

From Religion

—— To Truth and Life!

After being raised in the traditions of religion, one day I came to know Truth and Life. After finding the reality of truth and life, all of the symbols of religion lost their meaning. I wish to describe how I came into the reality of truth and life.

My parents raised me in a church that was full of elaborate ceremonies. When I was a teenager, my mother arranged for me to wear a priestly robe and assist our priest. I held a candle stick and stood beside the priest while he ministered before the altar and the people, while he chanted the scriptures from the ancient language.

During those years I understood that everything in the church was a symbol, everything symbolized some truth. The altar room symbolized heaven, the candle light symbolized the light of the world, the bread symbolized the one who is the bread of life, and the oil symbolized the Holy Spirit. Even the items on the priestly robes had symbolic meanings. But the symbols were only symbols of the truth without the reality. The symbols did not satisfy, and I began wondering why we had only symbols of the truth instead of the truth itself?

As a teenager, I began thinking: “I wonder what this church is all about. I’m a member of this church, and I don’t even know what it teaches. It’s not right to belong to an organization if you don’t even know what it teaches,” and, “What if Jesus did die, what does his death on the cross have to do with my going to heaven or not. What’s the connection?” With these questions in my mind, I set out to get some answers.

First, I got a Bible and started reading in the New Testament, the part that tells about Jesus. What I read really amazed me. I found that Jesus lived a plain, simple lifestyle, and mixed with ordinary folks. He did not wear priestly robes or conduct any rituals, ceremonies, or masses! Rather, he went about teaching men the right way to live—to forgive their enemies, and he healed the sick. But what astonished me was that his lifestyle was completely different from any of the Christians that I knew. None of them measured up to his standard, and I didn’t either! He taught people to forgive those who sinned against them and even to love their enemies.

When I looked in the churches, I realized that they had taken that simple and beautiful teaching and made it into a ritual, a ceremony, a

symbol, a program, an organization. I did not find the purity and simplicity of Jesus’ teachings and lifestyle in the church. While I was still a teenager, I began to realize that the church had degenerated or become corrupted. I wanted to tell people that God’s power was real, that we could have its reality, and that we did not have to merely follow the symbols. But being of young age, I rebelled. I decided to have fun while I was young and serve God when I was old.

However, it didn’t happen that way. When I was 18 years old, I had an experience that completely erased any thoughts of wanting to have fun while I was young and serve God later. It happened like this:

On the first of April, when I was in the twelfth grade, I was sitting in the school cafeteria when a friend invited me to a Bible club meeting. At that meeting, I heard some high school kids speaking joyfully about their relationship with Jesus. I had never met Christians who had such a relationship with Jesus, and I was astonished. I realized that these high school students had found the same purity and simplicity of Jesus’ lifestyle that I had found while reading in the Bible about Jesus. I had never heard anything like that in any of the churches that I had been in. In the churches, I had seen only somber-faced people who acted as if they were afraid that God would strike them dead if they cracked a smile.

I felt that I belonged with those kids. I enjoyed just sitting in their midst, enjoying God’s presence. For the next few weeks, I lived for those Bible club meetings. All I had on my mind was going to the next meeting. Those meetings were my life-line during my last two months of high school.

Then on May the first, my last month in high school, on a Sunday afternoon, I was walking down Main Street of my hometown when I saw a group of teenagers having a meeting out on the street; a 16-year-old from the Bible club was preaching. When I stopped to listen, a guy named Pinky came up to me and asked, “Are you saved?”

I answered, “What do you mean, saved from what?” (I had never heard anyone in my parents’ church teach that we are supposed be saved.)

He replied, “Are you a Christian?”

“Yes,” I answered, “I’ve been going to church all of my life.”

Pinky also asked me this question: “Have you ever been to an altar call?” But “altar call” was another religious expression that I had

never heard any in church. I answered Pinky this way: “I don’t know what you mean. The only time we go to an altar at our church, we go to partake of the communion.”

But Pinky didn’t give up. His last question really got me: “If you were to die right now and go to stand before God, would you be ready?”

I couldn’t answer him. I couldn’t say “Yes” because of my decision to have fun while I was young and serve God when I was older. But I was ashamed to say, “No.” Like most people, I sheepishly answered him, “Well, I think so.”

Pinky took time to show me from the Bible that we can know God, we can know we are saved, we can know the forgiveness of sins, and we do not have to live in uncertainty, doubt, or fear of standing before God. Also, he gave me a little tract with some Bible verses on it. I thanked him for the tract and told him I would study it and pray about what he had told me.

That night after studying the Bible verses on the tract, I got down on my knees beside my bed and prayed like this: “Dear God, I always thought I was a Christian, and I have repented of my sins, but that fellow today put some doubt in my mind. I want to be sure. I’m sorry for my sins. Please forgive me.” That’s all I prayed, but a peace came over me. The guilt of sin was lifted off of me and I was not afraid to stand before God. I took the tract, wrote on it, “Now I know I’m ready to meet God,” and sent it back to Pinky. Never again did I want to have fun while I was young and serve God later. I wanted to serve God now, just like Pinky and all of the kids at the Bible club were doing.

Now that first day of May, in my twelfth year of school, was the starting point of my new life. I felt peace and joy. Today, many years later, I am sure that day was my salvation, the day I arose from the symbols and came to know God’s reality.

However, a whole new set of problems also started that day. I no longer wanted to go back to all of the symbols in my parents’ church. I now had the reality, and going back to the symbols was like going from light into darkness. I now knew that there were people in the world who also had the reality and were not tied down with the symbols. I could understand those people, and I could relate with them. I wanted to be with them and to worship God together with them.

But that wasn’t the way my parents looked at it. My mother wanted me to be a priest, but I looked at the priesthood as the epitome

of all of the symbols of religion in the place of the reality. I did not find reality by joining a church or getting baptized or taking part in any ceremonies or religious exercises. I found reality when I did a simple act of submission to God—instead of a priest. But, I should add this: My father considered me a godly man; whereas, my mother considered me a heretic. So, over the next few years, my parents argued a lot; Dad said, “He’s a good boy,” where mom said, “No, he left the true faith, he has gone after those “evangelicals.” I suppose if I had been a drunkard, but went to church every Sunday and took communion, mom would have been satisfied. Such are the deceptions of religion.

After studying these things, I found that they boil down to one point: my parents’ church claims that she has the right to add to the teachings of the Bible (which were given by God) with their own traditions (which were added by men). And the church has many traditions that have been added by men since the Bible was written. I wanted to go back to the original, pure and simple teachings of Jesus before the church added her traditions. The church is so deeply entangled in those traditions that she is unable and unwilling to remove them. Once a priest admitted this to me. I asked him why the church people call the priest ‘father’ when Jesus told us that we are not to call any man on earth ‘father.’ (Matthew 23:9) This is the answer that he gave me: “Well, it is such a deeply ingrained custom that it would be impossible to change it”—thus he confessed to me that they are putting their own teachings above the commandments of Jesus the son of God and the Messiah of Israel whom they claim to be serving.

Jesus ran into the same problem in his day. Several times he contended with religious leaders about certain traditions that they had added to their religion (traditions that were not part of the instructions that God had given to Moses. These he called “the traditions of the elders”). Jesus accused the religious leaders of breaking God’s law in order to keep their own (man-made) traditions (Matthew 15:1-6). I understand that the churches are doing the same thing by getting away from the simplicity of Jesus’ teachings and lifestyle, and substituting their own traditions.

It is quite obvious that Jesus never wore priestly robes, never taught his disciples to wear any, that none of his disciples wore priestly robes, and that he spent his time teaching and healing the people instead of conducting religious ceremonies or rituals.

Once Jesus said to them:

You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.” —Matt. 15:7-9

That, in a nutshell, is the reason why I left my parents’ church.

Lord Jesus told us not to condemn (Matthew 7:1-2). I do not condemn any particular church, denomination, or minister. Jesus only condemned hypocrisy and man-made traditions, and we can do the same. May the condemnation fall on whom it will! Only God is qualified to judge—and all churches and denominations have true and false ministers in them. All churches have some truth and some error—including the one I’m a part of. First we must recognize the error in ourselves; then we will be qualified to recognize it in a church or a minister.

How can I be sure that I know God? The Bible tells us that we know that he lives in us by his spirit that he gave us (1st John 3:24 & 4:13). This is not an emotion; it is an inner knowing that is so strong that there can be no denying it. It is so strong that millions have died a martyr’s death rather than give up that assurance and inner peace.

In recent years I have come to realize that the word religion (as commonly used) signifies the symbols of the truth without the reality of the truth, and I have come to dislike religion! Please consider:

Did Jesus come to start another religion? or to bring us life, true life, abundant life, satisfying life, and truth, the real truth? He himself answered that question when he said, “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10)

When Jesus came about 2000 years ago, the world was already full of religion. It did not need another religion, it needed life, true life, full life, victorious life. The world needed truth, the real truth, an understanding of God’s purposes.

These are the things that Jesus gave them, but in the next few centuries most of Jesus’ followers took his simple and beautiful teachings and turned them into another religion, a ritual, a ceremony, an organization, a bureaucracy, a welfare agency, a denomination, and sometimes even into a philosopher’s club or a “mutual admiration” society or a social club.

However, that is nothing new. Before Jesus, Buddha taught a simple and proper way to live. After he died, many of his followers

turned his simple and beautiful teachings into a ritual, a ceremony, an organization, a religion. The denominations of Christianity have done the same thing!

The world has always preferred religion to pure and simple truth. One of the founders of Communism once said, “Religion is the opium of the masses.” He was right, the masses of people are addicted to religions with elaborate ceremony and ritual. Even the poorest of people will donate their last penny (their widow’s mite) to support the religious bureaucracy that is spending millions of dollars on religious symbols such as cathedrals and priestly robes.

Why does the world love religion? Perhaps it is because religion provides excuses for sin. Millions of religious people have held on to their sins while doing religious things such as joining a church, getting baptized, going to confession, listening to platitudes on Sunday morning on how much God loves us and how he always forgives us—all this instead of deep and hearty repentance and forsaking of their sins. The religious world says, “Well, nobody is perfect” or “Everybody is doing it.” Rather than give up their sins, the religions of this world devise the most complicated systems of theology and write many books about them—making excuses for their sins.

God knew that the world would always love religion, and one time he just gave them one. This was the Ten Commandments and the sacrificial system that he gave to the world through Moses. It had plenty of ceremonies and rituals, elaborate priestly robes, an initiation plan, religious holidays or festivals, plenty of rules for daily living, and detailed plans for a temple.

But this religion was not God’s ultimate purpose. Rather, all of the commandments, rituals and articles of the temple were symbols of the truth and life that were later fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth, Israel’s Messish. Once Jesus told his followers, “I have not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. In Jesus the Messiah we see the true life of victory, joy, and blessedness without any of the old hang-ups that Moses’ followers failed to obey. (The purpose of the sacrifices on the altar was to bring into sharp focus the difference between sin and righteousness, and to fore-shadow the ultimate sacrifice which was Jesus’ death on the cross.) Whereas once the Jews offered a little lamb on the altar as a burnt offering, Jesus was called “The Lamb of God” because when he died, he became our sacrificial lamb. There is no longer any need for us

to go to the Temple in Jerusalem and offer up a burnt offering to God. We just simply believe the message that Jesus is our sacrificial offering that paid for our sins. That believing starts us on the path of life, the true life, the abundant life.

I wish to share this significant event in my own life:

I made a commitment to serve Jesus when I was 18 years old. It was not long after that, one Sunday evening I told my mother that I was going to visit some friends. Well, in those days all of my friends were in church on Sunday night, so I went to their church. Later, my mother found out that I had gone to church, and she said to my sister: “Your brother lied to me. He said he was going to visit his friends, but he went to one of those ‘evangelical’ churches instead.” This was especially disturbing to my mother because she wanted me to be a priest in her church: the Greek Orthodox Church. I did not consider it a lie because my friends were at that church.

However at the time, my sister did not tell me what my mother said. One day about 45 years later, I visited my sister. While talking to her, that incident that happened 45 years earlier just “popped” into her mind, and she told me about it. Immediately I knew that I should go to my mother and apologize for telling her a lie — even though I did not consider it a lie. However, if I have gone to my mother when I was still young, probably I would have said, “Mom, that wasn’t a lie, all my friends were in church.” But now, 45 years later, being much more mature, the heavenly father had given me some wisdom. I knew I should ask my mother’s apology without making an excuse or trying to explain that “I was visiting my friends in church”.

When I went to see my mother, my sister and her husband went with me to the nursing home where my then 90-year-old mother was confined. Both my sister and her husband are very much devoted to the church/denomination that my parents raised us in.

When we arrived at the nursing home, first my brother-in-law testified for me: “Mom, your son is a much better Christian than I ever thought about being.” But that did not phase my mother; she sat stony-faced. Next my sister testified for me: “Mom, your son didn’t leave the church, he joined Jesus, God’s son,” and she quoted Jesus’ admonition to “...forsake all to follow me: father, mother, brother, sister, husband, wife, son, and daughter.” Neither did this phase my mother. She remained stony-faced.

Finally I spoke: “Mom, I want to apologize for telling you a lie a long time ago.” She immediately snapped back with: “Are you returning to Orthodoxy?”

Well, I wasn’t expecting this response; I was expecting her to accept my apology. So, I did what I had to: I said, “No, I am only apologizing for telling you a lie a long time ago.” She sat stone-silent for a minute. Not knowing what else to do, I repeated my apology, and I added: “Please forgive me”. Again, she sat there stony-faced for a while, but finally, without looking at me, she said in a very cold, unfeeling manner: “Okay, I forgive you.” And that was all there was to it.

I understand that my becoming a priest was the greatest ambition in my mother’s life, and she spent the rest of her life broken-hearted over my leaving her church, but I have never doubted that I did what our Lord told us to do. She died 97 years old after out-living her 14 brothers and sisters.

Thank you for permitting me to share these things with you.
Your brother, James

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