

# Religion vs. Relationship

by Paul E. Hamilton

I hate religion. Yes, you heard me right. I hate religion. Since I was a little kid growing up in the Baptist church, I hated religion. I never liked people telling me what to do and I sure didn't want rules. Every time I encounter religion, it strikes me in the wrong way. Throughout my life, I have met people who tell me they are Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Methodist, Assemblies of God, and many, many others. Each one of their denominations has the teachings from the Bible and then adds a man-made set of rules, regulations, stipulations, judgments, and then . . . more rules. Now don't get the wrong idea. I like church. I love to get together with people who love God. I love the Bible. It is a source of life and strength for me. I like people of all denominations. I have nothing against people who belong to one. But I hate religion.

I grew up in church. I was probably in church soon after leaving the hospital nursery and I was there almost every single solitary Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night of my childhood. My parents were upright, moral, and loving. I went to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. So when I talk about being in church, I know what I am talking about. But I grew up missing something. It was not my parent's fault. It wasn't the fault of the ministers and teachers that I had, but something was missing in my life. Something that I did not find inside the church. I found it at my lowest part of my life. I found it when I was down and out. I found it out in the world when I was at my wit's end. That is when I found what everything is truly about. That is when I found true relationship. But not just any relationship. I found a relationship with Jesus, my best friend.

Now before you toss this newsletter aside as just another story from a pastor, I want you to understand what I mean when I say relationship. Promise me that you will read this whole article and truly like about what I have to say before you pass judgment. I promise that it will change your life.

Relationship is a very hard thing to define. We all have a lot of relationships in our lives. Parents, children, brothers, sisters, friends, coworkers, the list goes on and on. Each relationship is different. Each one has a deeper level of meaning and commitment to it. Your relationship with your spouse is different than the one you have with your boss. Your relationship with a sibling is different than one with your parents. The

closer the relationship is, the deeper the meaning behind it and its importance to you. When my kids were younger, I used to play a little game with them when I tucked them into bed. I would kiss them on the forehead and then say "I love you". Then they would say, "I love you." Then I would say, "I love you more" and they would reply, "No, I love you more." And we would go back and forth for quite a while. The truth is that they cannot love me as much as I love them. No child truly understands unconditional love until they have children themselves. I would give up my life for them without hesitation. If I had to give up a vital organ and die so that one of them could live, I would. Would I do that for a stranger? Maybe. Would I do that for one of my children? In a heartbeat.

So what does all of this have to do with hating religion? Simple. Religion is a dead, man made organization. Relationships are about interaction, about communication, about love, and vibrant life. Jesus did not come to Earth to establish religion. It was already here when He arrived. The Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees, had rules upon rules upon rules. They called it "The Law". It was so packed full of regulations and requirements that no one could keep it, not even them. What Jesus was about was life.

*"I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly."  
- John 10:10b*

Jesus wanted people to know Him. When He came to a town, He went to where the people were. He would talk to them. He would listen. He would help them right where they were. Look at the Bible has to say about how much Jesus wants to have a relationship with us:

*"God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being."  
- Acts 17:27-28*

*"A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."  
- Proverbs 18:24*

*"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."  
- John 15:12-13*

*“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”*

*- John 3:16-17*

Jesus came so the He may help us know God better. You see God had a plan when He created everything. He made this planet so that He and us might live here together. Walking, talking, sharing, interacting together as God and His children. But like most kids, we rebelled. You know the whole story about Adam and Eve, the forbidden fruit (No one said it was an apple.), and that sneaky snake. Well, that whole act of rebellion made it very hard for God to have a relationship with us. You see, God is perfect and without any faults. In fact, He is so perfect that He cannot have a relationship with someone who is not. That is why Jesus arrived here on Earth. Not so He could be the subject of thousands of books and Hollywood movies, but that He could help us return to our original purpose for being alive . . . relationship with God.

It works like this: Jesus came to this Earth born of a virgin named Mary. Then He lived a life that was without fault or problem. In fact, He fulfilled every stinkin' law that the religious leaders of that day had made up. Then He freely gave Himself over to be put to death for crimes He did not commit. He never argued with his captors. He never cursed them as they drove spikes through his wrists and feet. Then, while He was hanging on that wooden cross, He assumed all the responsibility for every bad and horrible act that anyone had ever done or would do. God, being perfect, turned His face on Jesus while He was hanging there. Then, Jesus died. But wait! That's not the end. After being in a tomb for three days, God gave Jesus the power to come alive and walk out of that tomb. He had done it. Jesus made a way that we could again be in relationship with God by assuming the responsibility for our actions. It was the death and sacrifice of an innocent man that allows us to have a relationship with God as was the original plan. Jesus freely gave His life so that we might live. In fact, that what the Easter Sunday thing is about. Not wearing funny looking bonnets or dipping hard boiled eggs in colored vinegar, but celebrating what Jesus did for us.

“So that's it? Jesus died and now I can go to heaven when I die?”  
Well, that's is not totally true. There is a part that we play in this whole

relationship. But, it is very simple. Yes, Jesus died on the cross and provided us with a way to restore our relationship with God, but if we do not accept this free gift, then we still have a blockage to our relationship with God. It is like gifts under the tree at Christmas. If you don't accept them and open them, you will never get the gift. So we have to ask God to give us the free gift that Jesus gave with His death and then we are back in relationship with God.

Having this restored relationship is what make us a "Christian", or "little christ", which is what the word Christian means. Being part of a religion doesn't make us a Christian any more than going to McDonald's makes us a hamburger. We go to church to be able to know how to improve our relationship with God. We go to church to help other people with their relationship with God. We go to church because we want to, not because we have to.

Here at Hole in the Roof Ministry Center, we want to help you in your relationship with God. We want to encourage you, teach you, and help you grow closer to the One who created you. God wants a relationship with you so much that He allowed His Son to die for you and me. Why not come to one of our meetings and see what this whole relationship thing is all about? We promise not to tie you down and make you memorize all the books of the Bible and write a huge check before we let you leave. You don't have to wear a suit and tie. You don't have to dress like you are going to a funeral. Come as you are. We just want to help you find the joy of knowing God intimately. I promise that you'll have fun at church again.