



“You mean I’m NOT

NUTS?”

BY WAYNE JACOBSEN

**N**o statement has been spoken to me more often by such a wide variety of people than this one. Sometimes it’s a question. Sometimes it’s spoken with great joy, other times with quiet relief. I’ve heard these words in virtually every state of the union, and from countries half way around the world.

Every time I hear these words, I am blessed to be there. Because for a long time, I wondered if I was nuts, too.

I had hungers in my heart toward God that life in today’s Christianity never satisfied. In fact I would say most church activity did more to negate my hunger than satisfy it.

There were too many substitutes for the living God and too many people missing out on the sheer joy and freedom of knowing him and depending totally on him. Whenever I tried to talk about it, people accused me of being nuts.

Well, that’s not exactly the word they used. They said stuff like:

- “You’re too idealistic. Can’t you just accept it the way it is?!”
- “If that’s what God wanted to do in the church today, don’t you think he would speak to our leaders about it?”
- “The only reason you’re not

happy is because you’re too independent and unsubmitted.”

But every time I read the Word and took a look at church life, I couldn’t relate the two. The promises far outweighed the reality. It seemed to me that only a few people were really discovering what life in Jesus was all about. The rest were just cogs in the machinery of religious institutions.

For the most part these were good people, mind you. They were diligent in their commitments and responsibilities, believing they were fulfilling God’s purpose by doing so. But they never seemed to engage a joyful, transforming relationship with a loving Father.

I know that sounds judgmental. I don’t mean it to be. I’ve talked with many of them—always working hard, but always feeling so empty. Like me, they wondered why they didn’t experience the depth of spiritual life they saw in the Word. They were grieved by the focus they saw on buildings, programs, money and superstar leaders—and the hurt caused by the pursuit of those things.

A little over a decade ago I wrote some of those observations in a book called *The Naked Church*. That’s when the letters and phone calls started. It seems that I was not the only one afraid they were nuts. I discovered lots of other believers whose hunger for God left them

disillusioned with the priorities of our religious systems. They, too, had experienced persistent questioning of their sanity.

Many of these had served in leadership positions in a variety of denominations. Many had been pushed aside with accusations of being arrogant or rebellious when they started asking the questions that made others uncomfortable.

When they talked to me, they didn’t say things like, “Wayne, you opened my eyes to things I never considered before.” Instead, they said, “Wayne, you put into words what I have felt for so long, but could never express.” That someone else was asking the same questions and sharing the same hungers made them feel like maybe they weren’t nuts after all.

Unless, of course, we’re all nuts. Which in all fairness might be worth considering. Sometimes all I have to say is, “I think God is leading you. Feel free to follow him and not worry what others think.” Sometimes I’m the only voice saying that to them.

### Relationship, Not Religion

“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

These are the words Jesus prayed in the Garden, shortly before his crucifixion. He didn’t die to give

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birth to another religion, but to engage people in a relationship with him and his Father.

It has always bothered me that institutional Christianity doesn't look any different to the world than any of the other religions. We who allegedly walk with the living God have the same traditions, obligations, shrines, sacrifices and ceremonies that they have. Oh, we call them by different names and tell them we are different. But it certainly doesn't look that way to outsiders.

Christianity is not another religion. It is not a code of ethics. It is not participation in ceremonies or signing some creed.

Christianity is a relationship to the risen Christ, his Father and the Holy Spirit. It is intended to be a relationship more real, more loving, more transforming than any other we've ever known in this life.

He wants to be at our side when we awaken in the morning and walk with us through every step of our day. He wants to be the shoulder we cry on when we hurt, the resource we count on every moment and the ever-present guide that teaches us how to walk away from the bondage of self and embrace life as the Father knows it to be. Then we can be like him in the world, loving others as we have been loved.

It is called *relational Christianity*, because it is only caught up in loving him and loving others (see Matthew 22:36-39). *Period*. That's not only the way we'll treat other believers, but unbelievers around us, as well. That's all he asked us to do, and it is what religion has most failed at for over 2,000 years.

### **Freedom, Not Conformity**

That kind of relationship, however, doesn't grow where people are burdened down with religious obligations and duties. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

Paul encouraged the church at Galatia to seek that freedom,

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even though he warned them not to use it as an excuse to run off and appease the flesh. But even when people did, he didn't revoke the freedom of those who were growing to know the Father. His letters defined that freedom even as they warned that false leaders would come to take that freedom away. He knew believers would only grow in an environment of freedom:

- *To live in the love of an awesome Father, free to respond to him as he leads you, even if that means you make mistakes now and then.*

- *To walk without guilt or condemnation. Recognize that transformation is a life-long process that Jesus works in us by our security in his love, not something we do for him out of fear.*

- *To be real. To feel what you feel; to ask what you need to ask, to be wrong where you are wrong, and to extend that same freedom to others.*

- *To be liberated from accountability to human leaders who seek to take the place of Jesus in the church by telling others what they think he would have them do.*

- *To love other brothers and sisters freely, serving them the way Jesus leads you and not trying to conform to their expectations of what a 'good Christian' should do for them.*

- *To live free of bitterness and hurt, even where religious institutions (and those who run them) have failed*

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*you. We've all got plenty wrong with us, so there can be no end to the generosity we can extend others in their weakness.*

Those who do not understand this freedom have lost touch with the Head and deny the power of the Cross. When that happens, people end up lording over others, seeking to conform them to their standard of Christian behavior. Enduring transformation, however, can never come that way. It can only spring from within as the fruit of our friendship with Jesus.

### **Inside Out, Not Outside In**

Jesus didn't mince words: "Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean" (Matthew 23:26).

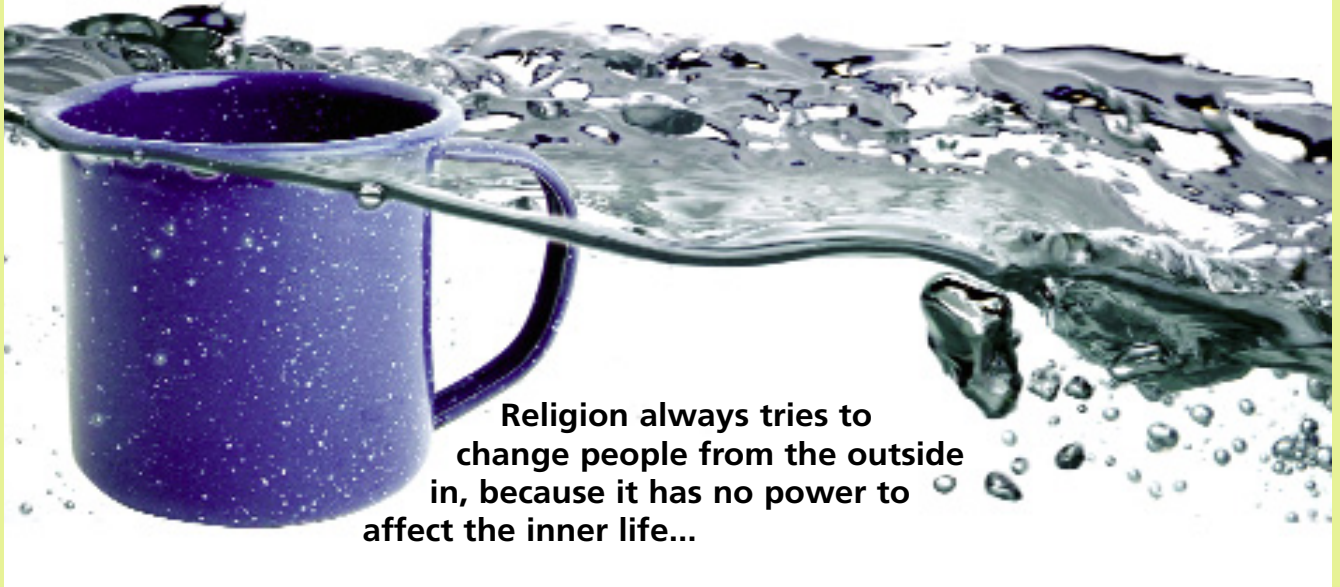
Religion always tries to change people from the outside in, because it has no power to affect the inner life. Religion finds its reason for being in sustaining traditions and ceremonies, meeting people's needs and demanding behavioral and philosophical conformity. We talk alike, act alike, think alike! We must be okay!

And because we've learned to be "nice" on the outside, we think that God's work is done. The only problem is that nothing has changed on the inside. We forget that the same system that made Paul "a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" was the same system that made him the "chief of sinners." When he fixed up the outside, he only drove the sin deeper inside.

What he saw on the inside was frightful. Even though outwardly perfect by his standard, by his own words he was a "blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" (1 Timothy 1:13). It's amazing what horrors external righteousness can produce where it really counts.

In Christ, Paul found motivation that absolutely trans-

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formed him. He came face to face with a love so powerful that Jesus' love for him was the only motivation he needed. He didn't need the fear of hell. He didn't need accountability to men. *He only needed to know how much he was loved.* There Paul could die to everything he aspired to for himself, and he

bothered by the fact that Jesus never once gathered his people in a service. He never "led worship" as far as we know. He never set up a Sunday School. He never launched into a 10-week study of anything beginning at 10:00 on Saturday or Sunday morning. Yet today, we cannot imagine Christianity with-

others and with the world. There's nothing wrong with that either. In fact, I think it's a lot closer to what Jesus modeled for his disciples than many of us would care to admit.

*Relational Christianity* is so simply summed up, it seems almost trite to say it: "Love him with everything you are, and love others the same way you have been loved by him."

Jesus didn't leave his disciples with a system to mass-produce throughout the world. He gave them the Spirit, so that we might depend on him. That is true freedom and the source of limitless joy that can conquer any circumstance life hurls at us.

Learn that, and you'll discover the church as God sees it—not our cloistered groups meeting in a specific building under a creed some weekend morning. You will see his body scattered throughout your community and the whole world. He knows those who are his. He is able to be the Shepherd and hold them in his care. He is able to link them for fellowship and ministry in ways we never dreamed. □

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### **So, Should We Be Against the System?**

If by "system" we mean Christians gathering together (even if it is the same time every week) for prayer, worship and teaching—absolutely not! In fact, I go to places like that quite frequently.

But if by "system" we mean the bondage of religious conformity, where people become passive believers in the machinery of a system that wants to use them to feed itself—then yes!

It amazes me that no one is even

out those things and judge harshly those who feel like those things don't benefit them.

Hear me clearly here. If you are involved in such a gathering that truly stimulates you to greater depths of relationship with God—by all means enjoy it! Wonderful things can and do happen when believers get together like that.

But if you find that environment too passive, or even hurtful because of what's being taught or how people are treated, *feel free not to go*, too! There are many people today who deeply love God and are finding the joy of gathering in much more informal settings, learning as families to share the life of Jesus together in their homes. They don't go to church, but are learning to live as the church by sharing Jesus' life with