

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-07-29—ARE YOU RELIGIOUS?

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

What would you say to someone who asks if you are religious? Is your response simply “yes”? Do you respond that you believe in God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ of the Bible? Do you know what ‘religious’ means? That would be important in order to accurately answer the question. Religion is defined two ways:

- 1) A particular system of faith and worship;
- 2) The belief in and worship of a superhuman power or powers, especially a God.

The first definition refers a system organized around common teachings, rituals, and participation. In modern terms—a church. Many will likely immediately identify this use of the term ‘religion’ with Protestants and Catholics. Some might expand it to include Muslims, Buddhists, etc.

As I have discussed in a past article, *church* is a word that came into existence after the days that Jesus Christ lived in the flesh. In the last two millennia, it not only was the common reference to organized worship systems but it has been transformed into the second definition: a system of beliefs. You might have noticed that I added *system* to the above second definition, but it is more accurate. In any case, it has become so deeply ingrained in our conscience that it completely replaced every instance of the Greek word *ekklesia* (“called out ones”) in the Bible. Let me explain.

The second definition of religion—belief in a God—is generally the result of the *influence* of organized systems of teachings, rituals, and participation. For example, Protestants *teach* certain principles and rules that include baptism, loving Jesus, and Sunday observance. They add certain *rituals* they regard as important reinforcement of their teachings. One such is Sunday ‘worship’ services featuring an audience of congregants (the students of their teachings) who participate in an agenda of prayers, song service, and a preacher who gives a lecture. In other words, the first definition of religion—an organization focused on particular beliefs and worship—**transforms** into the second definition—a system of beliefs—simply through repetitive teachings, rituals, and participation. At the very least, it develops rote behaviors not based upon the original source of truth. At the worst, it is deceptive.

Does all of the above reflect your view of Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, etc.? I suspect it does. Now the hard question—does it describe YOUR religion? Please do not take offense. I hope that I show you that the entire world has been trained to believe that any relationship of mankind with God is one that requires belonging to an organization that promotes its own teachings, rituals, and participation. Sadly, this includes some who belong to groups typically named with a prefix to “Church of God.”

The problem with a ‘religion’ (i.e., a system of beliefs) is that even Satan and the demons believe:

JAMES 2:19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: **the devils also believe**, and tremble.

Satan and the demons believe but they do **not** have a relationship with God. They were rejected by Him even though they believe! So, simply believing is not enough. The really important and fundamental question is not “Are you religious” or “Do you believe in Jesus.” The big question is: “Do you have a RELATIONSHIP with God?”

You see, God is a living Being. While He is the Most High who is above all in power and authority and has created all life and everything in the heavens and earth, He also has desires and feelings. Unlike organizations that lord power over others, God desires to have eternal relationships with people based upon love. Who might those people be? Are they those who try come to God solely through THEIR rote teachings, rituals, and participation of an organization? Or are they those who develop a direct relationship with God by listening to His words and talking to Him in prayer? Notice what God’s Son said:

JOHN 4:23-24 But the hour cometh, and now is, when the **true worshippers** shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for **the Father seeketh such [people]** to worship him. 24 **God is a Spirit**: and they that worship him must **worship him in spirit and in truth**.

Wait a minute. Doesn’t *worship* infer some form of ‘religion’? In the Greek, the word means “*a humble submission with an attitude of utmost adoration or respect.*” This attitude can be physically manifested by bowing or prostrating oneself. In all regards, *worship* of God means to acknowledge the fullness of His eternity, greatness, power, and authority with an attitude of humility and contriteness that comes as a result of HAVING a relationship with the God Most High. So, the answer is no—*worship* is not a form of religion. It is an attitude toward God by those in the flesh who desire above all else to have a **personal** relationship with Him, not according to how others define it. In other words, TRUE WORSHIPPERS know that God loves them in spite of the fact that they are utterly weak, corruptible, and pitiable. For that reason, true worshippers love God in return because there is no greater love than His¹. Who would not want to experience that kind of love?

So, what is required to have a RELATIONSHIP with God? Aside from the aforementioned humility and respect for His magnificence and majesty, He simply asks us to become like He is:

¹ John 3:16.

1 JOHN 4:12-17 No one has seen God at any time. Yet, if we love one another, **God dwells in us, and His own love is perfected in us.** 13 By this *standard* we know that we are dwelling in Him, and He *is dwelling* in us: because of His own Spirit, *which* He has given to us. 14 And we have seen *for* ourselves and bear witness that the Father sent the Son *as the* Savior of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, **God dwells in him, and he in God.** 16 And we have known and have believed the love that God has toward us. God is love, and the one who dwells in love **is dwelling in God, and God in him.** 17 By this *spiritual indwelling*, the love of God is perfected within us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment because even **as He is, so also are we** in this world.

“As God is, so are WE.” That is profound. On the day that we are born as spirit children, love will be PERFECT in us! We might still be lacking in certain things but, if nothing else, we will nonetheless be *perfect love* on that day. Friends become close because they have common feelings, beliefs, interests, and proclivities. To have a close relationship with God is no different than that of a friend. And Jesus told us what God wants:

MARK 12:30-31 And **thou shalt love the Lord thy God** with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this *is* the first commandment. 31 And the second *is* like, *namely* this, **Thou shalt love thy neighbour** as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

God loves us and wants a relationship with those who **also** love Him. It would not make sense even for God to try to have an eternal relationship with those who hate Him. But a relationship with Him also requires that we love our neighbors because God loves them, too. In other words, we have to love everyone that **God** loves. That only makes sense. We might love God but if we do not love our neighbors, then *can* we become eternal children of God? I think not. These are the TWO requirements. We cannot fulfill the First Commandment and not the Second or vice versa.

Okay, now for all the purists out there. Does a relationship with God exclude certain teachings, rituals, and participation? No, they are certainly a part of it. However, while they play a part in developing that relationship, they are not the foundation of it as Paul discussed:

HEBREWS 6:1-2 Therefore **leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, 2 Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.**

Yes, we must have the faith OF Christ² to believe that He is the Son of God and was sacrificed for our sins. Yes, we must be baptized in the name of Jesus. Yes, we must obey the Law of God. Yes, we must do good works³. Yes, there are required teachings (“doctrines of baptisms ...”), rituals (baptism, Passover, etc.), and participation (keeping the Sabbaths and Holydays) but it is what is in the “heart, soul, mind, and strength” that establishes a relationship with God. These rituals⁴ simply demonstrate a desire to have one.

In short, Paul says that we must set aside any obsessive expectations that ‘religious’ doctrines establish a relationship with God. Instead, we must go on to PERFECTION. What perfection? “Be ye therefore **perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.**” (Matt. 5:48). But what makes God perfect? Above all, “God is **love**” (1 John 4:8). Love is the basis of a relationship with God. Yes, there are components of ‘religion’ required even for those who are called to be His children. But those things are part of showing God that we ARE seeking a relationship with Him.

Do not misunderstand. I am not saying that attending Sabbath services with an organization is at all wrong. Singing hymns, praying, reading the Law, and learning the word of God is all VERY good. In fact, these things are ways to love God and our neighbors sincerely and deeply: “Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard *it*, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name.” (Malachi 3:16). But do not confuse the ‘religion’ of an organization with a relationship with God and Jesus Christ.

If you refer to God as “Father” and if you call yourself a “child” of God, then you are describing a RELATIONSHIP, not a religion. It is a relationship with God, His Son and our Elder Brother, and all of His other children. So, when someone asks if you are religious, perhaps the answer is, “To some extent. But much more than that—God is my Father and I am part of His family!”

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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² Gal 2:16; Phil. 3:9; Heb. 11:6.

³ Eph 2:10; 4:12-16.

⁴ Hos. 6:6.