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Series 2. Understanding the Church

Episode 12. Christianity: Religion or Life

“Then one day, through a series of events (I believe orchestrated by God), this religious box exploded, blew to smithereens, never to be found again. Somehow, by God’s mercy and grace, I was bored up as on eagles wings and brought to Himself. (See Ex. 19.4) My faith became personal. Being found in Christ, I encountered God in an entirely new and living way. I found *life*, the life that can only be known by those in fellowship with Jesus Christ. 1 Jn. 5.12-13 expresses it this way, “*He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.*”

Religion

This episode may well have been the first, rather than the last in this series on Understanding the Church. I just preferred to end the series “life” and a caution on “religion.” The Biblically

translated word “religion” or being “religious” often refers to being devout, or having a sense of godliness or piety. Some forms of the word indicate an excessive reverence or even a fear of the divine, often implying one being superstitious—and by this I mean acting out of ignorance and fear of the unknown and hoping some act or magical power could influence events in our lives. And so, when using the word religion, it can take on some subtle differences. Thus, extreme care must be taken in understanding its particular meaning.

However, in its general use in the New Testament and common understanding, it refers to the **outward** expression of devotion to God, including observing rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices, the keeping of commandments, prayer, and other acts of worship, and in repeating certain words, chants, or songs. The word emphasizes the “external” aspects of religious practices rather than the “internal” work of faith. Thus, the term can be associated with both a positive or negative connotation, depending on the context of its use and/or highlighting either genuine devotion or mere ritualism.

On a personal note. Growing up I always associated religion or religious practices as implying piety, devout in worship and closely following church rituals and practices. However, in more recent years the term has acquired a more negative connotation, of which I hope to make plain in the heart of this article. I have come to see religion as a box into which a believer is placed. Within this box is all he or she needs for their religious life: included are rituals to perform, sacrifices to make, songs to sing, holy days to observe, and commandments to keep. This is the box in which you live and routinely practice your belief in God. You are bound on all sides, boxed in by its set of rules and strict guidelines and call for obedience.

For the first thirty years of my life I lived in the box of Catholicism. I attempted to keep the church’s ideology by attending mass regularly, going to confession, saying certain prayers as the Lord’s prayer and the Act of Contrition, occasionally saying the rosary or just the Hail Mary prayer in devotion to her, and belief in the ten commandments...just to mention a few of the practices. Going to church and participating in the mass and going to confession made me feel good about myself and being somewhat secure as a member of the church. My spiritual life was, however, static, routine, and compartmentalized...there was the religious and there were the secular sides of life. The object is to find a proper balance between the two; only the clergy considers both as one, and I certainly was not a priest.

Then one day, through a series of events (I believe orchestrated by God), this religious box exploded, blew to smithereens, never to be found again. Somehow, by God’s mercy and grace, I was bored up as on eagles wings and brought to Himself. (See Ex. 19.4) My faith became personal. Being found in Christ, I encountered God in an entirely new and living way. I found *life*, the life that can only be known by those in fellowship with Jesus Christ. 1 Jn. 5.12-13 expresses it this way, *“He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.”*

Note that it is written *“that you may know that you have eternal life,”* not that you “might have,” or “will have” eternal life, but that you *“have eternal life.”* Regardless of my past sins, and present weaknesses, and all my imperfections in the knowledge of God and His righteousness and holiness, and all the defects of true love and of obedience to Him, I now possess God’s own life in me, being born again of the Spirit of Christ. I found that the details of my new life would be worked out through my day by day relationship and fellowship with Him. In this, I willfully enter that *“Sabbath rest”* (Heb. 4.9) abiding and resting in Christ—a rest which remains a mystery to religion.

As Jesus said, Jn. 10.10 *“I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”* *More abundantly*, meaning not merely to preserve my life or provide for something eternal reserved in the heavens for me, but to IMPART HIS LIFE, now, in a rich and full manner. Being no longer bound by the box of religion, Christ has become my perennial source of life and fullness of being. The external practice of religion has been terminated, and the internal manifestation of His life has come. We will explore this in more detail.

Religion of the Old Covenant (Testament)

There are nearly 4000 recognized religions in the world today, and the majority of the people follow Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. Christianity may be improperly recognized by the world as its largest religion, and even mistakenly believe it to be a religion as such by many of its own followers, but it is not a religion in faith, structure, organization, or practice. It is rightfully a body of people having spiritual life regenerated out of fellowship with Christ. It is living; it is the life principle in action.

Of those religions mentioned, we can, as an example, address Judaism, which is rightfully and fully a religion—the highest and greatest known to man. Judaism initiated approximately 1800 BC when God established a covenant with biblical patriarch Abraham with promises of a special land and nation. This covenant was confirmed about 300 years later with the reception of the Torah from God through Moses to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai. The Torah is considered Judah’s Holy Book containing the “the Law” including the Ten Commandments.

This covenant and this holy book are described in Ex. 24, where Moses conveys the words of the covenant of the LORD, and all its judgments to the people. The people answered with one voice, *verse 6 “All the words which the LORD has said we will do.”* They then offered burnt offerings and peace offerings upon the altar prepared at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Then Moses took half the blood from the sacrifices and sprinkled it upon the altar. The people responded, *“All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient.”* Then Moses took the remaining blood and sprinkled it upon the people and said, *8 “This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words.”* It was a covenant cut in blood between God and man, a foreshadowing the new covenant cut in the blood of His only begotten Son, the Lamb of God.

A 'covenant' is an agreement, concluded under solemn religious sanctions, as in cutting the covenant in blood, and by specifically stating mutual responsibilities and obligations. This is summarized earlier when the LORD makes clear His expectations for the covenant, He said,

Ex. 19.5-6 *“5Now therefore, **if** you will indeed **obey** My voice and **keep** My covenant, **then** you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. 6And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”*

This is like reading the fine print at the bottom of a contract. It states clearly the constraints of the covenant. In a religious sense, this covenant is the most formal and binding expression of the proposed relation between God and man. Here, God promises that “**if**” man obediently observes and obeys the conditions laid down by Him, “**then**” He will bestow upon him certain blessings. Thus, in this covenant, there is the Divine promise and the human obligation. The blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience are presented in detail in Deuteronomy 28.

Do you see that religious covenants like this are “conditional” covenants? God explicitly used the word “if.” “If,” in this instance, introduced two conditional clauses, **if** you will indeed **obey** My voice and **keep** My covenant. Obedience is strictly required to be fulfilled on man's part. The word “**then**” indicates what will happen afterwards, **then**, the Lord says, *you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. 6And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’*

Is it not terribly binding living under such a covenant, carefully living every aspect of your life legalistically keeping the law of the covenant, in fear of consequences for disobedience. James writes, Jam. 2.10 *“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.”* Breaking the law is breaking the law. I recall the Catholic teaching of committing minor venial sins or major mortal sins, either indicating the severity of the offense and the resulting consequences in our relation with God. But James is saying sin is sin, whether you lie, steal a penny, or murder, you are a law breaker and breaker of the covenant. Consequences will come. Thus, the need for continual sacrifices for sins.

And so, life under religion is living in that religiously confining box that tells you what you can do or cannot do, when to do or not to do things, how or how not to worship, where to go or not to go, what or what not to say, how to dress and what not to wear, what and how much to eat and what or when not to eat, and so on, and on. Many followers of such legalistic thought know they cannot keep the full extent of the law and trust that God will weigh all their good against their offense, and by His mercy judge in their favor. This is not Biblical but is born out of man's logic and wishful thinking.

Such an obligatory covenant can be assumed even under the New Covenant in Christ, with the same mindset of obedience to rules and procedures, weighing personal behavior against Biblical principles and Old Covenant commandments. Against such teachings are warnings, such as Gal. 3.10, *“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”* And, Rm. 3.19-20 *“19Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that*

every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. 20Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

Legalism is a strict, literal conformity to a law of a religious moral code of conduct. It restricts the free will. It can also go beyond the literal interpretation of the law with the view that people should not engage in social practices perceived as contrary to being a good witness. The Pharisees were good adding to the Law. Today, many feel that Christians should not engage in or practice things like dancing, drinking alcohol, playing cards, or wearing less modest clothing. Another example is refraining from doing work on Sunday—unknowingly that the law refers to the Jews refraining from work on their Sabbath, which is a Saturday. Whether a Christian works or not on a Sunday, or consider every day holy, is according to his own conscience. (Rm. 14.5-6) Paul contends that even though he may have the right to do or eat something, he would voluntarily refrain from doing it; if by him doing it, it would cause a brother to stumble—that it is not a sin but a matter of free will and conscience. (Rm. 14.21-22)

New Covenant in My Blood (Lk. 22.20)

Covenants with God are cut in blood. In the Old Testament it was the blood of bulls and goats, but there is now a new covenant cut in the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God. I believe it is necessary to read through Heb. 9.11-15 which speaks of the superior nature of this new covenant, and which does not add to the old covenant, but entirely replaces it,

Heb. 9.11-15 “11But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.”

The principles at work under this new covenant involve the exercise of faith, God’s mercy and grace, and most importantly, of new life. Allow me to explain more fully. All covenants are binding and conditional. We saw that the old covenant was religious and legalistic in nature. The people were bound to this covenant, which they willingly agreed to do so, and commit themselves to obedience to all its commandments of a moral code to live by, and by sacrifices and manner of worship, of holy days to keep, a priesthood to serve, and so on. “If” the people were obedient, they received blessings from God of safety, good health, and prosperity of crops and herds. However, disobedience brought curses of defeat from their enemy, diseases, failing crops, etc.

The new covenant in Christ is also binding and conditional, but in a higher and spiritual sense. To be binding is good, for it means that in this new covenant we are bound together with God, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit; even as Jesus prayed in His priestly prayer, Jn.17.21 *“²¹that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us.”* It means also that God is bound to all His promises, as it is written in Eph. 1. 3 *“³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”*

The new covenant being conditional is also of a higher and spiritual nature; here the conditional “if” is at work here as well. Jesus speaks of the unconditional requirement of faith in Jn. 3.18 *“¹⁸He who **believes** in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”* The soul of man fulfills its destiny and finds its highest good when in communion with God. His spirit cannot ignore or fail to recognize and believe with all his heart this revelation and call of God...to put all his trust and hopes in His Son. This conditional call of God is reaffirmed in 1 Jn. 5. 11-13,

“¹¹And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. ¹²He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.”

One either has the Son and has life or does not have the Son and does not have life. The entire basis of having life or not having life is by *faith*. Believing, or having faith, conveys a sense of total dependence upon Jesus Christ as the one and only means of salvation. This belief is not a mere intellectual assent, but it involves a deep, personal trust and commitment leading to a regeneration (new birth) of the spirit. **This, and this alone, marks the great distinction between religion and life;** *religion* being a mere outward practice of a belief system, and *life* being an imparted regenerated spirit that arises from within and exists in communion with God. There is an enormous gulf between the two.

Dead Works. It is now an appropriate time to return to our Hebrews reading and focus on Heb. 9.14, which reads, *“¹⁴how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from **dead works** to serve the living God?”* This verse requires some depth of understanding. Before faith in Christ, there is only the natural man, and all works done in the natural state, which is the state of sin; these works are considered “dead works;” for they come not from faith and that renewed spirit that exists in communion with God in Christ, but out of sinful man.

In the old covenant any contact with a dead body is considered defiled; and if they fail to ceremonially purify themselves with the water of cleansing, they defile the Lord’s tabernacle as well. Thus, death is a defilement. Eph. 2.1 makes clear that the natural man, even though alive in the natural, is considered in a state of death in relation to God, *And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins.”* Therefore, do you see that all works, even those seemingly good deeds in the eyes of natural man, are defiled because they came out of

death and therefore unacceptable to God. And so, we see here that even acts of religion could fall into the ranks of dead works if performed through the natural man, and so much goings on in the Church today issue forth from the strength, ingenuity and talents of man—hardly a pleasant aroma to God.

However, the first clause of the Ephesian verse specifically states, “And you *He made alive.*” And so now there appears to be two states of man, the former natural man who was dead in sin, whose works are reckoned dead because they are tainted with sin, and the new man created anew in Christ Jesus being now the temple of the Holy Spirit, whose works are reckoned good because they issue forth from life. Consider reading on to Eph. 2.4-6,

“4But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

A dead man has two eyes but cannot see, and two ears but cannot hear, because there is no life in him. Life is being keenly aware of all that is about you and the ability to interact with it; in the natural it is the world and the universe above and all that is in it that natural man interacts with. In the spiritual, the new life of the spiritual man interacts with the heavenly environment and God who inhabits it. Death disables; life enables. This is why Christ’s promise of life is so important. Jesus said,

Jn. 10.10 “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”

I have come that they may have life;; that the sheep, representative of the elect of God, might have life, both spiritual and eternal; while the rest of mankind, are by nature dead in trespasses and sins, and held accountable to an eternal death. But this life promised is actually the life of Christ having entered in, a life in present development and with an eternal perfection in sight. Thus, when a man is converted and born again of the life seed of Christ, it is said that he “has” everlasting life, not merely shall have but is already in possession of the life, which shall be everlasting. Hallelujah. It is life begun today enlivening the soul, expanding upon this soul life tomorrow, maturing it the following days, and it is destined to an eternal existence in the company of God. In addition, the promise is further made...

That they may have it more abundantly. The word *abundantly* denotes that aspect of life that is not absolutely essential but is added to make life fuller and happier. Are you familiar with the words “add-ons” when ordering an ice cream cone? The ice cream itself is most pleasant, but what is not necessary and optional are added things like nuts, sprinkles, chocolate chips, and hot fudge. Hmm.

So, this promise is that we not merely have life in a simple bare eternal existence, but we have all those added elements to life that make it even fuller of pleasure and contentment. It is not enough that the mercy of God keeps us from the agony of hell; but in Christ we are

blessed with this life now, and the anticipation of eternal goodness in fellowship with one another, and with God as members of His family, with Christ as His heavenly bride, and in fullness as the temple of the Holy Spirit, all of this in a realm of a new heaven and new earth wherein righteousness dwells, absence of sin, death, darkness, and despair, but wherein righteousness dwells and the powerful love of God prevails as an atmosphere pervading all and in all. Glory!

A Concluding Scriptural Prayer

Eph. 3.14-20 *“¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees to the Father ¹⁵of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, ¹⁷that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁸that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁹may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— ²⁰to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

²¹Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, ²²to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

S2,E12. Questions for Discussion

1. Explain what it means to be religious; it can be taken in either a positive or negative light—but then is either God’s highest? Has religion invaded your church? Your life?
2. How may Catholicism, or Methodism, Pentecostalism, or any denominational “ism” be considered religion?
3. Explain the conditional elements of “if” and “then” for both the old covenant and the new covenant. Explain how the Old Covenant is of a physical nature and the New Covenant is spiritual. How is the Old Covenant a shadow or prophetic of the New?
4. The whole world may be divided into the living and the dead. Explain using pertinent scripture.
5. Explain life “*abundantly*” as used in Jn. 10.10. Other translations use: *fullness, rich and satisfying, overflowing*, but *abundant* seem the best translation.
6. In your own words, explain what “life” is, and what the principle of life means to you and your relation to Christ.