



“Gospel versus Religion”, by Josh Moody

Extract from “No Other Gospel” (Crossway, Wheaton:IL, 2011).

On Galatians 4.1-7

When you first hear the song losing my religion by R.E.M., you get the sense of someone losing his faith. Mind you, Wikipedia, that source of all Internet knowledge, tells us that the song is really about losing one's temper, but it certainly has become a phrase waved by, for instance, journalist William Lobdell when he wrote a book about his disillusionment with religion.

That's me in the corner
that's me in the spotlight
Losing my religion.

...

Religion is viewed as the cause of many ills, the source behind many wars, and that which imprisons, even enslaves, and keeps society in a state of evil bondage. But it is surprising to find that the apostle Paul talks about religion in much the same way in our passage. According to the Bible, contrary to what people ... seem to expect, not all religion is a good thing. In fact, some of it is a terrible thing. Religion - this form of religion, which he defines – is like being a slave, Paul says. It is like being held back in immaturity and not going on to adult spirituality.

Paul contrasts for the Galatians the difference between religion and Christianity. I can think of no more important matter for the Western church today, and no more important matter for all of us.

...

Religion is child-like and slave-like: "I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elemental principles of the world" (vv. 1-3).

Some will say that this is only about what used to be the case in the Old Testament, but that is not Paul's point. Why would he tell them something that had no direct relevance to them? Paul uses the same phrase, "elementary principles," for Old Testament religion as he does for pagan religion (v. 9). No, Paul is not giving the Galatians a history lesson on how things used to be. He says this is a real and present danger.

The Old Testament was revealed by God, and pagan religion is against the true doctrine of God. But Paul's point is that when we use the Law for that which it was not intended, it becomes to us just like pagan religion. It may have a different form or different doctrines theoretically, but it actually becomes just another religion. That is, it becomes another attempt to justify ourselves by our moral, religious, or ceremonial activities.

I can take the best things from God, and in my human pride make it something that offends God. I can take a sermon and feel justified because I preached well. I can take a marriage and feel justified because I have a good marriage. I can take a church and feel justified because I am a member of the church. Those in themselves are good things, but I am using them in a way that, in the most important and essential sense, is no different from the pagan religion that seeks to please the gods by various magical, moral, or ritual activities.

The point here is that we are hardwired legalists, something that goes all the way back to Genesis 3. We are certain of our own morality and blame others for our sins. This is the very nature of what it means to be outside the favour of God. The person who thinks he is pleasing God by his own efforts, whether or not he thinks they are divinely inspired, is farthest from the grace of God. Martin Luther said, "When the devil cannot ruin people by making them worse, he will ruin them by making them better." The road to Hell is not so much paved with good intentions as it is paved with self-justification. "I have not done anything wrong. I am no worse than anyone else. I have kept the rules."

This is the kind of religion we are meant to lose. The Bible wants us to lose this religion. The purpose of the law was for our minority, to convict us of our sin that we might turn to Christ for his righteousness by faith. This is the religion that causes wars. This religion is an assertion of natural pride. This religion does not care for the poor because it thinks their poverty is always their fault. In contrast, George Whitefield found an orphanage. In contrast Charles Spurgeon founded an orphanage. In contrast the church ministers to the disabled, to the disadvantaged, to people of all races and backgrounds. Religion is like a magnifying glass to the problem of the human condition. It makes it worse. It takes our natural human pride and invested in religious pride. It's shields us from self-criticism and from our basic natural human compassion; it makes us judgmental and hypercritical of others.

Christianity is nothing like that. Lose your religion. Go ahead, that's you in the corner, the spotlights on you. Lose it. You have my permission. Put away the idea that your works are necessary for your justification.

In contrast there is Christianity: "But when the fullness of time has come, God sent for his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (vv.4-7).

...

Christianity is God doing something. Religion starts with man; Christianity starts with God. ... That means you need to start with God. You start each day with God. You start your decisions with God. You pray. You wait. You listen. God is real. He is speaking. He is here. Christianity is God doing something. It is not a religious philosophy with pragmatic tips for a better life.

...