

How Would You Know if You Had a Religious Spirit?

The question is significant.

Indeed, it was the seminal point of the conversation between Jesus Christ and a man named Nicodemus. They were discussing Jesus' teaching ministry and Jesus turned the conversation to the issue of being born again. Nicodemus was confused. "How can these things be," he asked Jesus.

"Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things," Jesus asked. Nicodemus, one of the leading men of Israel, did not comprehend the difference between a person being born again and one who is religious?

That is not uncommon in the church today. Many who would consider they are devoutly Christian do not know the distinction between being religious and being born again. It is not a casual difference. Jesus thought it of paramount importance for a leader of Israel to understand the distinction.

Jesus said this one point makes the difference between having eternal life and perishing eternally. "Truly, truly I say to you, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. ... Truly, truly I say to you, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ... Do not marvel that I say unto you, you must be born again" (John 3:3, 5, 7).

The apostle Paul emphasized the distinct difference between being religious and being born again in his letter to Titus. "But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of rebirth and the renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus

3:4-5).

Notice, the apostle said, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done." That is being religious. All religions of the world are seeking to appease God and trying to reach Him though the works of their hands; whether that is doing spiritual acts of worship and service or by denying their fleshly appetites and personal pleasures. Jesus' words to Nicodemus and the apostle Paul's instructions to Titus declare religious activity may have an appearance of godliness, but no amount of human effort will bring someone into the kingdom of God.

Are you born again or religious?

The distinct difference between true Christianity and all other religions is God came seeking mankind not the other way around. "But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared" ... take careful notice. God is reaching to mankind, NOT mankind trying reach to God. Almighty God showed His mercy and kindness by coming to redeem mankind through the person of Jesus Christ. Every person's sinful condition separates them from God and prevents them from reaching Him.

The only way a man or woman can be transformed is "through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." A person's heart can be changed from sinful to righteous and they may enter the kingdom of God. It is only by the washing of a person's heart in the blood of Jesus Christ and the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit in their life that a sinful human being can be born again into a child of God who is "holy, without blame, before Him in love" (Eph. 1:4). The born-again experience gives one a new heart that has been made the righteousness of God. The born-again experience gives the person a new identity and a new standing with God declaring them to be justified (just-as-if-they-had-never-sinned). The born-again experience adopts the person into the family of God, so they are no longer a sinner but a saint and an heir of

God and joint-heir with Jesus Christ. "Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things have passed away. Look, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

The mission Jesus Christ gave to His church was not "go and make people religious." It was "go and make disciples baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The Apostles understood this to be the mission. The apostle Peter declared, "Therefore repent and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

Attending church is vitally important in a person's life. Reading the Bible and prayer are critical for consistent, daily living the Christian life. But these things are not what make someone a Christian. They are the fruit of a life that has been transformed by the regenerating power of new birth through faith in Jesus Christ's death, burial and resurrection.

Dr. F. Dean Hackett *has served in full-time Christian ministry since October 1971. He has ministered throughout the United States, Canada and Europe, serving as pastor, conference speaker and mentor. He has planted four churches, assisted in planting 15 others, and currently serves as lead pastor of Living Faith Church in Hermiston, Oregon. Dr. Hackett founded Spirit Life Ministries International in 2001 to facilitate ministries in Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina and to open a training center for workers in those nations. You can find him at F. Dean Hackett – Foundational, Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest.*