inferior ideas. He never surrendered an idea with a shrug, though he was, on some issues, ready to change his mind, and to stand against his former intellectual allies.

2. Hitchens committed his life to the production of words, believing that the printed and spoken word can change the world.

As a writer and essayist, Hitchens is often compared to George Orwell, the subject of one of his many books. Hitchens' literary production was, by any measure, prodigious. As some of his friends noted, he seemed to write faster than they could read. He wrote books, essays, and seemingly countless articles. He was a public speaker, a conversationalist, and a commentator. He wrote books and essays that aggravated, assaulted, aggrieved, and irritated. He could be eloquent, and he could be crude. He believed that the power of language drove the world of ideas, and that ideas require verbal expression. He was hardly ever quiet, and the force of his arguments was expanded and extended in time through his writings. Though Hitchens is now dead, his books remain in print and widely available, and will be so for years to come.

3. Hitchens was a man of passion and personal intensity, and he made friends across ideological boundaries.

He was, as Tom Wolfe might describe him, a man in full. His passions were fully in view, if sometimes too much so. He delighted in human company, and made friends around the world. He had a host of Christian friends, including many who had debated him. He was never boring, always interesting, and just about everyone who knew him seems to recall his personal warmth and conviviality. At the very least, even when he attacked Christianity, he did not cut himself off from all Christians.

4. Hitchens did not hide behind intellectual scorn and he did not fear the open exchange of ideas.

Generally, the New Atheists are known for their unwillingness to debate Christians, especially Christian apologists. Richard Dawkins, in particular, has brought disrepute upon his own intellectual confidence by his steadfast and condescending refusal to debate Christian apologists and intellectuals. The same could not be said of Hitchens, who was

willing to debate evangelical Christians and to allow the debates to be publicized and published. He did not attempt to shut down debate by insulting his ideological and theological opponents.

5. Hitchens revealed the danger of cultural Christianity and exposure to tepid, lifeless, superficial Christian teaching.

In his childhood, Hitchens was exposed to the mild Christianity of his father and the Hitchens home. (Later in life, he discovered that his mother was, in fact, partly Jewish.) As a schoolboy, Hitchens received the customary dose of tame religious instruction. In *God is Not Great*, he wrote of Mrs. Jean Watts, “a good, sincere, simple woman, of stable and decent faith,” who taught him religion at his school near Dartmoor. Even as a boy, Hitchens was not impressed by her emotivist expressions of doctrine and her answers to his questions. He wrote also of a school headmaster, who seemed, among other failings, to believe that belief in God served a mainly therapeutic function. Hitchens described himself then as “quite the insufferable little intellectual,” but the damage was done. Unlike others who, as he wrote, might have rejected belief in God because of abuse or “brutish indoctrination,” Hitchens simply developed indignant contempt for a belief system that seemed so superficial and fraudulent. An exposure to tepid, lifeless, thoughtless, and intellectually formless Christianity can be deadly.

The death of Christopher Hitchens is a tragedy. That much is affirmed by virtually all the countless individuals who knew him, or knew of him. But Christians experienced the death of Christopher Hitchens with a special sense of tragedy, for we could not think of his death merely on his terms. We have no choice but to believe that Christopher Hitchens, with all of his amazing gifts, will have to face the very God he so aggressively dismissed and denied. As for that deathbed change of heart he warned us all not to hope for — we have every reason to hope that it happened in spite of himself.

For that matter, every single believer in Christ has come to believe and be saved by grace alone — in spite of ourselves.

There are important lessons to be learned from the life and career of Christopher Hitchens, and they are lessons we must not fail to contemplate. In the final analysis, Christians have far less to fear from atheists or antitheists as we do from what Hitchens called “the generalized agnosticism of our culture.” We agree with him that the question of the existence and identity of God is nothing less than the most powerful and urgent question humanity will ever confront.

For this central reason, the death of Christopher Hitchens is an absolute tragedy. And, as is often the case with such a tragedy, we dare not miss the lessons with which we are left.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

My book on the New Atheism, *Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheism* (Crossway Books, 2008), considers both Christopher Hitchens and the larger movement.

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