

BodyLife Articles

Bait and Switch

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BodyLife • May 2009

Trading the Vibrant Life of Jesus for a Ritualistic Religion Called Christianity.

I saw the sign a year ago in Georgia: *Live Free for Three Months*. It was a developer's marketing strategy for a declining housing market. When I saw it, however, I wasn't thinking about houses. I thought about Christianity and how we invite people to live free in Christ and then soon after saddle them with all the obligations of being a "good Christian". We generally don't even let them have three months.

When the early believers were first called Christians, we don't know if it was a complement or a mockery. We do know that they didn't invent the term for themselves. The culture called them "little christs" because they had found so much identity in following Jesus. Whatever spawned the term, those early believers adopted it for themselves and for 2,000 years it has been the dominant identifier for those who claim to follow Christ. But that might be changing.

Recent surveys show even believers are becoming uncomfortable with the term. At least in the United States it is increasingly used not for people who reflect the passion of Jesus in a broken world, but for adherents of a religion that has been built on a distortion of the life and teaching of Jesus, not necessarily it's reality. The results can be confusing.

"Are you a Christian?" I used to love it when someone on a plane asked me that question. "Absolutely," I'd answer, proud to be on the side of all that's good and right in the world. But over the last fifteen years, answering that question has become far more difficult. Much of what has been done in recent years in the name of Christianity embarrasses me and disfigures the God I love. Some of it even horrifies me.

So now when I'm asked the question today, I hedge a bit. "It depends on what you mean by 'Christian'," I often respond. If they are asking whether or not I am a faithful adherent of the religion called Christianity, I have to confess that I'm not. I'm not even trying to be. But if they are asking me if I am a passionate follower of Jesus, the answer would be an enthusiastic yes.

In a few short years those realities have diverged significantly. Perhaps there has not been a time since the Middle Ages, where what it means to be a good Christian and what it means to thrive in a relationship with God, couldn't be more at odds. You can do everything required of a 'good Christian' in our day and still miss out on what it means to know him and be involved in a meaningful relationship with him that transforms you to love as he loved.

How many people endure repetitive rituals certain that doing so endears them to God? How many

embrace a slate of ethical rules or doctrinal propositions thinking that doing so ensures God's blessings? Jesus offered us a vibrant life of relationship with his Father, and we ended up creating a religion that often disarms that very Gospel of its glory.

"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." (Mark 7:6-7) These words are as true for us today as when Jesus voiced them to the religious captives in his. His warnings in Matthew 23 about the pitfalls of religion, are more applicable in our day than they were in his. When is the last time you heard a sermon from that text? Read it. You'll know why.

Something Is Broken

For the last few months I've done numerous radio interviews for people concerned about what's being called the collapse of Christianity. Newsweek did a cover article in April about the collapse of Christianity's influence in America and that fewer people identify themselves as Christian or are a committed part of a local congregation.

There's a lot of handwringing going on about those statistics, most of them blaming the culture. But the problems in religion itself have never been greater. Conservative Christianity aligned itself with a political agenda and a party that turned out to be as corrupt as it blamed the other party for being. More and more believers I know are embarrassed at the anger and arrogance of many so-called leaders who speak to the press on behalf of Christianity. So it's no wonder to me that last year 4000 churches closed in America, 1700 pastors left the ministry each month and another 1300 pastors were terminated by their church, many without cause, and over 3500 people per day left their church last year.

Clearly we have a problem that cannot be blamed on the secularization of our culture. The kingdom is no longer a pearl of great price, and knowing Jesus is no longer the fruit of our religious activities. And people who are beginning to see that, are often marginalized as rebellious or unsubmitted for simply wanting what Jesus promised them.

Many people giving up on local institutions are not doing so because they've rejected Jesus, but finding that the culture of Christianity is actually diminishing their faith not enhancing it. In an email I got the other day, from a frustrated pastor trying to help people follow Jesus, and is just coming to realize that his own job may be at odds with his greatest passion. "Church has become a hindrance to building relationships and loving others."

He's not alone. Many of us came to faith enamored by the life and teachings of Jesus. We were promised a relationship with God but were handed a religion of doctrines we had to believe, rituals we had to observe, obligations we had to meet and a standard of morality to adopt. While most of those were true enough,

many found that their attempts to follow them did not produce either the life of Jesus it promised, nor the reality of true, caring communities of faith.

We have traded the simple power of the Gospel for a religion based on human effort. We were invited to relationship and ended up with a host of irrelevant dogma and burdensome obligations. Fortunately people from all over the world are waking up to a fresh hunger to shed the dictates of religion and embrace the wonder and power of a love-filled relationship with the living God.

Was Christianity Ever Meant to Be a Religion?

I guess all of this begs the question, did Jesus intend to start a religion called Christianity, or did we do this to ourselves? I suspect the latter. I am wholeheartedly convinced that he came to end all religions, not by lashing out against them, but by filling up in the human spirit what religion promises to fill but never can. Religion seeks to manipulate human effort to earn God's approval, when such approval can never be earned.

Abraham, a Jewish man, lead the tour portion of a trip to Israel I was on fifteen years ago. Some of those on the tour had been rude to his faith as they tried to "help" him embrace Jesus as the Messiah. On the last morning, I found him alone by the bus and had the chance to ask him if he'd been offended by some of the remarks.

He smiled. He told me he'd been guiding tours for 30 years and someone is always trying to convert him to their faith--Christians, Reformed Jews, Muslims and Mormons. Then he asked me, "Do you know why it makes no difference to me?"

I shook my head. He led me out to the street and pointed at a building, "Do you see that synagogue with the star of David? That's our building. The one over there with the cross on it is yours. Further down, do you see the dome? That's theirs. On the surface they may look different, but underneath they are all basically the same. You would think that if one of us was serving the Living God, it would look differently."

I still remember how much his words impacted me. Religion is the same all over the world. It is a prescribed set of doctrine, rules, rituals, and ethics. It celebrates sacred space, exalts holy-men as gurus and tries to muscle its way into the culture. For 2000 years many have practiced Christianity as a religion, essentially no different than the others, except in who it claims to follow. *But if one of us was serving a Living God, wouldn't it look very different?*

When we cram the life of God into a box, we rob it of its life and power and only distinguish it from other religions by claiming a more truthful doctrine. Could that be why Jesus didn't teach his disciples how to gain a following or build institutions. He didn't teach them how to meet on Sunday mornings at 10:00

with a worship band and a leader to lecture the others. He didn't give them a prescribed set of behaviors that people were suppose to follow as the means to serve God.

No, he invited them into his Father's house, and a reality of relationship with his Father that would transform them and opened the way for them to share that love with others. That you can't put into a religion and trying to only chokes out any hope of relationship. Putting creed and doctrine above a growing friendship with him supplants the reality he offered us, no matter how correct our doctrine or moral our ethics.

Don't get me wrong. Truth is vital, as is righteousness, but without love they are also empty. Learning to live as a beloved child is far more transforming than the greatest principle you can follow. The life of Christian community isn't found by sharing religion together, but by embracing a journey of growing relationship with him that transforms us by his grace and power.

Losing Your Religion

What does this mean for us? Should we stop calling ourselves Christian or judge those who do? Should we come up with a new term to franchise so we could separate the ones who live it relationally from the ones who are caught up in religion? If we did, we'd only be making the same mistakes that have diminished our life in Jesus over the centuries.

The truth is that Christianity as a religion is a dangerous disfigurement of the God of the Bible. But not all who call themselves Christians live religiously. Given all the excesses and failures of Christianity, I am delightfully grateful that the Gospel of Jesus is still relatively intact inside its doctrine. Unfortunately it only lets new believers live free for so long before burdening them with religious obligations.

And I meet many believers and leaders who have a profound faith and are seeking healthy ways to communicate that journey with others. I rejoice in that, as I do the amount of compassionate aid that such groups share with the world in need. But too many people miss out on the life Jesus offered them by practicing it as a religion instead of growing to know him.

Ultimately the transformation from practicing religion to living inside a relationship with God is not an institutional battle; it is a personal one. We could tear apart all of our religious institutions today and nothing would change. I've been in many a house church filled with people who see the institutional church as the problem and are oblivious to the fact that they've just moved their religion into a home, where close fellowship only makes it more oppressive.

So how do we know if you've been tricked into religion?

- When God is a distant concept to you instead of a real presence.
- When you find yourself following another man, woman, or a set of principles instead of following

Jesus.

- When fear of eternity, not measuring up, or falling into error drives your actions.
- When you find yourself in empty rituals that do not connect you in a real way to him.
- When you are burdened by the expectations of others and feel guilty when you can't do enough.
- When you look at others who struggle with contempt instead of compassion.
- When the approval of others means more to you than remaining in the reality of his love.
- When you hesitate to be honest about your doubts or struggles because others will judge you.
- When you think of holiness as an unachievable duty, rather than a glorious invitation.
- When you think righteousness depends on your efforts instead of his grace working in you.
- When following him is more about obligation than affection.
- When correcting someone's doctrine is more important than loving them.
- When God seems more present on Sunday morning, than he does on Monday.

If you have only known Christianity to be a set of doctrines, rules and rituals, I have great news. Jesus came and died to open up access between you and his Father. Religion supplants that, distracting us with discipline, commitment and hard work that never yields the fruit it promises. If you've been worn out by religion, don't think you're alone. Others are just pretending, afraid they are the only ones, too. Life is only found in him.

Switching Back

There's something about our flesh that craves the illusion of safety that religion affords. Anyone of us can find our heart easily turned toward following rules instead of engaging him. When we recognize that happening, we can simply turn our hearts back to him and choose to move away from the religious traps and connect once again with God as our Father.

Living the Gospel means we live in his love. We come to know the Father's love for us and then sharing that love with him, and with others he puts in our path. (John 13:34-35). No other motive will suffice; no other is necessary. This is where the journey begins and this is the only place it can continue.

Returning to our first love isn't as difficult as we like to make it. For me it just means finding a quiet place and talking to God. When you find yourself caught in religion, tell him you're tired of chasing a religion that isn't working and you want to know him as he really is. Then, wake up each day with a similar prayer on your heart. Watch how he makes himself known to you in the simple reality of living each day. Follow the nudges he puts on your heart instead of the obligations and rituals. Find others who are on this journey and find ways to share the reality of a growing relationship and help guard our hearts about following into empty religious practices.

If you've been steeped in religion for a long time, you'll find yourself going through a very disorienting

time. One woman I met called it a Pharisectomy, which is simply having your inner Pharisee removed. You might feel guilty, lonely, lost, or fearful in the process. Your former religious friends may feel threatened that you're no longer doing the things they do. But in time you'll find yourself sliding into the reality of relationship with him that is as increasingly real, transformative and engaging.

Among It, Not of It

So let's not go to war with religion, railing against its failures fighting against its dictates. Instead let's do what Jesus did--let's live beyond it. Let's find a reality of freedom and authenticity in him that can walk alongside anyone with patience and gentleness. Religion is what people crave when they haven't found life in him. Taking their religion away won't fix that. The only thing that will is helping them see a reality of relationship with God that makes all our religious activity unnecessary and unattractive. Jesus could be in religious settings and not be captured by them. He could care about a Pharisee as much as a prostitute.

Live among religion if he asks you to, loving toward those mired in it but you never have to be of it. The Gospel opens the door for us to re-engage the transcendent God, to know him as our Abba and to walk with him through the twists and turns of life, sharing his affection with others.

Live in the reality of that relationship and you'll find it quite naturally finding expression through you as you love and treat others the same way God treats you. People who refuse to live to fear, conform to ritual or put doctrine above love will find themselves having ample opportunity to help others on this journey as well. A dear friend wrote me recently who was feeling a bit swamped by all the people seeking out his help these days, "You didn't say anything about being safe is like hanging up a "counseling available" shingle."

We live in a great day. The emptiness of tradition is being seen for what it is and people are hungering for the reality of relationship. Live there each day and there's no telling where that will take you or who you'll end up walking alongside as Jesus becomes your life.

Then you can live free, not just for a few days or even three months. He came to set you free eternally!

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