

Looking Religious / Being Spiritual

Amos 5:18-27, Mt 7:13-23

One day when my brother-in-law was in a new pastorate at a Mennonite Church, he ran into a stranger who was brave enough to ask a difficult question. The question was: “Do you know what’s wrong with your church?”

Of course that question received the pastor’s attention. “What do you mean?” he asked.

The answer was: “A certain major leader in your church, and he was named, is disliked by everyone in the community.”

Shocking. “Why?” was the natural question.

Then the pastor was told about this church leader’s business reputation, in some detail. And he was told about this church member’s political maneuverings in the community.

Needless to say, my brother-in-law was forewarned. So when things started to go whacky in the congregation, he wasn’t totally surprised. Congregational members appreciated this man’s nice sounding words and his wealth. Later as major problems developed, things became worse. The conference minister immediately told my brother in law it was all his fault. As events developed, however, it became clear, some of the major fundamental problems in that congregation came from this rich church leader, and conference had to address this individual, which they did.

It was a situation where a person looked religious. Used the right religious language, but some of his behavior didn’t match up. He was generous – but controlling with his tithe. The Conference liked his giving to them. But eventually he was not able to fool anyone. As the saying goes, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”

Unfortunately, the congregation & conference were the slowest to recognize this, much less act with some partial church discipline.

I share this sad story to take us into another sermon on preparing for the next 500 years of church life. We’ve been looking at some basics, the fundamentals, the foundation of our life with Jesus Christ, that we need to get back to, or re-emphasize or lift out.

One of the dangers the church faces is from within. We have to be honest with ourselves that we in the church can be our own worst enemies. Jesus spent a lot of energy opposing the Jewish religious leaders. The Apostle Paul’s New Testament letters often included advice to correct some local church problems. We know of too many church scandals and leadership failures today. Each one of these hurts all congregations & followers of Jesus.

From another perspective, in an article from Christianity Today, we find this thought. We can worry about Muslim influence around the world, but, “Our greatest threat is the sin in our own lives. We need to put our house in order. History is filled with narratives of great empires and churches that fell due to self-indulgence and moral excess. So, when faced with fears of Islamization, we must not forget the greater danger of our own sin.”

In preparing for the next 500 years of church life, we simply have to do better. This is an old problem. Our text from the prophet Amos is a constant theme, a continual warning in the Bible. Israel expected the Messiah would make them a great nation again.

But Amos wasn’t the only prophet to say, “Think again. God despises your worship, offerings and music. You go through the motions with religious rituals but they don’t please me. So you will receive justice that involves being sent into exile.” Obviously the

audience didn't like this message that turned their expectations up side down.

But Jesus has the same message. It should be a wake up call. In our scripture from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasts the two ways, the two gates and the two roads. He warns us that not everyone who claims Jesus will be accepted.

Why do we have this constant warning throughout the Bible? Simply put, it's tempting to claim to be a Jesus follower, to look religious, or to say we are spiritual, yet we don't do what God commands. We compartmentalize our secular life from our spirituality and religious life.

James 1:26- 27 is an example of this Biblical theme. It reads: "Suppose people think their beliefs and how they live are both right. But they don't control what they say. Then they are fooling themselves. Their beliefs & way of life are not worth anything at all. Here are the beliefs & way of life that God our Father accepts as pure & without fault. When widows are in trouble, take care of them. Do the same for children who have no parents. And don't let the world make you impure."

Followers of Jesus are to be salt and light to the world by how we live and what we say. It's not an accident that the early Anabaptists labeled Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount as core to the Christian faith. The words of Micah 6:8, are repeated frequently in a variety of ways throughout the Bible to keep us grounded in God's values. "The Lord has shown you what is good. He has told you what he requires of you. You must act with justice. You must love to show mercy. And you must be humble as you live in the sight of your God." This instruction, this requirement, unavoidably puts us right into local, provincial national politics and international politics.

The Bible keeps pointing out that God has standards we are to keep. Luke warmness is frowned on. God hates nominal Christians. How we treat people, especially the weakest and more vulnerable is a core issue for God. And right from the beginning of the Bible – the story of Abel's offering being accepted and Cain's not – should be a caution for us.

Any religion can become tied mainly with a cultural identity. Here in Canada the residential schools for First Nation's children, as well meaning as they might have been – simply didn't match up to Jesus' kindness.

Cultural Christianity is religion that superficially identifies itself as "Christianity" but does not truly adhere to the faith. They wear the label "Christian," but the label has more to do with their family background, social environment, upbringing, and where they live, than any personal conviction that Jesus is Lord. It's counterfeit faith. They identify with certain aspects of Christianity, but reject the spiritual aspects required of a biblically defined Christian. Identifying as "Christian" is a way of declaring a religious affiliation, as opposed to being "Muslim" or "Buddhist."

Famed scientist and active atheist Richard Dawkins refers to himself as a "cultural Christian" because he admires some of the ceremonial and philanthropic aspects of Christianity. Dawkins is not born again; he simply sees "Christianity" as a label to use.

In nations with a lot of freedoms, the gospel is often presented as a costless addition to one's life: just add churchgoing to your hobbies, add charitable giving to your list of good deeds, & add the cross to the trophies on your mantle. In this way, people go through the motions of "accepting Jesus" with no accompanying surrender to His lordship. These people, who do not "abide in Christ," are cultural Christians. They are branches not attached to Jesus' vine.

However, there was no such thing as cultural Christianity in the days of the early church. In fact, to be a Christian was more than likely to cause you to be marked as a target of persecution. The term *Christian* was coined in the city of Antioch as a way to identify the first followers of Christ (Acts 11:26). The first disciples were so much like Jesus that they were called “little Christs” by their detractors. It’s sad this term has lost meaning over the years and has come to represent just an ideology, theology, institution or a social class rather than a lifestyle of obedience.

Now, the purpose of this sermon is not to ask us to go around and label people true Christians or not. It’s not to put together a list, which some people have of who is, or is not a true follower of Jesus Christ. But we do need to be aware that how each of us behaves and speaks, is a witness. And we do need to be aware of crucial distinctions, as we run into them. For example, here are some habits, or beliefs that may alert us to a Christianity that is less than holy, complete or sanctified.

One such measure is denying or minimizing Jesus’ claim that He is the only way to God (John 3:15–18; 14:6). (Mt 10:34; Mark 14:7).

Understanding Jesus to be primarily a social reformer, rather than God in the flesh who is came to be the sacrifice for our sin is another.

Another way to drift from God’s way, from Jesus’ teaching, and to push aside the promptings of the Holy Spirit, is to ignore or down play true repentance as the first step toward knowing God (Mt 4:17; Acts 2:38). It’s too easy to think, “What I did wasn’t as bad as this sin, or as so and so. So I’ll just say a quick simple sorry and it will be ok.” And then keep doing what we know is not life giving.

Talking much about “God” in a general sense, but very little about Jesus Christ as Lord (John

13:13; 14:6). After I was pastoring one church for about a month, I had a delightful time with a pastor from another denomination who was attending that Mennonite Church. He made the observation that in the year he had attended, he could count on 2 hands the number of times he heard the name Jesus mentioned. And you can guess what 2 days that happened. Easter and Christmas. So to balance things out, I seldom talked about or said God, but used the name Jesus a lot during my time with them.

You could add many more crucial distinctions between real followers of Jesus & Christianity that is not the full Gospel, like this one. It’s fun to focus on Jesus’ acceptance, grace and love to the exclusion of His teaching on obedience, and self-sacrifice and the reality of hell (Mt 4:17, 23:33, Mark 9:43; Luke 12:5).

Our problem is, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is offensive. It expects people to change and mature. So we like to make it nice. We like to domesticate the Gospel. To make it acceptable for people and especially for ourselves. It’s tempting to smooth Jesus’ challenges out over the rough parts like, “Then he said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’” (Luke 9:23).

Here's the problem: Although Christianity is flourishing, many people have become caught up in this increasingly bankrupt culture. We have adopted many of the values of the world around us. Galatians explains why adopting these values is a problem: "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." (5:9)

Too many people, including Christians, create or pursue the God we want, instead of the God who is. It is the tendency to be shallow in our understanding of God, wanting Him to be more of a gentle-grandfather type who spoils us and lets us have our own way. It is sensing a need for God, but on our own terms. It is

wanting the God we have underlined in our Bibles without wanting the rest of Him too.

People with the spirit of religion often go to extreme lengths to keep alive the traditions of their religion, even to their detriment. Those who cover themselves with religious traditions are usually trying to hide dead spirituality.

Do you remember your elementary school teacher demonstrating the principle of diffusion? She started with a clear glass of water. Then with an eyedropper she took some red food dye from a bottle and squeezed one drop into the glass. Within moments, the water was tainted with a pinkish hue as the dye permeated the water in the glass.

To be a partial Christian is to be like a clear glass of water with one drop of red dye. In other words, the secular culture is not that different from the Christian culture. So we can be partial Christians and still be somewhat close to a Christian worldview and values.

But what happens when the clear water receives a second drop of red food dye? Or a third? How many drops of dye does it take to not even be close to following Jesus? Can people really see that we are different because of our faith? Can we even be cultural, partial, counterfeit, lukewarm Christians with the whole bottle of red dye poured into the glass?

Did we ever think we could spend our lives being very religious and end up wasting our time? We deceived our self, but we didn't fool God. We simply have to work to be the Third Way that Mennonites and many followers of Jesus try to be. Being religious is never enough. Being spiritual is never enough. Here's the question: If religion is such a big part of our lives, why isn't it making more of an impact on our society? Why do followers of Jesus work so hard to get along with the culture and politics instead of challenging it?

The sad reality is that claims of religious commitment and spirituality run high, but impact seems to be at an all-time low.

So what can we do? The Message paraphrase of Romans 12:1 says it well. "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering."

What does that look like practically? Ask Jesus to be the centre of our faith. Create community to be the centre of our lives. Make reconciliation the centre of our work. Be open to and follow the influence of the Holy Spirit on our lives.

The person in the mirror will never change until they are willing to see themselves as they really are and as God sees them. Then the person in the mirror needs to wholeheartedly commit to know God as the Almighty Creator really is. This honest objectivity anchors us. It gives us the clarity of thought & perspective we need to be followers of Jesus. Is the person looking back at you in the mirror a lukewarm cultural Christian or fully committed to follow the teachings of the Bible and Jesus?

The Good News Gospel assures us, "We also are among those Gentiles who are appointed to belong to Jesus Christ. (Ro 1:6) We have been set free from sin. God has made us his slaves. The benefit we gain leads to holy living. And the end result is eternal life. (Ro 6:22) When any one lives in Christ, the new creation has come. The old is gone! The new is here! (II Cor. 5:17)

"Christ is the living Stone.... God places the highest value on him. We also are like living stones. As we come to Christ, we are being built into a house for worship. There we will be holy priests. We will offer spiritual sacrifices. God will accept them because of what Jesus Christ has done." (I Peter 2:4-5)

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Amos 5:18-27, Mt 7:13-23 (short version)

One day when my brother-in-law was in a new pastorate at a Mennonite Church, he ran into a stranger who was brave enough to ask a difficult question. The question was: “Do you know what’s wrong with your church?”

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It was a situation where a person looked and sounded religious. But some of his behavior didn’t match up. He was generous – but controlling with his tithe. The Conference liked his giving to them. But eventually he was not able to fool anyone. As the saying goes, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.” Unfortunately, the congregation & conference were the slowest to

recognize this, much less act with some partial church discipline.

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This is an old problem. Our text from Amos the prophet is a continual warning in the Bible. Amos wasn’t the only prophet to say, “Think again. God despises your worship, offerings and music. You go through the motions with religious rituals but they don’t please me. You don’t live right. You don’t support justice to the most vulnerable. So you will receive justice that involves being sent into exile.”

Jesus has the same message. It should be a wake up call. Our scripture from the Sermon on the Mount, contrasts the two ways, the two gates and the two roads. Jesus warns us that not everyone who claims Him will be accepted

We have this constant warning throughout the Bible because it’s tempting to claim to be a Jesus follower, to look religious, or to say we are spiritual, yet we don’t do what God commands. We compartmentalize our secular life from our spirituality and religious life.

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Another way to drift from God's way, from Jesus' teaching, and to push aside the promptings of the Holy Spirit, is to ignore or down play true repentance as the first step toward knowing God (Mt 4:17; Acts 2:38). True repentance means, stopping and changing our behavior. It means being truly sorry for what we did and apologize.

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Here's the problem: Although Christianity does have some impact on society, many people have become caught up in a pseudo religious Christian culture. We have adopted many of the values of the world around us. Galatians explains why adopting these values is a problem: "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." (5:9)

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"Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you."

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