

True Christianity

the

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RELIGION

BY
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Religion is any program that promises heaven, nirvana, enlightenment, peace, happiness and the like. It begins with the observation that you don't have these things, and the assumption that you can't get these things unless you ____ [fill in the blank].

Religions, all of them, including the Christian religion (not to be confused with knowing and trusting Jesus), put it all back on you. You have to please the gods by doing something to fix things up with them.

The Christian religion, however, has competing teams. Most of those teams want to recruit you, usually by trying to persuade you that their method is the one that works in terms of fixing you up with "God." Some go further by discrediting the other teams. After all, there can only be one right religion. Right? Then it follows that within the Christian religion there can only be one right practice.

wrong, if the Jesus of Scripture is to be believed. The Judaism of Jesus' day was, in his estimation, a hellish, legalistic, burdensome, condemning, cruel religious program. Its leaders, he said, had become children of the devil and a brood of vipers. He railed against them.

"It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers'" (Matthew 21:13).

"Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" (John 2:16).

Religion and religious leaders outraged Jesus. And the sacrificial system in the temple in Jerusalem, as Jesus saw it, had become a religious racket. Today's religions are no different.

Why Does Religion Appeal to People in the First Place?

Billions of people, including you

and me if we are honest, are snookered by too-good-to-be-true religious spiels of one flavor or another. We human beings seem to be tailor-made suckers for it! And I think I know why.

It's about your conscience. No, Sigmund Freud didn't make that word up and stick it in our vocabularies. The word is in the Bible 30 times. The New Testament Greek word is *suneidesis*, and it refers to



Keeping the gods on your side:

RELIGIONS, ALL OF THEM... PUT IT ALL BACK ON YOU. YOU HAVE TO PLEASE THE GODS BY DOING SOMETHING TO FIX THINGS UP WITH THEM.

that "thing" inside of you that distinguishes what is good from what is evil. In English, that's your conscience.

It is said that you should let your conscience be your guide, but the Bible disagrees. It's not that your conscience isn't a handy thing to

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have sometimes, but it can be wrong, warns Scripture. It speaks of a weak conscience, a defiled conscience and even an evil conscience.

"...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a *guilty conscience*..." (Hebrews 10:22, emphasis added).

Wow! With a warning like that, it seems wise to use your conscience as a reference, not your guide.

Your conscience can condemn you when no one else does, including God.

Religion Relies on Your Conscience

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Hebrews 8:12).

If your sins are forgiven and forgotten as far as the Lord is concerned, then who do you think might be condemning you now?

Why do you feel condemned all the time? Your conscience is your interior judge that con-

stricts you and convicts you and contradicts God's mercy to you.

Human conscience is a complete moral product of values composed of attitudes implanted in our minds by family, society, and last but certainly not least, religion.

Many of our beliefs, opinions and prejudices that cause guilt are religiously produced. Religion can use conscience as an ally in producing guilt and shame.

Religion relies on your conscience. There is no religion without it. Religion counts on the undeniable fact that your conscience is both a spiritual hypochondriac and a hanging judge.

Christless religion produces internal self-uncertainty and self-condemnation, thereby making its followers an easy mark for religious programming, even doomsday cults. Religion condemns its captives for failing to do good and avoid evil.

There is a counterfeit gospel out there, omnipresent in our culture.



SO WHAT CAN WE DO? ...WE WANT THE PAIN TO GO AWAY, AND WE WANT TO BELIEVE THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO MAKE THAT HAPPEN, SOMEHOW, SOMEWAY. BUT HOW?

That is why we are susceptible to religion. We're hurting, broken, confused, angry, vulnerable creatures who mess up. But we also, deep inside, want to be happy and free. So what can we do?

We can try to be so good that our consciences will shut up. Or we can try to be so bad that our consciences will give up. Either way, we want the pain to go away, and we want to believe that it is possible to make that happen, somehow, someday. But how?

Religion's Big Fix

Religion promises a plan to fix everything. It has programs. But what too few realize is that religion uses our own consciences against us. With the encouragement of today's scribes and Pharisees of Christian media, our weakness can be exploited.

The Christian religion, especially in modern evangelical circles, makes "God" in its own image. He's a legal "God"—a judge who is obsessed with good and evil, right and wrong—and we stand before this judge condemned.

Just look at a few book titles from some major televangelists today, even the subtle ones. They give you a program. They tell you how to be the best you can be, how to know that you're saved, how to unlock the storehouse of heaven, how to get your miracle, how to take your spirituality to the next level, and on and on.

The legal god of Christless religion requires that you work yourself out of this mess, or I should say *perceived mess*. There are do-gooder lists to please "God." There are steps to salva-

tion, and there are keys to prosperity. Don't laugh. These programs are selling!

The Evangelical Hamster Wheel:

The bad news is that you are separated from "God" because you are a sinner. You've displeased "God," and you know it. "God" can't come near you and your dirty sins, and he has no alternative but to punish you forever. (That's the setup for the evangelical hamster wheel.)

But, "God" doesn't really want to punish you, though he will if you are unresponsive to his offer. There is a tiny loophole in the law. You



CHRISTLESS RELIGION PRODUCES INTERNAL SELF-UNCERTAINTY AND SELF-CONDEMNATION, MAKING ITS FOLLOWERS EASY MARKS FOR RELIGIOUS PROGRAMMING, EVEN DOOMSDAY CULTS.

have a chance to "get saved" from "God's" punishment. It involves a procedure:

1. The Sinner's Prayer: To become a Christian, you must confess that you're a sinner, and that you deserve punishment, and you must repent of every evil thing you've done, and state that you believe Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead, and promise from this moment to change and do good, and ask Jesus to come into your heart and save you from the punishment of "God."

2. Church Attendance and Contribution: A *real* Christian, a person who has sincerely prayed the sinner's prayer, joins and at-



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tends regularly and gives money to a church. That's walking the Christian walk. That's the way to "stay saved" and thereby avoid "backsliding."

3. Daily Prayer and Bible Reading: A *real* Christian has a daily discipline, preferably very early in the morning, of prayer time and Bible reading. At least thirty minutes.

4. Obey the Rules: A *real* Christian doesn't smoke, drink, do drugs, have sex outside of marriage, gamble or cuss. He obeys all of the Ten Commandments. And he listens only to Christian music.

What if you follow these steps, but you slip up? No worries! There are thousands of books and videos showing what you did wrong and how to fix it.

- Maybe you aren't running hard enough.
- Maybe distractions, family

curse or addictions are causing you to fall off.

- Maybe it's your attitude.
- Maybe it's your lack of communication skills.
- Maybe you don't know your Bible well enough.
- Maybe you weren't as sincere as you should have been when you prayed **The Sinner's Prayer**.

Whatever your failure, there is a product to fix it. *That's what religion is for.* Religion is there to help you get and keep things fixed up with God in order to avoid his punishment.

Show Us the Father and That Will Be Enough

"Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us.' Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'" (John 14:8-9).

We have Philip's disease. We think of Jesus and the Father as

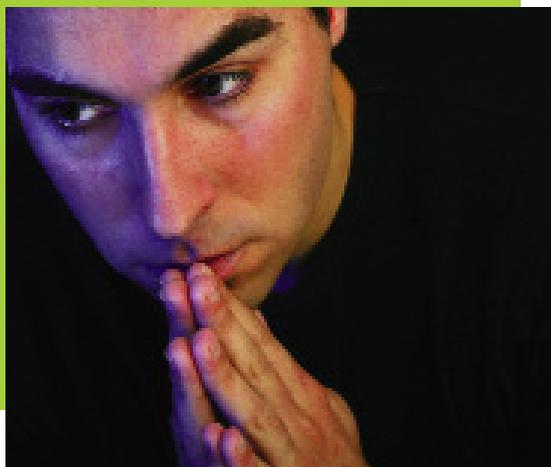
BUT WHAT ABOUT THE GUILT AND SHAME IMPLANTED IN MY CONSCIENCE BY RELIGION? IT STILL KNOWS I'M NOT GOOD ENOUGH. IT STILL KNOWS TOO WELL THAT I'M A SINNER, THAT I DON'T DO THE RIGHT THING....





THAT'S WHERE TRUST COMES IN. YOU CAN STOP ALL THE RELIGIOUS STRIVING, AND YOU CAN REST IN THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE THAT GOD IN JESUS HAS REACHED YOU, RECONCILED YOU, SAVED YOU FROM SIN AND DEATH, AND RAISED YOU. OR YOU CAN PREFER TO BELIEVE THAT YOUR CONDEMNING CONSCIENCE IS RIGHT—THAT YOU ARE ON DEATH ROW, BEGGING FOR A DEAL.

IS IT OUR DESIRE TO REACH A DISTANT GOD? IN JESUS, GOD REACHED US. IS IT OUR DESIRE TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT BETWEEN US AND GOD? IN JESUS, WE ARE RECONCILED TO GOD MAKING EVERYTHING RIGHT... NO RELIGIOUS FERVOR NECESSARY ON OUR PART. JESUS DID IT ALL.



Here's why: Is it our desire to reach a distant God? In Jesus, God reached us. Is it our desire to make things right between us and God? In Jesus, we are reconciled to God making everything right. Is it our desire to escape the prison of sin and death? In Jesus, sin and death are defeated. This is the message of the Bible. No religious fervor necessary on our part. Jesus did it all.

But what about the guilt and shame implanted in my conscience by religion? It still knows I'm not good enough.

It knows too well that I'm a sinner, that I don't do the right thing, that I often do the evil thing, that I hide these truths about myself and that I pose—propping up my pretend-self. It may be true that Jesus has fixed everything up and religion is dead, but what if I don't *feel* that way?

That's where trust comes in. You can stop all the religious striving, and you can rest in the biblical message that God in Jesus

being different. We see God like religion—obsessed with good and evil, legalistic, judging and condemning.

But we see Jesus as more user-friendly! He speaks of mercy and grace.

Do you know what modern evangelicalism does with this? Rather than correct Philip's error, as Jesus did, it accentuates these false differences: The Father *is* an angry watcher-god who intends to punish you, they say. But, since somehow he still loves you, his loving side sends a sinner-friendly Jesus to the world to offer a stay of execution.

Do you see what this means? It means that "God" sent Jesus to save us from himself! And if that's not crazy enough for you, some modern evangelicals go so far as to say that Jesus came to let "God" vent his anger on him instead of us!

It's so easy to blow this boat out

of the water. Actually, Jesus already did it 2,000 years ago, and we're still not listening because we have Philip's disease. Jesus is just so different than what we expect God to be like. But Jesus came to show us *exactly* what God is like. He and the Father are One, he said. To see him, Jesus assured Philip, is to see the Father.

Jesus' mercy and grace look nothing like religious legalism and condemnation, do they? So, something is wrong. Jesus is the very image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), and in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:19).

The Un-Religion

True Christianity is the un-religion. It's a non-religion. Moreover, real Christianity is the end of all religion. Religious people are dancing with a corpse and don't know it.

has reached you, reconciled you, saved you from sin and death, and raised you. Or you can prefer to believe that your condemning conscience is right—that you are on death row, begging for a deal.

"This is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence. If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything..." (1 John 3:19-20).

The good news is that you don't have to work your way to God the Father to be forgiven. He came to you with unconditional forgiveness in God the Son. So why not just say "thanks," and then ask him to help you make your condemning conscience shut up! □

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