

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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DO YOU HAVE RELIGION?

Christianity started in Palestine as a fellowship, it moved to Greece and became a philosophy, it moved to Italy and became an institution, it moved to Europe and became a culture, it came to America and became a religion. The word "religion" has been defined as "a system of doctrine; an organization; an approved pattern of behavior and form of worship." "Religion" and "Religious" is used only seven times in the New Testament and is translated from three different Greek words.

Acts 17:22: "And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I observe that you are very *religious* in all respects.'" Acts 25:19: "...but they simply had some points of disagreement with him about their own *religion* and about a certain dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive." The word translated "religious" in both passages is "superstition". Webster defines superstition as "a belief or practice resulting from ignorance; a motion maintained despite evidence to the contrary." George Cantor, a German mathematician (1845-1918) coined the following phrase relating to the relationship of infinite numbers which became known as Cantor's Law: "A false conclusion, once arrived at and widely accepted is not dislodged easily, and the less it is understood, the more tenaciously is held." We could substitute the word "doctrine" for "conclusion" and it aptly describes much of the church world today.

Superstition is based upon two things: ignorance, and a refusal to accept the plain facts of Scripture. Ignorance is one of the most dangerous enemies of the Christian faith, and is detrimental to the individual Christian. Note the many times the New Testament uses the phrase "I would not have you ignorant" and "do you not know?" and the many times the words "understanding" and "knowledge" are emphasized. It was the ignorance on the part of the religious system that crucified the Christ (Acts 3:17). It is ignorance that darkens the understanding, excludes people from the life of God and hardens the heart (Eph. 4:18). Peter warns that we are "not to be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance" (I Pet. 1:14). It was ignorance that caused the Athenians to worship an unknown god (Acts 17:23). The sin of the Jewish nation was that they had "a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge, for not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (Rom. 10:2, 3). It is superstition caused by ignorance that has led to the modern church "establishing their own righteousness" and neglecting the righteousness of God. Evidence of this is seen in way the church has been so prone to follow any new fad that comes along which promises to draw outsiders into the church. Oz Guinness stated in *The Dust of Death* that "Faith that is faddish can be as dangerous as faith that is false" and in 1973 he predicted: "cheapness and confusion will be the religious climate of the next years."

The second cause of superstition is the mysterious fact that there are many Christians who simply refuse to accept the plain teaching of the word of God. The word of God is not some mysterious enigma that keeps us in ignorance, rather it is a

"revelation" which means "made known". God does not give us His revelation and make it so complicated we can't understand it. Admittedly Peter wrote concerning Paul's letters: "in which some things are hard to be understood, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of Scriptures, to their own destruction" (II Pet. 3:16). However, he does not say they could not be understood, rather they were hard to understand. Jesus said to the Pharisees: "Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear my word...But because I speak the truth, you do not believe me" (John 8:43, 45). If you think you cannot understand the Scriptures you need to heed these words: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given us of God" (I Cor. 2:12). A refusal to accept the plain facts of Scripture means "they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths" (II Tim. 4:3, 4). A prime example of this is a quote from the book written by Maria Shriver (the first lady of California and niece of John F. Kennedy) entitled *What's Heaven?* which is aimed at children: "Heaven is somewhere you believe in...It's a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of any in the universe...If you are good then you get to go to heaven...When your life is finished here on earth God sends angels down to take you to heaven to be with Him there...And Grandma is alive and she is in a safe place with the stars, with God and the angels...She is watching over us from up there..." Religious bookstores will probably hawk this book as they did *The Prayer of Jabez* and because of the content and who the author is many Christians will probably purchase the book for their children. Superstition is poisoning the church today.

Colossians 2:23: After warning the Colossians to avoid mysticism and asceticism Paul says "These are matters which have the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion." The King James Version translates "self made religion" as "will worship". Self made religion has nothing to do with what God requires, rather it is worship devised by man and can be described as one's delight in his own righteousness or self imposed worship. This religion can be illustrated by two examples from the Old Testament: first, the worship at the "high places" and second, the offering of the Passover lamb. During the patriarchal times any man could sacrifice to God on an altar they built. (Some examples: Noah, Gen. 8:20; Abraham, Gen. 12:7; 13:18; Jacob, Gen 33:20; Moses, Ex. 17:15, 24:4). When the tabernacle was built only the priest were allowed to offer sacrifices and they had to be offered in the tabernacle, and later the temple. Numbers 16-17 records the fact of a rebellion in the wilderness against Moses and Aaron by Korah, Dathan and Abiram, who said "All the congregation are, holy, every one of them..." (16:3). They were saying the people had a right to sacrifice as well as the priests. God brought judgment upon them and established the priests as the only acceptable ones to offer sacrifices. The old system of anyone building an altar and offering a sacrifice was over. All sacrifices had to be offered by the priest in the tabernacle. However, from

the time they entered Canaan until the exile under Nebuchadnezzar, there were many that insisted on “worshipping God” on the “high places” they built. This led to the idolatry of their worshipping the false gods of the pagans on the high places. (An example of the “high places” is seen in Jeremiah 7:31; 17:3; 19:5; 32:35). Ezekiel 6 describes God’s judgment against their high places. These high places were “self made religion” or “worship devised by men”, much like worship today that has no basis in the Scripture.

In the second place self-made religion is illustrated in the fact that in celebration of the Passover there was to be only one lamb offered. “Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year; ye shall take it from the sheep or from the goats” (Ex. 12:5). Only one animal was to be offered. If anyone thought that if one offering did a good job, then two offerings would do more, it would become a personal sacrifice beyond what God required and would be a declaration that man was able to pay God out of their own assets. We are not to try to placate God by our own acts He does not require. When the Passover lamb was offered there was no more that could be done to enhance the sacrifice. Christ was our Passover lamb sacrificed for us and there is nothing else we can add to make us any more acceptable to God. In Colossians Paul is combating the false teaching that proposed to make us more spiritual by recourse to food and drink, to seasons and holy days and to strange forms of worship (2:16-18). If union with the crucified and risen Christ is the foundation of our spirituality then a Christian cannot attempt to find spirituality in human schemes that say “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch! (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using) - in accordance with the commandments of men. These matters which have to be sure the appearance of wisdom and self-made religion, and self abasement and severe treatment to the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (2:20-23). Too many churches and religious leaders make demands upon people that God has not made. This is “self-made” religion.

James 1:26, 27: “If any one thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” The word “religion” and “religious” has to do with external observance of public worship. The word is used in Colossians 2:18 in reference to “worship of angels” and In Acts 26:5 when Paul is giving his defense before Agrippa he says “I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.” It is in Matthew 23 the religion of the Pharisees is described by Jesus as he denounces and exposes them for what they are. In Mark 7:6, 7 Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 that describe them in these words: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” then he adds “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men” (ver. 8). Isaiah 1:1-15 is a vivid description of this kind of religion. God calls both the heavens and earth to listen to His indictment. He condemns their multiplied sacrifices, burnt offerings of rams and blood of bulls, their appearing before him and trampling his courts, their worthless offerings and their keeping new moons and Sabbaths, and the calling of their solemn assemblies. All these things were what He had originally commanded them, but

said they were a burden to Him and He was weary of bearing them. They were so busy “attending church” they forgot God. He rejects external observance of public worship. God’s remedy for all this was “wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight, cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, and plead for the widow” (ver. 16, 17). God does not address them as His people, rather he says “hear the word of the Lord you rulers of Sodom give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah” (ver 10). God has this to say about the sin of Sodom: “Behold, this was the guilt of Sodom; she had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me.” (Ezek. 16:49, 50). It is very easy to be caught up in the externals of public religion and miss the real meaning of what James says concerning the danger of this kind of religion: “if any man thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, “to visit the fatherless and widows in their distress and keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:26, 27). This is the outward observance of pure religion.

Note that James says there is such a thing as “worthless religion” and the main characteristic of this religion is that a man “does not bridle his tongue.” We would ordinarily apply these words to such things as gossip, slander, evil speech and boasting, things to which it would certainly apply, but it can be applied further in a more serious sense. There are a multitude of preachers who should bridle their tongues in reference to what they preach. A quote from Oz Guinness in *No God But God* aptly describes much preaching today: “the preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into a marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection. The unexamined world, meanwhile, drifts blindly into the future.” The apostle Paul warns Timothy that “the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine... but will turn away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (I Tim. 1:3,4). C.S. Lewis in *An Experiment in Criticism* shows how myths have the power to captivate the imagination, move people and exercise great power over them. Much preaching today has been captivated by the desire to be relevant and popular and turned aside to myths concerning the Scriptures. Myths can be detrimental to the faith when they are substituted for the truth. The danger of much preaching today in relation to Scripture is that it has a basis in truth, but is embellished and twisted until it becomes accepted as truth.

Not only should tongues of preaching be bridled, the tongues of singing should follow suit. What we sing is just as important as what we preach. Col. 3:16: “...teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.” More false doctrine is taught in our songs than is taught in the pulpit, be it the syrupy trite jingles of contemporary ditties flashed on the screen, or much of the traditional hymnody we sing from the hymn books. David Wells in *Losing Our Virtue* wrote: “In the large majority of praise songs and classical hymnody I analyzed it was hard to find any that were predicated upon and developed some aspect of doctrine.” This is a result of worthless religion.

