

THE SEARCH FOR GENUINE CHRISTIANITY - #3

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Many and diverse are the approaches to Christianity in the modern world. These various ways of pursuing religion have developed over the centuries by people who seem to be unconcerned with biblical authority for what they believe and practice. Today, at least five different approaches may be observed:

“Any ol’ Religion”

Many believe that what is essential to our relationship with the Lord is merely that we join up with some church. Doctrine, to this way of thinking, is unimportant with the exception that one must accept Jesus as Savior. People with this kind of religion are not interested in truth, so a search for genuine Christianity is irrelevant to them. They are described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness’”* (Matt. 7:21-23).

“My Religion”

This phrase describes people who are loyal to a particular group. They desire to hold firm to their traditional approach to “doing church.” They believe their church is right and tend to equate their traditions with the truth. They are like the Pharisees of old who rejected the truth Jesus brought because it did not fit into their traditions. Jesus illustrated the Pharisaic rejection of truth with the figures of trying to put a patch from a new garment onto an old garment and trying to put new wine into old wineskins (see Luke 5:36-39). The old traditions and truth simply are not compatible. And, if one is not interested in truth, then the old traditions are quite satisfying (Luke 5:39). These are people who have likely adopted the religion of their parents without question. And, they will pass the family religion down to their children to carry on.

Folks who think in this way are certainly not interested in a search for genuine Christianity. They are self-satisfied. In fact, whenever truth is presented to them they reject it because it is measured by the standard of their own religion. This was the case when the Pharisees and Scribes confronted Jesus about His disciples refusing to wash their hands before they ate (see Matt. 15:1-20). Such refusal was in violation of their religion. Jesus showed them how their traditions actually caused them to transgress the commandment of God (vs. 3) and to invalidate the word of God (vs. 6). The disciples later report to Jesus that these Jews were offended by what He said (vs. 12). The truth will offend, if we are not truth seekers.

“Meet My Needs Religion”

Some people have an agenda in seeking religion... they want something. Among these you will find church shoppers. They check out different denominations to find what they want. But, they are not looking for truth. They are looking for a youth program, or entertaining preaching, or a gymnasium, or a doctrine that allows them to remain as they are. They are not searching for genuine Christianity, they are searching for personal comfort.

Once in a congregation, they will work to make it more to their own liking. In fact, this type of person is willing to split a congregation in order to get what he or she wants. Of course, they are unable to distinguish truth, thinking truth is whatever they want it to be or whatever they choose to believe. They are like some Corinthians who find justification for what they want by misapplying truth (study 1 Cor. 6:12f.). And, they are like the rich man who came to Jesus with the right question, but the wrong motives (Luke 18:18-25). The rich man’s question was commendable, *“Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”* But, it becomes clear in the events that follow that he only came to be confirmed in what he

already believed. He had an agenda. Jesus gave Him the truth and the opportunity, but he turned his back on it because he came not to find truth.

“Misled & Misguided Religion”

This is religion where error is taught and people accept it as truth. Truth, to these, is whatever they believe to be the truth. Jesus refers to them as *“the blind”* following *“blind guides”* (Matt. 15:14). The error may be promoted from traditional beliefs or by some new innovation.

The Judaizers were such blind guides as they tried to make aspects of the old Mosaic system compatible with Christianity, binding circumcision on the Gentiles. Paul responded with blunt words: *“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again, now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed”* (Gal. 1:6-9). These were not seeking genuine Christianity, rather they were compromising Christianity to their own beliefs.

These blind guides are not interested in truth and will attempt to dissuade their followers from seeking truth. Paul also noted this aspect to the Galatians: *“Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the truth? They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out, in order that you may seek them”* (4:16,17).

Each of these approaches to religion have one thing in common: a wrong standard guides them all. The reason for such diversity in belief and practice in the religious world is due to this one fact. If all followed the same standard, then all would be teaching the same things.

If there is such a thing as genuine Christianity, then there must be a standard for it that has come to us from God. It would also follow that if we adhere to that standard, then we would certainly be a part of the genuine religion God has established through Christ. The fifth approach to religion, then is what we may refer to as...

“True Religion”

This is, of course, what we are seeking. Is it possible to possess the genuine religion of God? Absolutely. And, how may we arrive at it and know that we have it? Simply by following the standard of God.

The Scriptures present to us the divine standard we need for guidance. Jesus said, *“If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”* (John 8:31,32). The truth can be discovered and obeyed (1 Peter 1:22). It follows that if we are in compliance with the teachings of Jesus, then we are genuinely His disciples.

The New Testament indicates that the first Christians followed the same standard that came from Jesus through the apostles. So consistent were the teachings that Paul could say, *“...just as I teach everywhere in every church”* (1 Cor. 4:17); *“...thus I direct in all the churches”* (1 Cor. 7:17); *“...as in all the churches of the saints”* (1 Cor. 14:33); and *“...as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also”* (1 Cor. 16:1).

This divine standard is called *“the faith”* to which the priests were being obedient (Acts 6:7) and which was *“once for all delivered to the saints”* (Jude 3). There is only *“one faith”* (Eph. 4:5) or system of teachings to which everyone seeking genuine Christianity must comply. What is written in God’s Word is the only way to find His truth and the only way that we may find unity among believers.

Since there is a divine standard, Christians are to oppose what deviates from that standard. The apostle John wrote, *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world”* (1 John 4:1). Paul left Timothy in Ephesus *“in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines”* (1 Tim. 1:3). We are even to apply this standard to ourselves... *“Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!”* (2 Cor. 13:5). The standard of measurement to see if we pass the test is God’s word revealed in Scripture. Thus, Paul advocates, *“Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus”* (2 Tim. 1:13). We are to take the things written so that we *“may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth”* (1 Tim. 3:15).

The true religion is the religion of Christ that follows the teachings that Christ delivered to us. When the Colossians were being misled, Paul exhorted them in this way: *“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you*

were instructed..." (Co.I. 2:6,7). If a teaching or practice is not found in the instructions given to us by means of the written word, then we should abandon such beliefs and practices. Only in the Scriptures can we find the words of Christ and by them we are able to walk in Christ. Our obligation is to bring every teaching and every practice to the standard of Christ for testing.

Paul often described this work of pursuing truth in terms of battle and war. *"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ"* (2 Cor. 10:3-5). This means that every new idea in religion and every doctrine being taught should be brought as a captive, at sword-point, to the throne of Jesus to see if He approves it or not. If it is found in His word, then He allows it to live. If not found in His word, then He does not approve and such foreign doctrines must be destroyed.

It is obvious that the modern religious world has introduced many innovations and doctrines that cannot be found in Scripture. When you look at all the denominational systems today you may marvel at their complexity, their elaborate organizations, their external show, and their vast financial enterprises. These offer the modern sinner a way to feel religious in the church of his choice but offer little to anyone pursuing genuine Christianity. Looking around at all this mad pursuit of "bigness" and "newness," we should ask the simple question, "Is this what Christ intended when He declared that He would build His church?" The honest heart will answer in the negative.

Paul, concerned about the direction of the Corinthian church stated his frustration in these words, *"But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ"* (2 Cor. 11:3). Genuine Christianity is not some elaborate human system of religion. It is simple devotion to Christ. Anyone devoted to Christ will listen to Him and no one else. Paul goes on to say, *"For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully"* (vs. 4). To accept something that Christ did not deliver to us is to move away from simple devotion to Him.

Yet, we are enamored with innovation. We moderns like change and we pursue things that appeal to us. So, like our ancient brothers, the Corinthians, we may find ourselves moving in the wrong direction toward the elaborate and entertaining practices of the denominations. Some may even proclaim that this is an improvement in our religion. But, I am really not after this sense of "improvement" ... rather, I desire genuineness.

Genuine Christianity is not that difficult to find nor that complex to follow. Yet, all the extravagant innovations of our age obscure our view. What if we could just strip away everything and start all over? What would simple Christianity look like? What would be essential to possessing true religion and what would not be essential? The pursuit of genuine Christianity will require us to do this. We must go back to the beginning to see what has been added and changed along the way. Christianity had its beginning on the Pentecost following Jesus' death and resurrection. It is here that the search for what is essential must begin. And, this we propose to do in subsequent articles.