

Religion

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Most people who claim to follow Christ do not make great claims about being *religious* or of belonging to a *religion*. Yet virtually everywhere “Christianity” is considered to be “just another religion,” on a par with and not very different from Buddhism, Mohammedism or any other accepted *religion*. The reluctance of Christ’s followers, however nominal or genuine they may be, to lay claim to being *religious* is surely found in the New Testament’s refusal to embrace the notion of “the Christian religion.” Yet we find that the “church,” that mixed multitude who practices all manner of pagan rituals and practices, is quite content to *be* religious even as it downplays or even refuses to accept or adopt the *label* “religious.” In other words, many “church”-ites *are* very religious but don’t particularly like to be *called* that. This discrepancy alone should tell us very much about the true nature of the “church.”

The New Testament is not entirely silent about religion. James wrote, “If anyone among you thinks he is religious (*threskos* [2357]), and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion (*threskeia* [2356]) is useless. Pure and undefiled religion (*threskeia* [2356]) 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) The Greek words used in this passage refer to the outward or vocal or apparent ceremonies that are commonly associated with religion. The Jews openly referred to their religion and considered a devoutly religious man to be a great man to be respected. (Acts 26:5) It was because Jesus did not subscribe to this view but rather considered all men equal in the eyes of God (Mt. 22:16, 15:12) that the very religious Jewish leaders hated, opposed and quickly executed the One who came as the Messiah who would not dance to their tune nor support their hyper-traditionalist power base. (Lk. 7:32-34, Jn. 11:47-48) And Paul warned, “Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels (*threskeia* [2356], open ceremonial rituals directed toward angels)...” (Col. 2:18) The above is a *complete* compilation of what the New Testament has to say about “religion.”

Contrast this sparse treatment with what the New Testament has to say about faith. Faith is spoken of some 245 times and it is by faith we are saved. (Lk. 7:50, 18:42, Eph. 2:8, etc.) Faith or the closely associated word believing is said to be *the* work of God that we are to do. (Jn. 6:29) Religion does not save anyone – only faith in God does that. Religion is simply and only a *work* - when that work is done by the power of the flesh apart from simply obedience in faith it is sin. (Rom. 14:23) Religion, as a work, can be classified as “gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw” and the fire of God’s judgment will reveal the true nature of that work and the individual will be saved, “yet as through fire” – but if one’s religion introduces defilement into God’s temple, His people, “*God will destroy him.*” (1 Cor. 3:12-17)

It is because the “church” has allowed the outward practices of religion, a mere work, to be the functional basis of whether one is to be considered a “Christian” or not that the whole idea of following Christ is skewed and fallen into disrepute. (see 2 Pet. 2:2) No mere work can ever be the basis by which one enters into and receives Christ’s life and Spirit (Gal. 2:16) – yet the “church,” because it’s spiritual eyes have been plucked out and it’s activities have been reduced to grinding grain for the enemy (compare Samson – Jdgs. 16:21), can only use outward activities and appearances to make its judgments. (see Jn. 7:24)

Anyone who makes the practice of religion *the* basis upon which one can be received as a brother in Christ is misguided at best and a fallen apostate at worst. Religion is only an outward

expression of inward motivations and, as such, it's source must be spiritually revealed and discerned to know whether any particular practice is truly of God or of the flesh.

The one who is "anti-religious" (who considers all "religion" to be a bad or onerous thing) suffers from the same fundamental problem as does the one who thinks his practice of "religion" makes him acceptable to God. Both misunderstand the true role and place of religion as merely one form of works. Dead works, that is, works done by the power of the flesh – even religion – are to be repented of. (Heb. 6:1) Any work, even religion, done in the power of the Spirit of God will bring forth life, both abundant and divine. Thus it is by the fruit that we can judge the source of any particular religious practice.

Religion – as a word, as a concept and as a practice – cannot be rightly categorized apart from the adjectives and descriptive we attach to it. "Good" religion must be that which is done in obedience to God, enabled and empowered by His Spirit. "Bad" religion will be that which lures the individual into reliance upon fleshly practices in order to "please God" or that draws the individual into following a false god, a deception or a mere man. Either of these kinds of religion can be practiced in the name of Christ and God – and it is the responsibility of each individual to guard his or her own heart from all forms of false religion. (1 Cor. 10:14, 1 Jn. 5:21, etc.)

Paul wrote, "Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty.'" (2 Cor. 6:17-18) John wrote, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." (Jn. 1:12) And Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him." (Jn. 14:23) At the risk of using a word used even less than "religion," what God is calling us into is "relationship." We are called to be His sons and daughters, His children and to live with Him as our close and intimate Father. We are not called to grope blindly after Him and do whatever seems right in our own eyes, a thing the Bible calls lawlessness, a thing which causes us to be dismissed from God's presence. (Jdgs. 21:25, Mt. 7:23) Jesus further warned, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." (Mt. 7:21) It is not those who call Him "Lord" or "Father" who shall remain in eternity with God but those who actually *do* what He commands and who follow Him wherever He leads. Thus religion, wherever it deceives us into thinking that we are pleasing God when in fact our religion is leading us into deception and presumption, is a most dangerous thing.

There is no darkness greater than the religions of men, especially "Christianity," that in reality prevents men from truly entering and virtually participating and functioning in God's kingdom of light. Religion, as a work, is merely men's blind gropings after God and can only reach so far. Only when religion leads us into contact with the heavenly Father, who will then lead us to Christ (Jn. 6:45), does religion have any eternal value. The one who handles the truths of Christ but never surrenders to God stands in a place of terrible judgment indeed. God will impartially judge every man "according to his deeds. ...to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness – indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish..." (Rom. 2:6, 8-9, 11) It will do no good to list all our spiritual and religious works if we have not obeyed the truth or practiced righteousness (what is right in God's eyes) but have instead done only what is "right" or "good" or "true" in our own eyes. God's purpose is to redeem unto Himself a people zealous for Him and His goodness (Tit. 2:14) not to create yet another religion whereby men can pretend to serve God and then enjoy eternal rewards for their pretences.

Let he who has ears hear.

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