

Christian Religion versus Real Christianity

By

L. R. Barnard

(Revised 14th January 2020 by Peter Cooke for illustrative purposes)

It is instructive to observe that while the Bible speaks of the “Jews’ religion” (Galatians 1:14,15), it does not speak of “the Christian religion”, as we so often do. The faith and experience of a Disciple of Jesus Christ requires more vital terms to describe them. We have in the New Testament therefore such phrases as “In Christ”, “Life in Christ”, “eternal life” and “life in the Spirit”. The word “religion” is inadequate and inappropriate.

The “Christian religion” that expresses itself among us today is not the vital faith of the early congregation. It is a substitute for life in Christ – an alternative to divine reality. It is often a highly organized form of worship. It possesses recognizable words, creeds, liturgies, and customs, and it is held together by clergy, denominational officers, associations, projects and programs. It is a form of community life – a powerful coordinating factor in social life. Psychologists acknowledge the importance of religion in holding society together.

Between Christian religion and “life in Christ”, however, we must draw a clear distinction. It is said that Jesus founded the Christian religion, just as Buddha founded Buddhism. But the idea that Jesus founded Christianity is alien to God’s Word. The Gospels do not urge organized religion. Jesus came to give what men really need. He came to give life, and his Gospel offers a gift of that life. The Congregation is a body of new life, held together not by traditions, hierarchies or associations, but by the abiding presence of the living Head in her midst.

Religion can never be more than a social power. The supreme value of Judaism has for centuries been its social purpose. It has provided the communal bond which has maintained the amazing racial integrity of the Jewish people throughout twenty-five centuries of dispersion. Thus, we find ardent religionists among the Jews who do not believe in a personal God. Modern Judaism is an exercise of the national soul and sentiment. It is purely religion, for it serves a human purpose.

A religion is a system of ideas about human nature and about the problem of an unknown and hidden God. In its most primitive forms, religion is man’s attempts to harness and utilize the powers that lie beyond him. Even in civilized and cultured religions, the basic approach is the attempt to explain and exploit the gods. This is the most persistent factor.

A religious mind thinks of God as being useful for providing comfort and security. Going to a church is the means of securing these blessings, and holding religious beliefs is insurance for an uncertain eternity. For the religious person, God is useful,

not gracious and merciful. That is why some psychologists advise godless people to go to any church, with indifference to repentance and the truth it might have.

Religion and psychiatry are wedded in that way; God provided medicine, not mercy.

Religion is what man devises when he loses the power of God within. When the Spirit leaves the organized church institution, it must create a sensuous form of religion to compensate for the loss of its inner power. The form of discipleship is retained, but it has no content. To make religion important to people with no spiritual instincts, the outward form of religion has been beautified with art and music and made apprehensible with many symbols. It makes the word and external, artistic, because there is nothing of worth or power inside. Much might, money and learning has gone to create and support this hollow thing we know as Christian religion.

In religion therefore, we may say prayers, but never pray. We may have strong and emphatic beliefs but may not believe. We come to the Church, but do not belong to the Church. We speak of “Christian” principles and campaign for the fulfillment of the Sermon on the Mount but have not Christ. We can serve the church institution well, but never serve the Lord. We may have a good conscience and a fine spirit but be bereft of the Holy Spirit. We may belong to a lively congregation which is quite dead to God.

Organized religion creates a holy atmosphere but does not have the Holy presence. We practise the holiness of beauty, mistaking it for the beauty of holiness. It is refined, polished, professional, cultured and learned social feeling, but it is the subtlest of all mistaking’s for faith.

In his Mars Hill sermon in Acts 17, Paul said that the men of Athens were superstitious because they had built an altar for an unknown God. He then told them about the God they worshipped in ignorance. Paul could see that the Greeks had a form of worship, but they were “too superstitious”. The better translation of the word “superstitious” is “religious”. The revised Standard Version of verse 22 is “I perceive you are very religious”. But their religion had no power, no pardon, no experience of the indwelling Spirit. They could, therefore, only acknowledge the right God in the wrong way. That is the New Testament definition of religion. In Athens, Paul’s preaching brought few converts because religion and life in Christ are opposed to each other.

You enter religion when interested. **You enter the new life in Christ by a personal encounter with Him.** Your interest in religion may be deep and sincere, but it remains superstition, it has no personal experience of Christ. People may have the Christian religion but not have its Christ. He may be the symbol of the Christian religion, but He is not its life and Lord. Church institutions may think that God wants right beliefs, instead of living faith in Christ. They can develop attractive programs of

Christian education and not convey Christ to the people. But those in God's true Congregation become new moral and spiritual creations – not in an organized church institution but in Christ.

Our Lord said, "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? And in Thy name cast out devils? And in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:22-23 KJV). Will this be said to those who attach themselves to the Christian religion, who became notable in it, upholders of it, but who can never be said to be "in Christ"? They have beliefs but no faith, morals but no pardon, membership in church, but no eternal life.

Christ imparts divine life that throbs through a pardoned and regenerated soul. A genuine experience of Him is personal and direct. God meets us on the personal level, never merely on the institutional level. Whatever is found in our church institutions outside the spiritual life and power that is represented in the New Testament is religion. Jesus did not come to found a religion. He came to win for us divine mercy through the cross, and that mercy lies at the centre of a Disciple's being.

Not religion then, but life in Christ is what we need. Not religion, but life.

L.R. Barnard was born in Australia, was educated for the ministry at Spurgeon's College in England and is a graduate of the University of London. He served as an Officiating Chaplain in the Royal Engineers Regiment at Chatham Barracks during the Second World War and was pastor of the Abbey Road Baptist Church, London, when this sermon was delivered in the 1960's. It has been edited and condensed from the version initially published in the February 1963 edition of COMMAND. It does a good job of succinctly stating the critical difference between "Christianity" and "Christian Religion"

