

Are you RELIGIOUS or RELATIONAL?

written by Randy Starkey | 07/01/2024

Many people have heard me say “*Christianity is not a RELIGION, it’s a RELATIONSHIP*”. I believe this is the clear teaching of the Bible, and that we need to understand it and live by it.

The English word “religion” is used 5-7 times in the New Testament (3 different Greek words), depending on the translation, and it has an “outward” type meaning, in how Christianity is practiced. Devotion, worship, or the practice of “religion”. The New Testament however always points to a heart RELATIONSHIP with God as the needed real inner motivator of the Christian life.

Verses like John 17:3 “*Now THIS is eternal life: that they KNOW you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*” (emphasis mine) show us that RELATIONSHIP is at the heart of eternal life. You can’t get to KNOW someone if you don’t relate to them! You might know about them, but you can’t KNOW them without a RELATIONSHIP! In Matthew 7, we even have the example of some people prophesying and casting out demons and performing miracles, but Jesus rejected them because He said they never KNEW Him! That sort of really shows the importance of RELATIONSHIP!

What RELIGION does is turn Christianity into OUTWARD things that may be ABOUT God, but they lack the RELATIONAL dimension of a sense of God’s Spirit guiding our lives. Religion can even be EMOTIONAL, but if it’s only religion, it will lack the true RELATIONAL!

Here’s some practical examples of the difference between RELIGION and RELATIONSHIP...

1) Religion emphasizes a “law” approach versus a grace approach. It’s outward behavior that gets focused on, often in a judgmental way, as opposed to helping someone discover the grace of God to help them both want to be free of sin, and also to experience the power to actually get free. The person being “helped” in this religious way often experiences condemnation, instead of grace based conviction. This is a form of “legalism”, and often comes across as harsh or angry.

2) Religion often treats spiritual truth as an outward “formula” that it applies to every situation. So for instance, no matter what problem a person being helped might be experiencing, the answer is always to believe some scripture, confess it, declare it done, and that’s it. Or we pray over that person for deliverance, and that should solve it all. These are “formulaic” approaches instead of being led by the Spirit to see how to specifically help someone in need, which might be neither of those two approaches. We can become religious about anything when we start applying it in automatic ways without letting God guide us in our application of truth.

3) Religion is also often “pushy”. It enters the room “Bible first”! No matter what the conversation is, they have a scripture for it, and what you need to do about it! This often lacks love and compassion and grace, is condescending, and actually drives people away.

4) Religion often has a “know-it-all” attitude. It’s a pride problem very much like the religious leaders of Jesus’ day who thought they knew better than Jesus. They were stuck in a religious rut and could not understand or accept what Jesus was teaching them, because they thought they knew it all and had it all figured out, and that they were closer to God and more holy than Jesus was. When actually they didn’t even really have a true relationship with God themselves like Jesus did, instead they just applied the scripture they knew like some sort of “system” of law, and they thought they had all the answers and were more spiritual and correct than Jesus. Pride blinds to the truth, and was the original sin of the devil!

5) Religion often has trouble acting normal and relaxed, like an every day person. It has to be “spiritual” all the time. It has an answer for everything, and relates every situation to something “God is saying” or “wants us to do”. It is not relaxed, and it can create a “super-spiritual” or even a tense atmosphere. As in 3) or 4), it can also feel pushy, or condescending, or “know-it-all” in approach. This can be coupled with an approach of always relating everything to “the Lord said”, or some prophecy or vision or word, and it can also be associated with an out of balance focus on end-time prophecy, events, conspiracy theories, the latest fad, etc. etc. It misses the reality of daily relationship with God and growing in the character of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5. *Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. (Gal. 5.22-23 NLT)*

6) Religion often is not sensitive to or genuinely loving to people, and does not have a relational approach to people, as the second greatest commandment clearly tells us, that we “*should love our neighbor as ourself*” Mt. 22:39, but instead is legalistic, super-spiritual, pushy, condescending, “you-need-to-know-this”, “here’s what you need to do”, or being “preachy”, etc. None of that is love. We learn what love is like in 1 Cor. 13...

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Sometimes this can be called having “emotional intelligence”. Where we relate to people as unique individuals, with unique needs (we all need the gospel as a starter, but it can be presented in many ways), and we are led by the Spirit (Gal. 5:18) in our approach to how best to help them. That is being RELATIONAL, and not RELIGIOUS!

It’s so important to remember...

“Christianity is not a RELIGION, it’s a RELATIONSHIP. First with God, and then with people.”