

RELIGION OR RELATIONSHIP



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‘Religion or Relationship’
by
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all Scripture quotations are taken from
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(Any words in brackets are not in the original text
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RELIGION OR RELATIONSHIP

I have looked online to try and find a short definition of ‘religion’ and instead found long descriptions! This one on Encyclopedia.com certainly isn’t short, but it seems to cover everything — “In general, religion can be described as a unified system of thoughts, feelings, and actions that is shared by a group and that gives its members an object (or objects) of devotion, someone or something sacred to believe in, such as a god or a spiritual concept. Religion also involves a code of behavior or personal moral conduct by which individuals may judge the personal and social consequences of their actions and the actions of others.” In short, ‘religion’ is a system of belief with rules to be followed. In contrast, ‘relationship’ is knowing someone and being known by them.

What is Christianity?

This description of the word ‘religion’ doesn’t mention having a relationship with that ‘sacred someone or something’. Yet this is what Christianity is all about. In John 3:16 Jesus says – *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”* And He explains what eternal life is in John 17:3 – *“This is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and him whom you sent, Jesus Christ.”* Christianity is a love relationship between us and God as our Father and Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. No other religion has a love relationship with ‘someone or something sacred’ and it isn’t only about us loving God, but also God loving us. Christianity is unique because it isn’t strictly a religion at all – it’s a relationship.

Many non-believers' think Christianity is a religion with things you must do and things you mustn't do in order to please God and hopefully go to heaven when you die. But this is far from the truth. Christianity is relationship with God through Jesus. It isn't about trying to earn our way up to heaven by following rules and being 'good'; it's about putting our faith in Jesus who loved us so much that He came down to earth to save us while we were still sinners. Romans 5:8 says – *'But God commends his own love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.'*

The Scribes & Pharisees

In Matthew 15:8 Jesus says about the religious leaders of the day, the scribes and Pharisees – *"These people draw near to me with their mouth, and honour me with their lips; but their heart is far from me."* Religion is all about what people do outwardly with no concern for the condition of their heart. Jesus goes on to say in the next verse in Matthew 15:9 – *"And they worship me in vain, teaching as doctrine rules made by men."* They were teaching their own man-made rules, but telling the people they were God's rules. Because their hearts were not right, their outward worship of God achieved nothing. In 1 Samuel 16:7 God says – *"I don't see as man sees. For man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."* Those religious leaders were telling the people that they had to follow man-made traditions with all the accompanying rules and regulations, instead of relating to God in their hearts.

Jesus didn't hold back – He wasn't politically correct. When necessary He said some harsh things and they were almost all directed towards the scribes and Pharisees, not towards the ordinary people. In Matthew 23:27-28 He said to them – *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like*

whitened tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men's bones and of all uncleanness. ²⁸*Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity."* Outwardly they did everything correctly, but inside they were corrupt. This is the definition of a hypocrite and the Bible tells us that God hates hypocrisy. They didn't know God – they just followed outward rules. In Mark 7:13 Jesus said that hypocrisy results in – *"making void the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down."*

This is really important to get hold of. Making tradition the main thing, even when it contradicts God's Word, means we will never know the fulfilment of the promises of God or experience His love and power. The King James Bible calls it, *'making the word of God of none effect.'*

I knew a church which is very different now, but back in the 1980s it had unwritten religious rules. One of them was that a service where you had communion had to be solemn. And another was that you had to have communion on Easter Sunday. Put these together and the Easter service was the opposite of a joyful celebration. There was no rejoicing or victory. Religion stopped people from celebrating the resurrection and their relationship with their risen Saviour on Easter day!

The Law

In the Old Testament God introduced the law to show the people how far short they fell of His perfect standards. It was full of detailed rules which no-one could ever keep perfectly. God wanted them to know that they couldn't earn their way to Him and realise that they needed a Saviour. And Jesus is that Saviour.

He died on the Cross, suffering the punishment for all our sins so we could receive forgiveness. Justice against sin had been done which meant we could now come into relationship with God by putting our faith in Jesus and all He had done and won for us.

Faith and Works

Ephesians 2:8 says – *‘for by grace you have been saved through faith.’* We aren’t saved by being good or obeying rules. We’re saved by the grace of God – His unconditional love for us that sent Jesus to the Cross to die in our place. And we receive that salvation through faith. We then need to believe in what Jesus has done for us and receive it personally. It’s called being born-again. (To read more about this go to the end of this booklet)

Ephesians 2:8-9 goes on to say – *‘for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not of works, that no one would boast.’* ‘Works’ is what the Bible calls the things we do trying to get God to love us and save us. Works are part of religion, not relationship. There couldn’t be any relationship with God if He hadn’t showered us with His grace, but there can’t be any relationship with Him if we don’t receive His grace in faith.

When we are born-again, doing things for God becomes a natural response to His grace. What we do is no longer us trying to earn something with God – now it is us responding to what Jesus has done. Our actions can’t achieve anything of lasting worth unless they are done as an outcome of faith. The important thing to remember is that faith follows grace and our work for God follows faith, not the other way round. Grace —> faith —> work for God.

Born-again and Religious?

It is possible to be born-again but also be religious. True Christians can feel they have to do certain things to please God like going to church, reading the Bible and praying. These are good things which should help us grow in our walk with God, but they will never make Him love us more or earn favour with Him.

In Colossians 2:20-22 Paul said to the believers in Colossae – *‘If you died with Christ from the elemental spirits (the principles) of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to ordinances (rules and regulations),²¹ “Don’t handle, nor taste, nor touch”²² (all of which perish with use), according to the precepts and doctrines of men?’* They had accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, but instead of living in relationship with their Father God they had gone back to living by man-made rules. Paul went on to say in Colossians 2:23 – *‘These things indeed appear like wisdom in self-imposed worship, humility, and severity to the body, but aren’t of any value against the indulgence of the flesh.’* Outwardly everything looked good, but believing you can achieve something with God and defeat your selfish desires by being good isn't of any value at all. It's just being religious. Galatians 5:1 says – *‘Stand firm therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and don’t be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.’*

A Love Relationship

Titus 3:4-5 says – *‘But when the kindness of God our Saviour and his love towards mankind appeared,⁵ not by works of righteousness which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy, he saved us.’* This is the opposite of religion. Our salvation starts in the heart of God – in His love for us which shows itself

in His kindness towards us. And that loving-kindness reveals itself by punishing Jesus for our sins instead of us and giving us mercy. The result is that we can receive our forgiveness and come into a love relationship with God, not because of our goodness, but because of God's loving mercy. All we have to do is believe and receive. John 1:12 says – *'But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God's children, to those who believe in his name.'* God doesn't want us striving and failing and trying again, He wants us to enjoy being His beloved child.

Relationship with God involves love, mercy, grace, truth, abundance, forgiveness, faith, joy, peace and so much more. None of these are part of religion. None of these are works. They are all gifts from God which He wants us to receive and enjoy.

Contrast Religion and Relationship

Religion and relationship can't exist together at the same time. If you are trying to earn God's favour by your own works, then you're not experiencing the love relationship Jesus has won for you. Romans 11:6 says – *'And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.'*

Let's look at some ways in which religion and relationship with God are the opposite of each other:

- Religion is all about rules and regulations
Relationship is all about love
- Religion is us working for God
Relationship is God working with us
- Religion is trying to change ourselves
Relationship thanks God for changing us

- Religion tries to earn God's favour
Relationship says thank You that I have Your favour
- Religion is all about what we should do
Relationship is all about what Jesus has done
- Religion is about doing in order to receive
Relationship is about receiving in order to do
- Religion is man's attempts to approach God.
Relationship is God approaching man through Jesus.
- Religion is about earning your own way to salvation
Relationship is about putting your faith in Jesus who has already earned the way to salvation for you
- Religion is our opinion of God
Relationship is God's revelation to us
- Religion is about striving to obtain God's love
Relationship is about resting in His love

Choose Relationship

You can choose to live your life in religion, trying to earn God's favour, or you can choose to live in the freedom of relationship with your Father God. We can thank God that He has called us into relationship and not religion. It's the difference between freedom and captivity. Choose relationship today. If you're trying to earn God's love or blessing in some way, turn away from that thinking. Don't worry if the thoughts come back – just speak the truth of God's grace out loud. Use the verses in this booklet. They will build you up in the truth that it's all about what Jesus has done and not about what you do.

"Thank you Father God for drawing me into this wonderful love relationship with Yourself through Jesus. Thank You that now I

can do what You want me to do in response to all You've done for me, not out of duty and striving, but out of love. Thank You for the freedom of relationship with You. Hallelujah!"

Being Born-Again

When you acknowledge Jesus as God and decide to follow Him, you make Him your Lord. When you accept His sacrifice on the Cross for you personally, you make Him your Saviour. You are then born-again. God becomes your Father and you His child, and you can start to enjoy your personal relationship with Him.

Romans 10:9 says – *'If you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.'* Say this prayer out loud and believe it in your heart – "Jesus, I declare that You are Lord and that God raised You from the dead to live forevermore. Thank You for dying for me personally. I receive my forgiveness and my salvation now. Thank You Jesus, my Lord and Saviour."

You are now born-again and Jesus has come to live in you. All your sins are forgiven, past, present and future, and you have a new perfect spirit. And after this life is over, you'll live in love, peace and joy with your Father God for ever.

As a child of God, you now have a whole new family of brothers and sisters. Tell a trusted Christian that you are now born-again so they can help you in your new life in Jesus. And you have the Bible to help you understand and experience more of God's love for you and all Jesus has done and won for you. It will help you to live your life in the best possible way – His way.

Life in Jesus

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and all He has done and won for us
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Is Christianity a religion?
And if not, what is it?
Discover the difference between
religion and relationship
and let it take you into the freedom
that Jesus won for you.
It wasn't so you would be bound by rules,
but so you could enjoy being God's beloved child –
part of His family.



Katherine Hilditch has been teaching in local churches for many years. In 2013 she wrote her first booklet and since then has written many more. She created her website to make all the booklets freely available to everyone. They can be read online or printed out. Katherine's threefold purpose is to help people understand more about Jesus and all He has done and won for them, to encourage them to go deeper in their relationship with God and to provide material to help them share their faith with others. To read her story and find all the booklets go to –

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