

Spiritual But Not Religious

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There is a current trend, especially in what older observers call the “emergent” generations (those born after 1980), to prefer to think of oneself as “spiritual but not religious.” This is, in part, a reaction against denominational “church” hierarchies and, in part, an extension of the relativism that has pervaded the thoughts and beliefs of every educated person on the planet. For those who embrace this stance of being spiritual but not religious, there are several factors that one would be wise to consider:

- Being spiritual speaks of things “of, relating to, consisting of, or affecting the spirit.” (Webster’s) Having stated the obvious, though, we are still left scrambling to find an adequate definition of “spirit.” “Essence of being” probably comes closest but it too falls short. Religion, on the other hand, is much more readily defined. It is “the service and worship of God or the supernatural, a commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance.” (Webster’s) It is not far from the truth to simply say that “spiritual” is an aspect of what we *are* while “religious” relates more to what we *do*. Thus this label of being spiritual but not religious tends to be a category, like “emergent,” that older observers have invented to pigeonhole younger people into categories which the older people, with their worldview, mindset, preconceptions and paradigms already firmly set, can wrap their minds around. There is enough validity in the characterization, however, that causes many younger people to embrace this label as a tool for self definition.

- The trend toward embracing this label is founded upon the “church’s” well-deserved reputation as a place for the dead and dying. The first words one thinks of upon hearing “church” are “hypocrisy: and “judgmentalness.” The last word one thinks of upon hearing “church” is “life.” The “church,” through its multitudes of divisions and embracing of errors and various misguided political agendas, has done so much damage to the idea of their being the possessors of truth that the young people would rather die than be thought by their friends and peers as being “religious.” The “church” has rendered the notions of God all but irrelevant – even though the Book they have proclaims its message to be truth delivered to men by God Himself. The “church,” because it no longer knows the truth, must change its message in its attempts to achieve anything resembling “relevant” even as it remains bound by its own perceived need to get everybody “saved.” God’s eternal truths, however, have and always will be relevant whether anyone desires or believes them or not and He alone is able to save anyone. (Jas. 4:12)

- In a trend that has been developing since the Enlightenment, the individual person is increasingly required to decide for him or herself what is the truth. Since the “church” has demonstrated its own faithlessness to absolute truth, the individual often grabs onto whatever spiritual practice (or non-practice) that serves the interests of the individual.

It is in light of these three overarching factors that we need to reconsider exactly what the Bible has to say.

- The New Testament clearly foretold the failure of the “church” to uphold the way of truth. Peter wrote, “*Many* will follow [the false teachers who yet claim to follow Christ in] destructive [divisive] ways, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.” (2 Pet. 2:2) This is precisely what the “church” has done to the truth.

- The first heresy (sectarian division) within the “church” was accomplished when bishops arose from among the elders to draw followers after themselves and their own peculiar doctrines, precisely as Paul prophesied. (Acts 20:30) The exaltation of any man *over* another among the people of Christ was expressly prohibited by Jesus (Mk. 10:42-43, etc.) and cryptically labeled Nicolaitanism (literally, “conquer over the people” – Rev. 2:6, 15) so that bishops and their “theological” descendant, the “pastor,” could grow to maturity as a tare, a son of the devil. (Mt. 13:38) “Pastors” who do have some genuine spiritual relationship with Christ and God are often either completely unaware of the deceptions they are under and perpetuate or else they simply cannot explain the oppressions and frustrations they constantly live with.

- The second heresy (sectarian division) within the “church” revolved around a man named Montanus and his two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla, as they went hyper-spiritual. “Tongues,” fits of ecstasy and bogus “prophetic words” characterized this movement which ranged across much of the Christian world at that time – not much different from the hyper-charismatic sects of today. But because Montanus, and those who spoke and wrote in defense of his practices (such as Tertullian), called into question the moral looseness of the Catholics and challenged their selection of corrupt bishops as lords over the assemblies, of course, the bishops had to denounce him as a schismatic. Montanus was indeed operating under a spirit that differed from the Holy Spirit of God but so too were the Nicolaitan bishops and what suffered most because of Montanus’ error was the very right idea that one needed to also be a spiritual being in order to follow Christ. This was a very successful demonic stratagem from which the people who follow Christ have yet to recover from. “Church” history has been in a downward spiral ever since with only a few bright and shining moments where people threw off layers of darkness, deception and death. But no movement to date has ever recaptured all that the ekklesia (the Greek word misrendered “church” in English versions of the New Testament) was intended by God to be.

- The Bible is God’s *Book* - that is, His words and His message to His people. The Bible is not the inerrant or infallible “Word of God” as is often flaunted in some “churches.” The Bible clearly says the Word of God is a *He*, the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. (Heb. 4:12-13, Jn. 1:1, 14, etc.) The Bible is an *it*. John wrote, “The Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify

of Me... When He, the Spirit of truth has come, He will guide you into all truth.” (Jn. 15:26, 16:13) Because the “church” has not followed the leading of the Spirit of truth, they have lost whatever truth they possessed even while they still retain possession of the Book. The situation is strikingly similar to that of the Jews, who crucified Christ, still possessing the Law and the Prophets but not being able to recognize the Messiah whom God had sent into their midst.

- Paul wrote, “Now the Spirit explicitly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines (teachings) of demons.” (1 Tim. 4:1) The “church” is precisely fulfilling this (and many other prophecies about the apostasy, the falling away from the faith that occurs before Christ’s return as King – Mt. 24:10, 2 Ths. 2:3, 2 Pet. 2:1, etc.)

- “Religion” in the New Testament – in the sense of recommended actions for the follower of Christ – is mentioned in only *one* passage. James wrote, “If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.” (Jas. 1:26-27) As applicable as it is to the “church”-ites – and indeed many a “church” defect would be cured by eliminating gossip, slander and evil-speaking, by focusing on helping the poor, oppressed and disadvantaged and by seeking to be free of the contaminants of this wicked world – it is applicable to *all* who seek to avoid the evil connotations and implications of the term “religious.”

- The devil is said to be “the prince of the power of the air, the *spirit* who now works in the sons of disobedience...” (Jn. 8:44) and is said to be “a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” (1 Pet. 5:8) The “church” no longer pays any attention to this lethal enemy – many even deny his existence! – and has been taken captive by him to do his work. (2 Tim. 2:26)

For all these reasons and more, everyone should cast a skeptical eye on those who meet in specialized “church” buildings (a building in which God will never dwell – Acts 17:24) and insist that you agree to their peculiar “doctrines” and “theology” (and even tolerance of sin has become a popular “theology” to draw in the unwary) and participate in their religious rituals and practices (even if that means only sitting at the feet of their man or depositing money in their pockets) in order to be “a true Christian.”

Jesus rarely spoke of the ekklesia (English “church” - see Mt. 16:18, 18:17 for the *only* three times this Greek word is inserted into this Aramaic-speaking Rabbi’s teachings) – He proclaimed the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is that realm where Christ is actually obeyed – that is, the Spirit of truth is followed and one learns from Him to worship God in spirit and truth. (Jn. 4:24) No man stand over you to command you in what you must do (Mt. 20:25-26, 23:8-9, etc.) and no man stands between you and God to mediate your relationship to Him. (1 Tim. 2:5) It is the King alone who commands – that is the nature of having a King.

Those who, though apart from the “church” still traffic in error and deception about spiritual matters, are not difficult to recognize. The Spirit of truth will *never* lead anyone to

contradict or change what the Bible truly says. The New Testament is what we could call God's manifesto, His "public declaration of intentions, motives, or views." (Webster's) It is not a manual nor a religious catechism. ("summary of religious doctrine often in the form of questions and answers" – Webster's) The Spirit of truth will use the words of the Bible, giving spiritual revelation and insight about Christ, bringing all believers who truly follow Him toward the unity of the faith (Eph. 4:13) as they endeavor to preserve the unity of the Spirit. (Eph. 4:3) The entire *group* of believers – and not an individual, especially not just a "leader" acting alone, and not a portion, not even the majority – will be led by the Spirit of truth to practice unity in order to protect its members from deceptive "wolves" who want to use the words of the Bible to draw followers away from Christ and after themselves.

Jesus said, "If you abide in My word [remain knowledgeable of and obedient to what I teach], you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." (Jn. 8:31-32) And Paul wrote to his younger fellow worker Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself *approved by God* [not men], a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (2 Tim. 2:15) If we will but follow Him into the new birth He gives (1 Pet. 1:23, Jn. 3:3, 5, etc.) and continue on with Him down the path that leads to life (Mt. 7:14), we will know the truth and we will be freed from the prison gates of death and darkness ("Hades") and we will be His ekklesia, His people called out from the darkness to live in His kingdom of light. (Mt. 16:18) And we will never once be compelled to join any "church" or obey anyone other than Him. (Acts 5:29) We will be partakers of His divine nature. (2 Pet. 1:4) God *is* Spirit (Jn. 4:24) and we will *never* need to practice any religion in order to gain His favor – He has already given us "all things that pertain to life and godliness [God-likeness]..." (2 Pet. 1:3, see also Eph. 2:8-9, etc.) Whatever good works He has us do (see Eph. 2:10) will simply be the overflow of the "living waters" He causes to flow through us. (Jn. 7:38)

Jesus came to bring abundant life (Jn. 10:10) – not abundant religion. The original New Testament good news (gospel) was that men would be given new spiritual life so that they could freely enter into and participate in the wonderfully transcendent love, Spirit and nature of God. Though there is a devil (an evil spiritual being), who is attended by fallen angels and demons (likewise evil spiritual beings), who will one day be justly thrown into an eternal lake of fire (Rev. 20:10, Mt. 25:41), the good news is that we need no longer follow him, be deceived by (or deceive others with) his lies, nor suffer his eternal fate. It is more than appropriate to be spiritual but not religious. That is only a concise – a bit too concise perhaps but an accurate one nonetheless – of God's original plan of redemption for humankind.

Let he – or she – who has ears hear!

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