

True Religion

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I recently had my car serviced at the Honda dealership. I suppose they took so much money from me that they felt guilty, because they gave me a free two-month subscription for SiriusXM radio. It didn't take me long to find Willie's Roadhouse, a station that plays country classics. That reunited me with this lyric from an old Don Williams song: "I don't believe that heaven waits for only those who congregate. I like to think of God as love; He's down below, He's up above."

This mindset is just as prevalent in our world today. Usually, it is expressed this way: "I'm spiritual, I just don't believe in organized religion." Or, as one young man recently told me, "I believe in God, but I don't need a gang." This is an effort to have Christ without His church or a relationship with God without any of the responsibility to do what He said.

I don't anticipate this attitude among the readers of this article. The fact that you are holding a church bulletin indicates your desire to be a part of the Lord's church. But there are some subtle ways in which this battle can be fought among our own members. They find their voice in these false statements about religion.

"It doesn't matter where I worship." There are certainly legitimate circumstances that cause us to meet with a different congregation of God's people on the Lord's Day. If we are out of town or on vacation, we look for faithful people who assemble in that area. When Paul and Barnabas and Silas were on their missionary tours in the book of Acts, we read how they sought out the people of God in whatever city they came to.

What we don't read about are Christians going around town looking for the church with the best offer that week. "Who is having a singing? Who has a get together afterward? Who has something for me?" One of the purposes of the worship service is revealed in the same passage we use to prove why we should not forsake the assembly (Heb. 10:23-25). "That worship service wasn't very stimulating." Well, who did you provoke? "I didn't get much out of that." What did you put in? The local church is described as a family. Would you miss someone in your house if you didn't know where they were? The local church is described as a body. If a part of your body is hurting does it have an impact on the whole?

“There are too many hypocrites there.” There is great harm done by lives that are inconsistent with their calling. That’s why there was such swift action taken on Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. The result? “And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things” (5:11).

Notice that great BLAME did not come upon the whole church. Neither was there a mass exodus at Corinth when it was discovered that there was an immoral man among them (1 Cor. 5:1). We must continue to serve God and trust Him to handle those who are just pretending. The servant who is not prepared for his Master’s return He will “cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 24:51). And at the very least, let us realize that when you live a life that does not follow what you proclaim, you give ammunition to the devil and his followers.

“I want to go where it’s not so narrow and restrictive.” If a local church is too rigid with regard to traditions, then that is a legitimate concern. Jesus condemned the religious leaders of His day for putting their human traditions on the same level as the commandments of God (Matt. 15:9). We must be careful not to bind where God did not bind.

But Jesus did claim to be a narrow Way. “Enter by the narrow gate...for the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it” (Matt. 7:13-14). He told His followers to submit to certain requirements or else, they “cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:25-35). And the instructions to the New Testament church involved restrictions on their worship: that all things be done “for edification” and “decently and in an orderly manner” (1 Cor. 14:26,40). We must give God what He wants, not we want.

“This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27). To have God without His word or His church is to have no religion at all.