

Down With Religion



David Wilkerson March 1, 1981

In a recent survey, young people were asked the question, "Where do you get bored the most?" The #1 answer was, "In Church."

I agree! The majority of churches today have nothing at all to offer young people. Most teen-agers go to church only because their parents make them go. And many of their parents go only because it's the "religious thing" to do.

It's not because young people have become godless or irreligious. In fact, another recent survey showed that 84% of American young people believe in God and that He is personally involved in their lives.

They are not down on God, just religion. They can't understand why there are so many religions - so many denominations - so much confusion, fighting and hatred - all in the name of God.

Think of the religions in the world; to name just a few: Buddhism, Hinduism, Mohammedanism, Catholicism, Islamism, Judaism, Protestantism, Shintoism, Mormonism, Unitarianism.

It's almost impossible to keep up with all the old and new religious denominations, movements, groups, and cults. There are more than twenty Baptist organizations; more than twenty-five various Pentecostal denominations; Methodists; Presbyterians; Church of Christ; Disciples of Christ; Lutherans; Episcopalians; Christian Church; United Methodists; Free Methodists; Brethren; Plymouth Brethren; Christian Science; Seventh Day Adventists; Jehovah Witnesses - and on and on.

Even more confusing are all the new religions: The Moonies, Hare Krishna, Kimbanguism, Zen Buddhism, Spiritism, Scientology, etc.

Have you heard it said, "There may be many religions on earth, but we all worship the same God"? This is what the Islamic Ayatollahs preach. They kill, kidnap, torture - all in the name of God! Millions of Iranians and other Islamics are ready to die for the god of their religion.

Iraq and Iran are both Islamic religions: the same god, the same doctrines, telling the world they are fighting a "religious war" against each other. More people have died because of religion than any other cause on earth. In Ireland right now, Catholics and Protestants kill each other in the name of God and their religion. Church history books are full of bloody accounts of religious wars. In the name of religion, the world has suffered the atrocities of inquisitions, burnings, beatings, drownings, mass murders, and genocide.

I heard a Ku Klux Klan leader say in an interview, "We burn crosses in the yards of Blacks to show them that Jesus Christ was White." This demented man goes around preaching that God raised up the Klan to protect the Bible, morals, Whites, and motherhood. Klan members boast about being "very religious."

The devil invented religion! Satan is a very religious being. The dictionary definition of religion is: "A belief in a superhuman power." The Bible makes it clear that the devil believes in God, so much so, he trembles at the thought.

"So you believe there is one God; good for you: but the devil also believes, and shudders because of him..." (James 2:19 Living Bible).

Nothing provoked the holy anger of Jesus Christ more than empty religion. It was religion that kept people from accepting Him as their Savior. Their religion kept them from entering the Kingdom of God.

The religion of the Jews kept them in spiritual darkness. It had a strong hold on the masses, binding them with rules, regulations, laws. It was a religion of bondage and fear. Christ was a threat to the scribes, Pharisees, and high priests of religion. The scribes were legal experts in the Jewish religion. It was their expertise that helped the temple and synagogue priests to keep the people under bondage. The scribes spent their entire lifetimes studying their religion and telling people how to be religious. They later became known as rabbis.

It was religious leaders who turned God's house into a den of thieves. The temple of God was supposed to be a house of prayer, where people who were hungry for truth could find reality. But Jesus walked into the temple one day and discovered the religious leaders had turned God's house into a carnival!

"Jesus went into the temple, and began to cast out those who sold and bought inside the temple and to overturn the tables of the money changers..." (Luke 11:15).

Jesus made a whip and, with a holy zeal, He drove them out into the streets. Can't you hear Him, "Out - all you religious scoundrels! Out - you religious cheaters! Down with your religion; down with your godless forms and traditions."

These same religious fanatics killed the Lord Jesus! Keep in mind, Jesus was not killed by a mad mob of atheists and agnostics. He was crucified by high priests, church leaders, zealous and orthodox religious crowds. Churchgoers killed Him.

They killed Him, nailing Him to a shameful cross, spitting and laughing at Him - all in the name of religion. The high priests claimed they crucified Him to the glory of God! They called Him an imposter.

People go to hell sitting in church pews. They are devoted, pious, and they have a strong belief in a superhuman power. They talk much about God. But religion without spirituality will damn their souls. Christ Himself warned that many who use His name will be lost on Judgment Day.

"Not all who are religious are really godly people. They may call me Lord, but they still won't get to heaven. At the judgment many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not preach in your name; and cast out demons, and do many wonderful deeds in your name? But I will answer them, Depart from me..I never knew you...you workers of iniquity..." (Matthew 7:21, 22 Living Bible).

In other words, it's going to take a lot more than religion to get you into heaven!

Christ does not live in church buildings, either! Every church that has ever been built has been dedicated to "the glory of God." But God does not live in any church, cathedral or temple.

Like so many people to day, the disciples were awe-stricken by the huge, beautiful temples and synagogues. But Jesus said:

"See all these great buildings? There shall not be one stone left upon another. They will all be cast down..." (Mark 13:1,2).

Brick and mortar cannot contain the power and glory of God. The Bible says,

"The most high dwelleth not in temples made with hands..." (Acts 7:48).

"You are God's temple... Know you not that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16).

There is absolutely nothing sacred about a church building or a temple. What makes a building sacred are the two

or three spiritual people who gather there in His name! He is there - in them! They bring Him into the building!

Thank God there are churches where Christ is very present and people's needs are being met. But take these Spirit-filled people out of that building, and you may as well turn it into a bar or dance hall. Christ lives only in the hearts of the church members.

God will not send a single soul to hell for not attending church. Going to church can't change you anymore than walking into a barn changes you into a horse. We are commanded to join together with believers and assemble in His name! But that can be anywhere. If it is in a live, Christ-filled church, then go! But Christ is not going to judge you on church attendance, but rather on seeking after Him. He prefers you find a true body of believers and worship with them.

Paul, the apostle, could also cry out, "Down with religion." Before his conversion, he was known as Saul, the persecutor of Christians. What a religious man he was. He admitted:

"I belonged to the strictest group in our religion. I was a Pharisee."

He further states,

"I was one of the most religious Jews of my age in the whole country, and tried as hard as I possibly could to follow the old, traditional rules of my religion..." (Galatians 1:14,15 Living Bible).

The most religious man in all the country - this regular church goer - this clean, moral, religious fanatic loved God but didn't know Christ, His Son. One glorious day something happened to this religious man! He junked his religion and discovered the Man, Christ Jesus!<

"...but then something happened to me... God revealed His Son in me..." (Galatians 1:15 Living Bible).

I say as Paul did, away with your religion! Knowing Christ is the only thing that counts. Jesus said,

"If you had known me, you would have known my Father..." (John 14:7).

"If you have seen me, you have seen the Father..."

What the world needs is a new revelation of the power in Jesus Christ! What made Saul give up a lifetime of religion to follow a Man? What made him say:

"Everything is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have put aside all else, counting it worth less than rubbish, in order that I may have Christ, and become one with Him..." (Philippians 3:8 Living Bible).

What a change! Suddenly, all the religion that once meant so much to him is now worth nothing; it's all rubbish! Now he has found reality. In Christ! A man who knew God - found Christ!

God did not reveal himself to Saul because he was religious. The other men with him must have also been very religious, to embark on such a traumatic journey to enslave Christians. They were probably also commissioned by the priests, chosen for their religious fervor. They, too, heard the voice. If Christ reveals Himself only to people who are religious or zealous they would have all been converted.

God is no respecter of persons, so he could not have "chosen" Saul arbitrarily, out of the blue, over all the men traveling with him.

Christ explains why the revelation came to Saul. His spirit in him was "kicking up." He was in turmoil in his soul. His conscience was smiting him. He was under the knife of conviction. Revelation follows conviction for sin. You can't be made whole until you begin to admit sickness. Only the sick need the physician.

The Great Physician was responding to a very sick spirit. This man, Saul, was sick on his feet. He later stated that he persecuted Christians "in ignorance," and that is why he got the revelation. But Saul's ignorance did not make it right. God does not respond just to those who sin in ignorance. The heathen sin in ignorance and do not see the

Light.

It was more than that. Saul was doing and saying one thing outwardly, but thinking something else in his mind.

"As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

A person can be outwardly a persecutor, an outright rejector of Christ; also outwardly wanting nothing to do with Christ. He may sound like the worst Christ-hater on earth. But inwardly he is stricken. He is in a war! A battle is raging!

Even now, there are people all over the world who talk and act like cold hearted sinners, but they are just a lightning stroke away from discovering Christ as Lord. Man judges you on your outward appearances; God looks at the inner man. If a man can't get Christ out of his mind, he will never keep Him out of his life.

I hear teen-agers everywhere saying, "I don't need Him; don't want Him! Let everybody leave me alone." But a battle is raging inwardly. The knife of conviction is pricking them. They are thinking about their life, their future, and their emptiness.

Is it possible to be religious and persecute Christ? Yes! Saul did it! Jesus said so! "Saul, why do you persecute Me?..." Others persecuted Him. The priests, the Pharisees, Herod, the Roman soldiers - but only to one persecutor did Jesus ask why. Not, "Why persecute?" but "Why you?"

"Of all people, Saul, why you? I could understand the soldiers, the priests, the Pharisees. They are all spiritually blind. They do it because of hatred. But why you? You are spiritually hungry; you are different."

Christ was trying to show this sincere man he had no reason to go on rejecting! This is the question that comes to all sincere souls - "Why you?" The cold hearted addict, maybe! The blinded unevangelized, maybe! But you? WHY? What reason?

You see, Christ Jesus was not a stranger to Saul! When Jesus asked, "Why do you persecute me?", Saul asked, "Who are you - Lord?" There is the clue! He already sensed Christ in his heart. That would be like saying, "Who are you - David Wilkerson?"

You don't call Him Lord without respecting Him! You don't call Him Lord - except by the spirit.

"No man calleth him Lord except the Spirit be in him."

The Holy Spirit had been working on Saul. He may as well have said, "Is that You Lord? So You are the One making me so miserable!?" Here is a man under Holy Ghost conviction, with a growing disgust for his rejection, knowing what was right in his heart, but still going through the motion of a rejector.

Christ met Saul on that Damascus road because Saul was ready to give up his religion and find reality. The first thing he did when the light struck was to fall on his face. The other men stood speechless! They heard the same voice and didn't move a muscle. They stood unmoved, blind to the meaning of it all. Saul gave in and surrendered at the first call. This outwardly hard, calculating persecutor had a tender heart.

"To this one will I look; to him that hath a broken heart and a contrite spirit."

The light cuts right through our religion to reveal Christ. "Suddenly there shined a light." This light was a sudden revelation - not about the power or love of Christ, but a revelation of what he had been doing to Christ. Suddenly it hit him, so hard, so traumatically; he literally went temporarily blind! He also lost his appetite. When it suddenly dawned on him, he could not stand it. To think, Paul reasoned, "My religion almost kept me in darkness. I was rejecting the very One who could meet all my needs. I've been so blind. This is what I've been wanting all along. All along it was Him! How could I have been so blind? How could I have held out so long? Why didn't I see it before?"

Saul was simply in the throes of repentance! It was his soul crying out, "That's enough! I can't hold out any longer. I've hurt Him enough! I need Him! I've had enough of dead religion."

Repentance is not just sorrow for sin! It is sorrow for rejecting His love, sorrow for putting Him aside for so long!

Repentance is saying, "Lord, I've been shutting You out too long. I need You now."

The light didn't strike in Jerusalem. The Spirit did not wait until He rounded up the Christians and herded them to the jail. Wouldn't that have been more spectacular, a greater witness, to smite him in the sight of all those witnesses, in front of the priests and before all His Christian prisoners? Wouldn't it have been more powerful if about a thousand of his Christian prisoners saw him fall on his knees and get converted?

No! No minister! No Christian witnesses! No counselors begging! No other human voice! He was all alone in front of his own crowd. His friends, his associates, had to be the first to see and know about the miracle in his life.

He was going to have to forsake that bunch of Christian haters. He was going to have to walk away from his crowd and walk alone for a while! They saw their best friend turn spiritual, rather than religious.

"Poor Saul," they must have said. "He's lost his mind; gone crazy. No one will ever hear from him again. He's given up everything he's worked for. Poor man."

If you go with Christ, your old friends must be the first to go, even if you must walk alone!

The religious Saul became the spiritual Paul - and a whole new world opened up to him. Instead of empty religion, he was "Filled with the Holy Ghost." Where once he was filled with bitterness, hatred, and blindness, now the power of God dwelt in him! He now had power to live life as it was supposed to be lived. He was given strength. He discovered new friends - "the disciples of Damascus!" Those he once hated - he now loved. Those "fanatical" Christians were now his best friends! He found he had everything in common with them now.

Most important of all - he was given resurrection life. This once-dead religious Pharisee became alive in Christ! This is what we get instead of religion! We get life - as it is supposed to be lived! Life in heavenly places in Christ!

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