

# How Religion Chokes the Life Out of the Church

On many occasions I have preached in churches where I saw the same peculiar vision while standing in the pulpit. I saw in my spirit many tangled and gnarly roots growing up from the floor of the building and wrapping themselves around the chairs and walls. The roots covered the doors, the stage, the pulpit and even the ceiling. It appeared as though these invasive roots were choking the very life out of the house of God.

I have come to know that what I was seeing was evidence of a spirit of religion. And in each case, I understood it as a warning—because the life of the Holy Spirit cannot flourish in a church that is controlled by this cold, dark deadness.

Of all the enemies of Jesus, dead religion is the worst. 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 religious 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 in our churches 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:

**Religious people view God as a cold, harsh, distant taskmaster rather than an approachable, loving Father.** When we base our relationship with God on our ability to perform spiritual duties, we deny the power of grace. God does not love us because we pray, read our Bibles, attend church or witness, yet millions of Christians struggle to find true intimacy with Jesus because they are enslaved to performance religion. Discover His amazing mercy and cultivate closeness with God.

**Religious people do outward things to prove that God accepts them.** Some Christians believe their dress codes, spiritual disciplines, 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 should not wear their hair short. Such religious rules ostracize people and turn Christians into unhappy legalists.

**Religious people develop traditions and formulas to accomplish spiritual goals.** We trust in our liturgies, denominational policies or man-made programs to obtain results that only God alone can give. Formalism chokes out the work of the Holy Spirit. If we want the life of the Spirit, we will sing a new song, preach a fresh word and experience fresh fire each time we gather.

**Religious people become joyless, cynical and hypercritical.** This 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!

**Religious people develop a harsh, 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.

**Religious people refuse to embrace change.** This is why many churches become irrelevant to society. They become so focused on what God did 50 or 100 years ago that they become stuck in a time warp and cannot 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" (Mark 2:22), so God must find more flexible vessels that are willing to follow the Holy Spirit.

**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.

**Religious people will not 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, and the baptismal tank stays dry. The congregation ages; there are no children in the nursery, 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 barren spirit—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. {eoas}