

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS, EDITOR

7844 GRIMSBY CIRCLE, HARRISBURG N.C.

APRIL 2021

THE FAILURE OF ORGANIZED RELIGION

After WWI, Reinhold Niebuhr, 20th century Theologian, observed in 1929: "The church is like the Red Cross service in war time. It keeps life from degenerating into a consistent inhumanity, but it does not materially alter the struggle itself. The Red Cross neither wins nor abolishes it." Niebuhr says the church is just like the Red Cross, not engaged in any battles, not trying to win nor influence their outcomes, not trying to win the war; it is just helping others to survive. Today, nearly 100 years after Niebuhr, the church has not matured beyond the point of his description of a century ago, but organized religion is alive and well, expressing itself in grand worship productions, flamboyant preachers, arrogance infested congregations and weird theologies, massive structures, and well-endowed money chests. About seventy-five years ago A.W. Tozer wrote in *The Pursuit of God*: "I wonder if there was ever a time when true spiritual worship was at its lowest ebb. To great sections of the church the art of worship has been lost entirely, and in its place has come the strange and foreign thing called 'the program.' This word has been borrowed from the stage and applied with sad wisdom to the type of public services which now passes for worship among us." This is the fruit of organized religion.

The classic example of the failure of organized religion is seen in the record of the Jews in the Old Testament. They had the temple, its priesthood, the law, its ritual, its sacrifices and could boast of 2,000 years of being the people of Jehovah God. They had the most elaborate, best located, and most magnificent physical plant in town. They had it all. Their priesthood surpassed that of Roman Catholicism. They could trace their priesthood back to Aaron. Their ritual and pageantry would've made the Episcopalians take a back seat. They were more organized than the Baptist, more reformed than Presbyterians, more traditional than the Methodists, and more refined than the Lutherans. They were about as legal concerning the law as the Church of Christ is concerning the New Testament, and about as independent as the Christian Church. They kept the Sabbath more holy than the Seventh Day Adventist and their worship would make the Charismatics jealous. They sang Psalms, they chanted, they praised and prayed. They raised their hands and clapped and danced, and they offered sacrifices and they burnt incense. About any practice found in organized religion today has its root somewhere in Old Testament Judaism. Yet the sad thing about all, it was absolutely worthless, absolutely worthless. (See Isaiah 1 & 2).

Not that God established something that was of no value. The intent of God had been lost centuries before. And what was practiced as the Jewish religion in the day of Christ had no resemblance to the original form and purpose God intended.

So, let's be honest about the failure of organized religion. Three things: In the first place: It could not and cannot free the worshipper from sin. In the second-place worship becomes meaningless. And in the third place it's not the will of God. Hebrews chapter 10 is a definitive example of the fact that organized religion was the failure of the Jews in the OT and is still a failure today.

In the First Place: It cannot free the worshipper from sin. In verses 1 & 2 the writer shows the law (which is comparable to the legalism of many churches today) had only a shadow of good things to come and not the very substance of things, could never by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year after year make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise would they have ceased to have been offered? Having been once cleansed they no longer would have a conscientiousness of sin. It didn't make any difference how much they offered sacrifices and practiced certain rituals; it made no difference in their life as far as sin is concerned. We must be free from the consciousness of sin in order to function in the kingdom of God. This is basic.

The reason so many church members today are not serving the living God as they should, they have not had their conscience cleansed from sin. Organized religion and ritual and worship and sacrifice and coming and going and doing is not going to cut it. It is through the blood of Christ that we have this experience of having our sins forgiven and our conscience cleansed. It is only then that we can get on with the work of the kingdom. That's the point of the whole book of Hebrews, from the beginning to the end. The writer is saying "lets get on with it." As God told Moses in the wilderness: "You have been in this mountain too long." Realize who you are and what you have and what God wants you to do and begin doing it. He makes it very plain in this 10th chapter what he's talking about. After saying what he says about the offering that Christ made for the sins of his people having perfected for all time those that are sanctified, he then quotes Jeremiah the prophet concerning the new covenant, he says: "their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." Then he says: "Where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin." You have been forgiven. Now, he says, start acting like it. It means something to be forgiven.

In the second place: Worship becomes meaningless when there is no forgiveness of sins. Every priest stood daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices which could never take away sins. It was like going to church every Sunday and nothing happening, attending church every Sunday and your life remaining defeated.

Isaiah, the first chapter, is a passage that speaks vociferously loud of this very subject. In verse 1 God calls the heavens and the earth to listen and in verse 2 he warns them to pay attention because he says, "the Lord is speaking." So what he says is important and he calls on the nation of Israel to listen. He says, "they are sick because they have forgotten Him, their God." He begins to describe their condition. "The land is desolate, their cities are burned with fire, strangers come in and devour their fields. Desolation and barrenness are everywhere. The Daughter of Zion is like a shelter in a vineyard and watchman in a cucumber field." Useless! He said, "If the Lord had not left a survivor, they would have been as Sodom and Gomorrah." That's quite a picture of God's people.

God had to send them a prophet to tell them what was going on before their very eyes. They didn't even know it and couldn't even see it. So he sent Isaiah to tell them. Beginning in verse 11

he tells them their organized religion was a failure. "What are the multitude of your sacrifices to me? I've had enough of your burnt offerings of ram, the cattle and blood of bulls and lambs and goats when you appear before me, you're trampling out my courts. Bring your worthless offerings no longer, your incense is an abomination to me. The new moon and the Sabbath and the calling of your assembly I hate. They have become a burden to me. I'm weary of bearing them. I will hide my eyes from you, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen."

Why they in this condition, why were they falling apart, impotent and useless to God? They were too busy "going to Sunday school and church." They were too busy practicing their religion to be what God wanted them to be or to do what God wanted them to do. So their worship was meaningless. Jesus warns us about this in the sermon on the Mount: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act upon them is like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand. The rains fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against the house and it fell, and great was its fall" (Matt. 7:26, 27). The ones who faithfully attend church and listens to sermons but does nothing about it and does not act upon it, Jesus says they are fools. Their house is built upon the sand.

The third thing, and perhaps the most important, is it is not the will of God. God ordained all these things, but he never ordained them to be practiced as they were being practiced. Everything we read in the first chapter of Isaiah God had given them and commanded them to do them. They had traditionalized and changed them so much they had lost the meaning entirely and so he says, "Sacrifice and offerings, I do not desire." He took no pleasure in them. Just imagine worshiping God and offering unto him worship of which he takes no pleasure in. He doesn't care how much one attends church or how faithful they are in their organization if they are not doing his will. And we ask, "what is his will?" His will is things we are not able to do in legalism, things we are not able to do by ourselves, and things we can do only if we avail ourselves of his provision.

Israel had been chosen to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). Their purpose was to tell the world about God and convince the world of his love. Paul in pointing out the failure of the nation (Rom. 2:18-22) reminds them of their failure to live up to their God commanded goals. They were to be a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, a corrector of the foolish and a teacher of the immature. Unfortunately, Israel never understood and accepted the purpose of their calling. This is typical of organized religion today. All the effort and activity we see going on in the world of the modern church is making very little difference in modern society. Most of the energy of modern organized religion is focused on itself, what it takes to succeed and be popular. Is all we see going on in the organized religious system the will of God and is this what Jesus meant his church to be and to do? Is the kingdom of God being reflected in the modern church? Is it the power of the Spirit that has brought the modern church to the condition it is in today? It is sad to see those who are committed to the modern religious machine and are (to quote Tozer again) "caught up in the monstrous heresy that noise, size, activity, and bluster make men dear to God." This was the problem with the Jewish religion that made God reject it. Organized religion has failed because the authority of the Scriptures has become colored with human thinking and has lost its importance and the gospel has lost its power.

Let's leave the failure of organized religion and consider the positive aspect of what the church needs to understand. Jesus, our great high priest, has opened the way for us and we can come boldly into God's presence. The believer is truly, as Paul says, "sitting with Christ in heavenly places" (Eph. 2:6). We can draw near. We can live in his very presence. We have access to the throne, that is, access to heaven. And God has given to our disposal all heaven itself. "He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm" (Eph. 1:3), or as Peter says, "he has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness" (II Pet. 1:3). It is ours. God can do no more for us than he has already done.

This is all summarized in Hebrews 12:22-24: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better things than the blood of Abel." These are astonishing words. Staggering words. They make no impression upon the average reader and few, if any, sermons have been preached on these verses. The writer is saying, among other things, the believer has already come to Mount Zion. We are not marching to Zion, we "have come" to Zion. We are already there, the heavenly Jerusalem, to God and to Jesus. God said it... believe it! And if preachers fail to believe it, fail to know it, fail to preach it, that's their problem. God said it. This is God's "new and living" rest uniquely designed for His new covenant church with a place prepared for us where we can now enjoy abundant life in heaven itself, in the presence of God, seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6) at the right hand of the Father in Christ (Col. 3:1).

The religious system rejects the present reality of this for the same reason the Old Jewish High Priests caused Israel to reject Christ...Unbelief! Psalm 27:13: "I would have despaired unless I would believed I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." If the psalmist had never believed it, he would never have seen it. Believe it to see!

Pushing our entry into heaven to "over-yonder" makes us exactly like the Old Covenant unbelieving Jews who went to the boarder of the promised land but turned away without entering and spent 40 years in the wilderness because of unbelief. (Heb. 3:18-19).

The entire Jewish nation that left Egypt died in the wilderness without entering the promised land (Num. 27-38). Our salvation remains sure. Failing to enter heaven while in the land of the living does not impact salvation, but we lose out on an unfathomable number of eternal rewards by rejecting God's centerpiece of achievement for us in Christ. God has made heaven and its richest resources found only in Christ in the land of the living.

We believe in the first half of God's Gospel (forgiveness). So enter into the second half of his "Good news," (heaven now) using the same amount of faith as the first half. "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). "Ah Lord God! Behold you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm. Nothing is too difficult for you!" (Numbers 32:17).

(We are thankful to Col. Lane Rogers for the thoughts in these last four paragraphs.) Continued next month: Zion.