

## Religion vs. Church

In last week's sermon, I talked a little about the separation of church and state. I realize that while I had used church and religion interchangeably, they actually are different. This being Reformation Sunday is actually a good time to explore and explain those differences, since that is what Martin Luther was attempting to achieve when he began the Protestant Reformation in 1517. As you will recall, Luther was not advocating to break away from the Roman Catholic Church, rather he was looking to re-form, to refocus the church. Luther had felt that the Roman Catholic Church had lost its focus on the Gospel of Jesus. Luther wanted the focus of the church to be on Jesus Christ and the Gospel accounts of His life.

Before we go much further, we should first take a general look at what religion is and what church is. In very broad terms, the Oxford English Dictionary defines religion as a set of beliefs in and worship of a superhuman controlling power. These beliefs and worship practices can be demonstrated in many ways. Typically, the beliefs relating to the 'superhuman controlling power,' or god, if you will, are usually transmitted into a code of behavior of some fashion that guides the believers to acceptable behavior towards one another, towards non-believers and towards their god. While we could go deeper into what makes up a religion, this is the main understanding of what religion is in broad terms.

When those people with similar beliefs are gathered together in a community setting, we get 'church.' A church would be a community of like-minded people who believe in the same concepts of God. The church body would then take the general beliefs of the group and further elucidate them so that a clear definition of what that church is would be clear to both those inside this community and those who are outside of the community. These become the doctrine of the church and it defines what makes this particular community different from other communities with similar beliefs.

Doctrine is usually derived from the accepted understanding and not only describes what the church believes but also prescribes what is acceptable behavior for its members. Unfortunately, we use the same word for the building that the community gathers in and for the collection believers, as well as a local, individual congregation and the larger expression at the national or world level. For the balance of this discussion, I will be using the term church institution to refer to the wider expression and not to the local congregation or the building.

In the natural course of any organization, there is an evolution of that organization. Policies get expanded and clarified; and the focus of the organization may change. For a business, the product line may change over time. For example, the company Nintendo originally started out as a producer of playing cards in the late 1880's. However, now it is one of the leading video game companies. There are many other examples of companies that have changed their product lines over the years. Those companies which had kept their focus on their main objective, which is to make money for the stockholders, have stayed in business while those companies which lost that focus are no longer operating.

With regards to the church institution, questions will normally arise as to what a particular doctrine means and what that doctrine allows as time goes on. Human nature, being what it is, will always be testing the limits of what is allowed and will look for those loopholes that would allow someone to get around those limits. In doing this, the doctrine will be further refined and clarified to close those loopholes so people will know what exactly is allowed and not allowed. As time goes on and society around the church changes, becoming more acceptable to certain behaviors, there is pressure on the church institution to change with the changing times. Some church institutions will change with the changing norms of society while other church institutions will 'dig in their heels' and resist those changes and may even make their rules stricter. There then becomes the

tendency for the church institution to become legalistic and it becomes most important for the church to maintain this rigid legalism so as to not lose its identity. While the church institution is doing this, then it can often lose its focus on what brought that community together in the first place. The defining doctrines about God and how God interacts with and in the world become secondary to the legalism that grew out of a desire to keep the church institution intact. Just like a company that has lost its focus on its main objective, these kinds of churches that have lost its focus on its main objective of relating to God eventually will cease to exist.

Martin Luther had felt that the Roman Catholic Church had lost its focus on the Gospel of Jesus. The church had lost its way and was more concerned about controlling people and their lives than it was concerned about proclaiming the story of Jesus. The church had reached a point where it was looking to preserve the power that it had in society and it did that through the legalism that grew. Much like the legalism that Paul saw within the Jewish culture, Luther saw legalism in the culture of the Roman Catholic culture. The adherence to this legalism contributed to the Jewish leaders not recognizing Jesus as the promised Messiah. Luther saw this same thing being repeated by the Roman Catholic officials in his day.

A problem thus arises when this kind of legalism by the church institution is observed and then people use it as a criticism of religion. Many people have pointed out the abuses of power that a church institution had perpetrated and used that as an indictment against religion. Historically, it has led some to the conclusion that humanity is better off without any kind of religion, that a superhuman power is not needed for humanity to solve the problems found in the world. This kind of thinking leads to its own form of legalism and a list of do's and don'ts for people to live by. A list that would actually be much more fluid depending on who is has the power at that time. There would be nothing to keep those in power from increasing their power by any means and

eliminating any opposition to their power. However, when the church institution is rooted in something that is bigger than itself, such as being rooted in God, then voices can rise up and call for a refocus of the institution to what really matters.

There could be much more said about these differences between religion and the church. However, this is not really the place for this to continue. What we can take away from this discussion is that we always need to be grounded in our beliefs that brought us together in the first place. That there is a God who created everything in the world, that God is still working in the world. Because of the introduction of sin into the world, God has redeemed us through Jesus Christ who not only was the sacrifice for us that we could not make on our own, but also showed us how to live a life being obedient to God's will. It is in Jesus that the covenants that God made with the world through the Jewish people were fulfilled and will be fulfilled in the future. Until that time when the covenants are completely fulfilled, we will live in a world of 'now, but not yet' - a world of 'both - and' where we will need to resist the urge to develop a legalism that tells us what we can do. At the same time, we need to be able to discern between those calling for a real refocus to the Gospel of Jesus and not those who are seeking to replace the current legalism with one of their own. It is only with the help of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we can return to religion and depend upon God for all that we need.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon:

Service: