

The Business of Whitewashing

Got Religion? – Part I

Romans 2:17-18

Introduction

The Birmingham Newspaper ran a rather shocking article in the January 7, 2001, Sunday edition. The article was headlined, “Worker Dead At Desk For Five Days”. It read,

Executives are trying to work out why no one noticed that one of their employees had been sitting dead at his desk for five days before anyone asked if he was feeling okay. George Turklebaum, 51, who had been employed as a proof-reader at a New York firm for 30 years, had an apparent heart attack in the open-plan office he shared with 23 other employees. He quietly passed away on Monday, but nobody noticed until Saturday morning when an office cleaner asked him why he was working on the weekend. George’s boss, Elliot Wachiaski said, “George was always the first guy in each morning and the last to leave at night, so no one found it unusual that he was in the same position all that time and didn’t say anything. He was always absorbed in his work and kept much to himself.”

A post-mortem examination revealed that he had been dead for five days after suffering a coronary.

The article ended rather tongue-in-cheek by saying,

You may want to give your co-workers a nudge every once in a while.

Everything looked right – he was at his desk, sitting upright, clothed, in his usual arena, surrounded

by books, facing forward. He looked alive, but he was, in fact, dead.

It is possible for the church to be a lot like this man. My purpose today, is to give you a good nudging.

One first century church received a letter, that is recorded in Revelation, chapter 3, saying, in verse 16,

... you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

In the gospel of Matthew, chapter 7, as the Lord preached His famous sermon on the Mount, He said to a group of people, in verses 21 through 23,

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 . . .”

The Bible tells us, in the book of Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 1, that to be without Christ is to be spiritually dead. Apart from Christ, the spirit has not been regenerated; made alive; brought to life by union with Christ.

From these passages, we conclude that it is possible to be a church that looks alive and yet, does not have the power of the Holy Spirit or the dynamic of eternally effective ministry. It is also possible to be a person who claims to be a Christian and who even serves in the name of Christ, performing all sorts of miracles, and yet, not have the power of

Christ resonating in your heart, and, in fact, to be spiritually deceived, spiritually unregenerated, and eternally lost.

There has never been a day in the world where more people are religiously oriented than today. Nearly everyone has religion; everyone is claiming some form of God.

In America, Christianity has made seemingly incredible progress. Christian television, radio, music industries, publishing houses, educational institutions, “mega” churches, and best sellers all seem to indicate that Christianity is a power to be reckoned with. Yet, George Gallup Jr. would write, with biting reality, the words, “Never before in the history of America has the church made so many inroads, while at the same time, making so little difference.”

How is it that those in the church now post the same statistics of divorce, abortion, involvement in pre-marital sex, pornography, and all sorts of sinful obsessions, as those outside the church? How is it that the church, for centuries, has called out, with great clarity, for the world to repent and yet, in our generation, the church is in need of repenting as much as the world?!

It happens when, slowly, but surely, the reality of a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ can be relegated to the back stage and religion will take the spotlight.

Now, there is such a thing as good religion. We sing the song, “Give me that old time religion”. When I sing that, I think of the religion that was, in fact, spiritual reality. It was centered on Christ; it lifted high the cross of Jesus Christ and warned of sin and judgment.

James wrote about pure religion, that is undefiled, as acts of service that reach out to the widow and the orphan. These were individuals, in James’ day, who had no money to pay for what they received and could do nothing in return.

If pure religion is related to acts of love, impure religion is related to acts of liturgy and ceremony. False religion caters to those who can pay for services. If pure religion makes an internal difference in the heart of a person, then false religion cares only about externals and the reputation of a person.

False religion can be a “mega” church or a best selling book, while true religion may very well be a country chapel and dusty overlooked volumes of truth. False religion has always been the enemy of

the gospel. Around the world today, the obstacles to the gospel are not demonic attacks or political obstructions, the enemy to the gospel is organized religion.

The problem of religion is not new to us. Turn in your Bible to the gospel of Luke, chapter 11. Look at verses 37 through 46.

Now when He had spoken, a Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him; and He went in, and reclined at the table.

And when the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed before the meal.

But the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness.

You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also?

But give that which is within as charity, and then all things are clean for you.

But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.

Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the front seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places.

Woe to you! For you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it.”

And one of the lawyers said to Him in reply, “Teacher, when You say this, You insult us too.”

But He said, “Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers.”

In verse 44, the Lord gave a scathing analogy to the religious professionals of His day. Look again,

. . . For you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it.

Now, this points us back to the Passover time when they would whitewash all of the tombstones. It

was kind of a “clean up Jerusalem” act that was to beautify everything in preparation for the Passover – when millions of Jews would flock to the city.

Part of the law required no contact with the dead and it was expanded to refer to contact with graves. The problem, though, was that sometimes people would not be aware because a stone was not as observable as it should be. A person would walk on it and become ceremonially defiled and unclean.

With all the people coming to Jerusalem, part of their custom, before Passover, was to whitewash all the headstones so they would stand out. In order to eliminate, as much as possible, the accidental defilement of an Israelite, all the headstones would be painted white so no one would accidentally walk across a grave.

In Matthew, chapter 23, the Lord said even more specifically to the “religionists” of His day, in verses 27 through 28 and 33,

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. . . . You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?

So Jesus says, “You Pharisees are like whitewashed tombstones. You stand out and draw attention to yourselves; you look good and clean, but you do not represent vitality, you represent decay. And people who look up to you and follow you don’t realize that, by being under your influence, by walking around with you, by rubbing shoulders with you, they are touching death, and becoming truly defiled.”

Ladies and gentlemen, the system of religion still is today, I believe, the greatest, most effective, most popular, most alluring path along the broad road that leads to hell. Find organized religion anywhere in the world, and you will more than likely find the smell of death and decay.

Religion has always and will always be in the business of whitewashing; it changes nothing on the inside, it merely focuses on the outside.

I remember, a few years ago, in Vienna, Austria, visiting St. Stephen’s cathedral. It is a magnificent cathedral that has been standing since the middle ages. Marsha and I were spending time with a church

couple, who had only recently left to serve the Lord as missionaries in the Ukraine. The four of us had gone into the cathedral to stare at its immensity and grandeur.

We noticed a sign, announcing a tour, near a set of stairs that led down underneath the floor. We were intrigued and decided to stay for the tour.

When the tour began, I was dumbfounded to realize that we were seeing things that went back to the time of Martin Luther, the monk who attempted to reform the Catholic church. In one room, were the coffins of former archbishops of Austria. The dates of their tenure were written on their ancient caskets. We found the casket of the archbishop who lived in the 1550’s and wondered aloud what he had said of his contemporary, the condemned reformer, Martin Luther.

Then, we went deeper still, underneath the cathedral, into dimly lit rooms chiseled out of solid rock. We gaped at huge, cavernous rooms filled, from floor to 30 foot high ceilings, with human bones. I could not believe we were being allowed to see this. The tour guide said, “Many of these bones were polished and stacked by enemies of the church. Most of these deceased remains were from the black plague.”

I wondered how many Christians had spent their last years cleaning and stacking bones.

When the tour was over, I stayed behind and cornered the guide, who was a college student from Vienna. I asked him, “Why did the church let people see that the ground underneath this cathedral is literally a grave yard?”

He said casually, “Oh, St. Stephens is in need of repairs and the tour proceeds are going to help refurbish the appearance of the cathedral.”

I thought, “How ironic.”

This medieval church was built and is, even now, maintained, as it were, on dead men’s bones.

That is the way of religion. Religion has a way of building monuments to hide its misery. Its business is whitewashing sinners – making them look and feel better about themselves.

It will say nothing of sin and depravity – just put on a couple of coats of Sunday-go-to-meeting paint and that will do just fine. It will say nothing of symptoms of spiritual life, such as hunger and thirst for righteousness or repentance and a commitment to moral purity. It will say nothing of the demands of discipleship and the reformation of life, lips, heart, and desires.

Just give me a hymn and a verse and a blessing and that will do for me. Just give me a little whitewashing here and there, where I have tarnished my coat of paint.

The church today accommodates it. Church growth experts and church growth specialists are in great demand to be consultants to the church on how to invest in everything from telemarketing strategies to entertainment schedules; how not to offend the unbeliever; and how to market the church to the unsaved.

One author wrote,

Plainly declaring the truth of God's Word is regarded today as unsophisticated, offensive and utterly ineffective. We're now told we can get better results by first amusing people or giving them success tips and pop-psychology, thus wooing them into the fold. Once they feel comfortable, they'll be ready to receive biblical truth in small, diluted doses.

One well know "mega" church pastor made a new year's resolution that revealed his deception by current trends when he wrote,

I will waste less time with long sermons and spend much more time preparing short ones. People, I've discovered, will forgive even poor theology as long as they get out before noon.

Ladies and gentlemen, I submit to you that many a church, within mainline denominations, have steeples stretching toward heaven, only to hide the fact that their doctrine is leading men to hell. It may have overflowing parking lots and pews, but death, decay, and deception are its charter members. I am so filled with indignation toward the enemy of the gospel – and the enemy of the gospel truth is not the world, it is religion.

Jesus Christ said to the religionists of His day, what we can still say today, both to organized religion and individual men and women, "You might say you have religion; you might look spiritually alive; you might do the works of religiously minded people, but you are self-righteous, self-satisfied, self-confident, and self-deceived and are following the road that leads to death. You are involved in religion, but you are on the road to hell. You are religious, but you are not redeemed."

Well, that is enough of an introduction. I have said all of this to prepare you for the audience to whom Paul now turns his attention.

In his letter to the people living in Rome, Italy, the place that, to this day, represents, to millions of people, true religion, with all of its ceremony and ritual and form. To this same city, Paul addressed a religious group of people, who also represented millions of others, who claimed to have true religion with all its ceremony, ritual, and form.

Paul will shock, disturb, and upset them and, I am sure in his prayers, hopefully reveal them to themselves and, by the grace of Yahweh, convert them to *the way, the truth and the life*, found only by faith in the work of Jesus Christ alone.

Around ten or eleven centuries ago, the church divided the Bible into chapters and verses. Most of the time, they hit the nail on the head, but other times, they missed the point. I believe Romans, chapter 2, verse 17, is one of the places where a new chapter should begin. I say that because Paul now begins to address his third audience.

You may remember that in Romans, chapter 1, he has addressed the immoral man; in chapter 2, he addresses the moral man and now, he shifts again and begins to address the religious man. From verse 17 of chapter 2 through the beginning portion of chapter 3, Paul condemns the religious man as being equally as lost and in danger of the judgment of God as the immoral unbeliever of chapter 1 and the moral unbeliever in chapter 2.

Paul now begins to address the Jew, who was the epitome of religious confidence. Face it, if anybody had every reason to feel secure in their standing before God, the faithful Jew did, right? If anybody was going to get into heaven, and not have to worry so much about the judgment of God, it would be the faithful Jew.

Remember that Paul was a Jew himself. In fact, he used to be a Pharisee – one of those religious men Christ condemned earlier. Paul knows how they think; he knows where they were placing their confidence, and he begins, under the brilliant inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to peel away their defenses.

Six Reasons Why Faithful Jews Felt Eternal Safe Before God

There were six reasons why faithful Jews felt eternally safe before God.

Because of his special name

1. The first reason the Jew felt safe was because of his special name. Paul gives that reason in chapter 2, verse 17a.

But if you bear the name “Jew” . . .

We know, from biblical history, that the Hebrew was first called a “Jew” in the book of II Kings. This is where we read the name, “Judeans,” or Jews. The name comes from the tribal name of Judah. Judah, and its shorter derivative, Jew, means “one who is praised”.

By the time of Christ, they had turned their privilege into pride. The rabbis taught statements such as these, “God loves Israel alone of all the nations of the earth. . . . God will judge the Gentiles with one standard and the Jews with another. . . . All Israelites will have a part in the world to come. . . . Abraham sits beside the gates of hell and does not permit any wicked Israelite to go through.”

Paul will say, in effect, “You can’t skip the judgment of God just because you bear the name, Jew.”

I cannot imagine the horrifying realization of so many who stand before the Lord on that judgment day, according to Matthew, chapter 7, and say, “But we’re Christians! We did everything in Your name, Jesus.”

Jesus, the Judge, will answer, “But, you did not know me and I did not know you.”

Millions today, in America, are, I believe, Christian in name only. It sounds better than atheist, or pagan, or unbeliever – “Sure! I’m a Christian!”

Because of his dedication to the Law

2. Secondly, the faithful Jew felt safe because of his dedication to the Law. Paul writes, in verse 17,

But . . . you bear the name “Jew,” and rely upon the Law . . .

The word “rely,” in this verse, could be translated, “to rest upon, to lean upon, to depend on”.

The Jew had great pride in the fact that they had been given the Law and they had given themselves to the Law.

Their forefathers had received the Law from Yahweh. They had the Torah – the books of Moses. The orthodox Jew would memorize most of the Torah. Every Pharisee, in Paul’s day, would have memorized huge sections of the Law and the prophets.

How many today would say, “I know God is going to let me get into heaven because I have a copy of the Bible. I’ve memorized passages from its pages. I love my Bible; I lean upon my Bible; I rest in and depend upon my Bible.”

You are no more dedicated to your Bible than the Jew was to his Torah. And Paul is telling the Jew that it was not enough!

Because of his respect for God

3. Thirdly, the faithful Jew not only felt safe because of his special name and his dedication to the Law, but because of his proud respect for God. Paul wrote, in verse 17b,

. . . and [you] boast in God.

A faithful Jew would never breath anything disrespectful of God. In fact, they never wrote the full name Yahweh – they would only write the Hebrew consonants. And, they only wrote that after stopping their copying of the scriptures, going and washing their hands, coming back and picking up a brand new quill, and then, writing the consonants. Afterwards, they would throw away the pen, so that it would never be used to write anything other than the consonants of the name of their high and holy God.

They had incredible respect and pride in their God – they were not ashamed of Him. They boasted that He was their God and they were His people!

Are you proud to be associated with Him? Do you bow your head to pray in a public place before a meal, or are you embarrassed? Do you acknowledge on Monday that you were in church on Sunday? Are you ashamed to own Him as your God? Do you speak His name to others?

If the answer is, “No,” do you think you will get into heaven, when these Jews, who wore Him like a banner of pride, will not get in either? How will you ever hope to get in?!

Because of his special knowledge

4. Fourthly, the faithful Jew felt eternally safe because of his special knowledge. Paul says, in verse 17 and then, verse 18a,

. . . you bear the name “Jew,” and rely upon the Law, and boast in God, and know His will . . .

The word for “will” refers to the revealed will of God through the scriptures. Israel knew they had a

covenant with God. They knew the roots of their heritage and what God intended for them to become – a blessing to all the nations of the world. They knew all about God’s will for them.

Perhaps you say, “I know God has a plan for my life too. I know His will for me according to the Bible.”

I would say, “There is a vast difference between knowing His will and doing His will.”

The apostle Paul wrote, in I Thessalonians, chapter 4, verse 3,

For this is the will of God, . . . that you abstain from sexual immorality

“Sexual immorality,” or “fornication” in some translations, is sexual relations outside of the marital bond. Those in the church call themselves Christian and yet, engage in the same level of fornication and adultery as those outside the church. In many cases, divorce has become the justification for serial adultery, while, at the same time, they say, “We are confident of heaven!”

Paul wrote in another epistle to the Ephesians, in chapter 5, verse 3,

. . . do not let . . . any impurity or greed even be named among you . . .

Is anybody here given to greed?

He writes, in chapter 5, verse 4,

and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, . . . but rather giving of thanks.

Is anybody here disobeying the will of God by not being thankful; by complaining instead?!

These are just a few passages that clearly tell us what the will of God is. Now let me ask you, “Does knowing the will of God give you a sense of security, or a greater sense of fear?”

It should give you a greater sense of fear! Why? Because the more you know about the will of God, the more you realize you have disobeyed it! The more you learn about the holy standard of God for your life, the more you realize how unholy you are and how much of God’s judgment you truly deserve.

Do you see how foolish it is to say, “I’m safe because I know God’s standard for my life”?

The more you recognize His standard for holy living, the more you realize how unholy you are. That is all the revelation of the Law can do for you. The revelation of His standards for living can only

condemn. The Law cannot redeem you – it can only reveal what a lawbreaker you are.

The faithful Jew felt safe because of his name, his dedication to the Law, his proud respect for God, and his special knowledge of God’s will.

Because of his keen insight

5. Now, fifthly, the faithful Jew felt safe because of his keen insight. Verse 18 goes on to report,

. . . [you] approve the things that are essential . . .

The word “approve,” or “dokimazo” in the Greek, means “to examine or to approve after putting to the test”.

The Jews prided themselves in testing everything. They examined philosophy and world views and determined those things that were truly essential for life.

They were sharp thinkers. They had spent generations dissecting and debating the Law. They had commentaries on commentaries; teachers upon teachers; regulations upon regulations that they felt were essential to pleasing God.

But they had missed the essential thing, as Paul will eventually point out, they had failed to bring true glory to God.

Because of his biblical education

6. The final thing the faithful Jew had that gave him his misguided, false sense of safety was his biblical education. Paul says this, in verse 18b,

. . . being instructed out of the Law

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a danger of thinking that you are alright before God, simply because you possess the truth.

The average person in church could imagine he is safe because he knows so much more about the Bible than the average man on the street. He has a half dozen Bibles in his home – in three or four different versions. The average Christian can find a verse for everything.

As one man said, “The trouble is, the average Christian is like a bad photograph, overexposed to the light and underdeveloped.”

The Jew said, as Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verses 7 through 9, says, “I know the Law – I’ve received an

education in it, since childhood. My parents taught it to me when we sat down in the house and when we walked by the way and when we lay down at night and when we rose up in the morning. We bound them as signs on our hands and placards on our foreheads. We wrote them on the doorposts of our homes and on our gates.”

“We’ve got a name; we’ve got the Law; we follow the true God; we have insight and knowledge and a thoroughly biblical education.”

And God said, in effect, “And you happen to be unknown to Me and lost and on that broad path that leads straight to hell!”

Application:

A Warning to Religious People Today

Let me move on and give three brief statements of application and warning.

It is possible:

It is possible:

1. for religious exercises to touch the mind and emotion of man without ever changing the heart of man,
2. for a person to be emotionally moved by religion without ever being spiritually awakened by the Redeemer, and
3. to be religious, but not redeemed.

A letter written to a Melbourne, Australia daily newspaper expressed this with uninhibited arrogance. A man wrote to the editor, and it was published in the newspaper,

After hearing an evangelist preach on the radio, viewing him on television, and reading reports and letters concerning his mission, I am sick of the type of religion that insists my soul, and everyone else’s, needs saving. I have never felt that I was lost, nor do I feel like I wallow in sin, although this preaching insists that I do. Give me a practical religion that teaches gentleness and tolerance, that acknowledges no barrier of doctrine, that teaches of goodness and not sin.

Note his closing words,

If, in order to save my soul, I must accept such a religion as I have recently heard, I prefer to remain damned forever.

He may very well get his wish.

What do you want my friend? What kind of religion makes you comfortable? Do you understand now why you would rather have another coat of whitewash applied to your heart than admit your sin and guilt? But today, you will say, “Lord, strip off all the whitewash – all the coats of religious go-to-meeting-paint that I’ve put on over the years. Take it all off. I stand exposed and guilty before You, my sin ever before me and my need for cleansing so apparent. Cleanse me by Your shed blood, wash me and my heart will be whiter than snow.

Maybe today, you will have a willingness to face the uncomfortable truth you have heard and will recognize that you, and these faithful Jews that Paul wrote to centuries ago, actually have a lot in common.

I invite you to set aside these things that give them, and you, false security and false hope and admit your utter need for Jesus Christ. Today, while there is still time, repent of your sinful wretchedness and place your life in His holy, redeeming hands.

Sing,

*Give me that old time religion,
Give me that old time religion,
Give me that old time religion,
It’s good enough for me.*

*It was good for Paul and Silas,
It was good for Paul and Silas,
It was good for Paul and Silas,
It’s good enough for me.*

*It will take us all to heaven,
It will take us all to heaven,
It will take us all to heaven,
It’s good enough for me.*

*So give me that old time religion,
Give me that old time religion,
Give me that old time religion,
It’s good enough for me.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/7/2001 by Stephen Davey.

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