

The Spiritual Force Choking the Life Out of the Church

Earlier this week I spoke at a leadership conference for a group of pastors in El Salvador. These pastors face a lot of spiritual challenges in their culture: Drug addiction among youth, alcoholism, idolatry and rampant witchcraft. But I had to tell these pastors that the biggest challenge to their churches is not something outside—it is something inside the church.

One of the biggest enemies of revival is the spirit of religion. It could be the reason your spiritual life is stagnant. It could also be the reason your church isn't growing.

Religion opposes biblical preaching, resists the Holy Spirit, persecutes those who truly love God and turns vibrant faith into empty formalism. And most of all, it sterilizes churches until they die from barrenness.

The apostle Paul warned Timothy that the time would come when people who claim to know Christ would “[hold] to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (2 Tim. 3:5a, NASB). Religion looks good on the outside. Religious people sing nice songs about God, recite nice prayers, dress in nice clothes to listen to nice sermons and even give money to build nice buildings. But it can all be a show that is devoid of life.

And when the Holy Spirit comes to bring new life to the church, and to revive us from the deadness of the past season, we must break free from the control of a religious spirit. We are in this season now. The Spirit wants to blow His refreshing wind into our barrenness. When He does, the dead roots and brittle branches of lifeless religion will be pruned

away—and supernatural fruit will appear.

Have you been infected by dead religion? You can take your own test by examining these eight characteristics of a religious person:

1. Religious people view God as a cold, harsh taskmaster rather than an approachable, loving Father. When Jesus wanted to show people who the Father really is, He told the story of the prodigal son. He described a compassionate father who forgave his wayward son, embraced him and welcomed him back home even though he had been living in a pig pen. Our God is merciful. He opens His arms to us when we return to Him. When you cultivate this view of the Father you will break the spirit of religion.

2. Religious people do outward things to prove that God accepts them. Some Christians believe their dress codes, music styles or even certain doctrinal positions make them better than others. I knew of one church that taught that people who wear wedding rings aren't saved. Another denomination taught that women shouldn't wear makeup. Such religious rules ostracize people and turn Christians into legalists.

3. Religious people develop traditions and formulas to accomplish spiritual goals. Formalism chokes out the work of the Holy Spirit. If we trust in rote prayers, vain repetition or dry ceremonies, we are quenching the Spirit. If we want the life of the Spirit, we should sing a new song, preach a fresh word and experience fresh fire each time we gather.

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4. Religious people become joyless, cynical and hypercritical. These attitudes can turn a church completely sour. When religion takes over a church, love turns cold, smiles turn into frowns and church members gossip about each other. And

visitors won't feel welcome in that environment. One of the best ways to overcome dead religion is to ask God to restore your joy.

5. Religious people develop a judgmental attitude toward sinners, yet those who ingest this poison typically struggle with sinful habits that they cannot admit to anyone else.

Religious people rail against the evils of society but rarely notice their own flaws. And their pharisaical attitude makes it impossible for them to show true mercy. This is why religious churches don't do outreach.

6. Religious people refuse to embrace change. Many Christians become so focused on what God did 50 or 100 years ago that they become stuck in a time warp and can't move forward when the Holy Spirit begins to open new understanding. When a church refuses to shift with God's new directives, it can become an "old wineskin" (see Mark 2:22) that is stiff and inflexible.

7. Religious people persecute those who disagree with their self-righteous views. An angry religious person will even use slander to assassinate other peoples' character. You would be shocked by the kind of behavior professing Christians are capable of when they are driven by a religious spirit.

8. Religious people won't see conversions. Sinners will rarely find Jesus in a toxic religious environment. When religion takes over a church, fewer and fewer people visit the altar, tears of repentance are rare and the baptismal tank stays dry. The congregation ages; there are no children in the nursery, the youth group dwindles and eventually the church closes. Religion is deadly.

If the poisonous tendrils of religion have contaminated your walk with God, ask Him to pour a fresh understanding of His grace into your heart—and then expect His new life to flow through you. Let's welcome the fresh wind of God that comes to

breathe new life into our barren churches. {eoa}

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