

11. Mr. religion, meet Mr. Regeneration

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According to the latest extensive new survey by the Pew Research Center, the Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing. While the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly high among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of all ages.

Yes, the United States remains home to more Christians than any other country in the world, and a large majority of Americans – roughly 7-in-10 – continue to identify with some branch of the Christian faith. Over the period from 2007 to 2014, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated – describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” – has jumped more than 6 points, from 16.1% to 22.8%. And the share of Americans who identify with non-Christian faiths also has inched up, rising 1.2 percentage points, from 4.7% in 2007 to 5.9% in 2014. Growth has been especially great among Muslims and Hindus, although from a very low base.

Speaking of religions, atheists are some of the most religious people. To them, atheism is their god and their religion. Many of them try very hard to convert others to their “faith in no-faith” with great passion and fervor, far more intensely than many born-again Christians. They even sabotage other people’s faith with lawsuits.

Let me define ‘religion’: It is my approach to God on my own terms – my own idea of who God is; my own idea of how good God is; my own idea of how I can choose to worship if I feel like; my own idea of what God needs to do for me above everyone else; my own idea of how to interpret the Bible to suit what I want or to justify my sins; and my own idea to ignore the Bible if it goes against what I want.

We are going to eavesdrop on the conversation between Nicodemus, Mr. Religion of the ancient Israel and Jesus our Savior who represents Regeneration.

A. MR. RELIGION WITH AN IMPECCABLE RESUME

John 3:1 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

Nicodemus had an impeccable resume, if you will. If heaven would allow only a handful of people in by their own merits, Nicodemus would be one of them without a doubt. Here is a list of his accomplishments:

- 1) Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which meant he lived by the strictest possible religious rules.
- 2) Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews which meant he was a member of the Sanhedrin – a court of seventy men who had religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world.
- 3) Nicodemus was a very wealthy man which was a sign of God’s blessings in the mind of the Jewish people. In John chapter 19, after Jesus died on the cross, he brought one hundred pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes to embalm the body of Jesus. Those things were not cheap by any measure.

B. MR. RELIGION, MEET MR. REGENERATION

John 3:2-8 This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” 3 Jesus answered and said to him, “Most

assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” 4 Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” 5 Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’

Nicodemus was equivalent to Dr. Billy Graham in our days – that much respect from others, that much status and reputation. No doubt, Nicodemus was deep in his religion, following every jot and tittle of the Law, Talmud, and Mishnah, yet he was still far from the truth. This Mr. Religion came to Jesus, because there was something lacking in his heart which he couldn’t figure out yet.

Nicodemus came to see Jesus by night. I don’t know whether Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to avoid other people or he simply wanted to have one on one time with Jesus without any interruption from the thronging people. The important thing was that he came to seek the truth from Jesus.

I love the way Jesus handles the situation – no-nonsense, straight to the point, no religious mumbo jumbo.

We see the words ‘born-again’. The Greek words are “gennao anothen.” They can be translated “born from above.” Up to this point, the Bible has never mentioned it. We get our word “regeneration” from the Latin rendering of the phrase “born-again.”

‘Born-again’ is a divine initiated salvation process, not by human effort. Religion is a human struggle to approach God. It is our way to gain God’s favor in our own terms. However, regeneration is God’s effort to reach us. It means God’s demonstration of love based on grace without any participation on our merit or work.

Ever since our ancestors, Adam and Eve, sinned against the Lord – disobedience outwardly and pride inwardly, their spirits were dead. Consequently, all of us were born with this sinful nature in our hearts, and our spirits were dead from the beginning even though our physical bodies may be just fine. There is absolutely nothing a human can do to make that change. It is way above our league. Only God could do something and He did.

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

From time to time, I think that some biblical theologians don’t have enough things to do except to argue with each other and to complicate the simple and obvious things in the Bible. Clearly I am not smart like them to make the Bible complicated. The “water” in v5 is a case in point. If you read v5 only, you will have a hard time figuring out what Jesus meant. But as I taught you guys before, the best way to interpret the Bible is through the Bible. If you read v6 in context with v5, Jesus explained it to us plain and simple.

John 3:5-6 Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

He was talking about a physical birth, since we all have come forth from a sack of water in our mothers’ wombs, as Nicodemus understood.

Nicodemus was baffled at Jesus' comment that one must be born-again. It caught him off-guard. Why? Like most of the Jews of his time, Nicodemus believed that they already had the inner transformation promised by their physical birth as Jews, God's chosen people. This concept is still applied by the majority of good unbelievers. They think that they are good enough to go to heaven by their own.

Just as we must experience conception to begin physical human life, so we must experience a rebirth spiritually that is initiated by God from above.

Before we move on to the next verse, I must insert a very important point that we should not ignore. There are some Christian denominations which insist that you must be baptized to be truly born-again – a.k.a. baptismal regeneration. That is a completely unbiblical and wrong doctrine.

If they were right, Jesus should have been busy dunking people in the water as soon as they got saved. We don't see anywhere Jesus did that. Even the apostle Paul scolded the believers of the Corinthian church about dividing the church with this baptism issue.

1 Corinthians 1:17-18 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. 18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

No matter how you look at it, baptism is a human effort. It is our declaration to identify ourselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I remember a young man who scolded me and told me that I was wrong for not teaching "baptismal regeneration" several years ago. Don't look around, he is not here.

For those who are in doubt about what I just said, please turn your Bible to Luke 23:42-43:

Luke 23:42-43 Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." 43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

If you have a red letter Bible, you see what Jesus said in v43 is in red. According to Him, the thief was saved. You see, the thief didn't have a chance to get baptized. He couldn't do anything, because he was stuck on the cross, literally.

C. THINK OUTSIDE OF YOUR JEWISH RELIGIOUS BOX, NICK

John 3:8-13 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? 11 Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

Jesus illustrated His point by a play on words applicable both in Hebrew and Greek. The word for "spirit" – in Hebrew "ruah"; in Greek "pneuma" is the word for "wind" in both languages and can be translated either way, depending on the context.

Clearly Nicodemus was confused and having a hard time thinking outside of his Jewish religious box. It is not that Nicodemus didn't know which portion of the OT when Jesus was referring to when He said 'wind.' Nicodemus knew that it was from Ezekiel 37:1-14.

The prophet Ezekiel saw a valley full of dead bones. But when he prophesied to the wind, the Spirit of God came and gave the bones life. Again, it was the combination of the Spirit of God and the Word of God that gave life. The nation of Israel – including Nicodemus and his fellow Sanhedrin council members – was dead and hopeless; but in spite of the morality and religion of the people, they needed the life from the Spirit.

Long ago, I talked with a man who insisted that he didn't need to go to church, or do what the Lord Jesus said in the Bible to be saved. But he claimed that he is a Christian. In my experience of witnessing, he was not the only one. I've met hundreds of people who came up with just about the same excuse. They all feel that they were religious enough to go to heaven without any problem in their own terms. They think that God should roll out the red carpet for them on the Golden Boulevard in heaven.

They don't like the idea that they should do what the Bible says. They want to do the things according to their ideas, not be told by the Bible. One of my family relatives said that pastors shouldn't tell their congregation how to live. Do you think I am joking? No, I am not.

It is a lot easier to reach out to a person who knows himself and herself as a sinner with the Gospel of Jesus Christ than a snobby religious person who thinks that he has God in his pocket.

So, whenever I come across those religious people who reject my witnessing, I start to pray that the Lord makes them be spiritually bankrupted and put them in the place where they cannot turn to anywhere except to the Lord. Some of you might be offended that I pray in this way for those people. I am not doing anything the Bible says otherwise. As a matter of fact, it is very biblical.

1 Corinthians 5:5 deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

I don't do this because I hate those people, but because I care about them and their eternal life. What good is it for a person to die in good health and to end up in hell? It is better to be with the Lord because we realize that we are spiritually bankrupt without the Lord.

Mark 8:36 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

D. LET'S REMEMBER THESE

1) Cults and religions want you to believe that Jesus paid the down payment on the cross. But now you have to make your mortgage payment with good works of yours. **NOT!**

2) Religion is a man-made ritual and endorsed by satan that puts a god within the understanding of religion-maker. Men start their own religion to appease the void in their hearts that only can be filled by Jesus Christ, no one else.

3) Outward confession of religion doesn't mean inward possession of the Holy Spirit.