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When Religion Becomes Christianity

John Allen Chalk

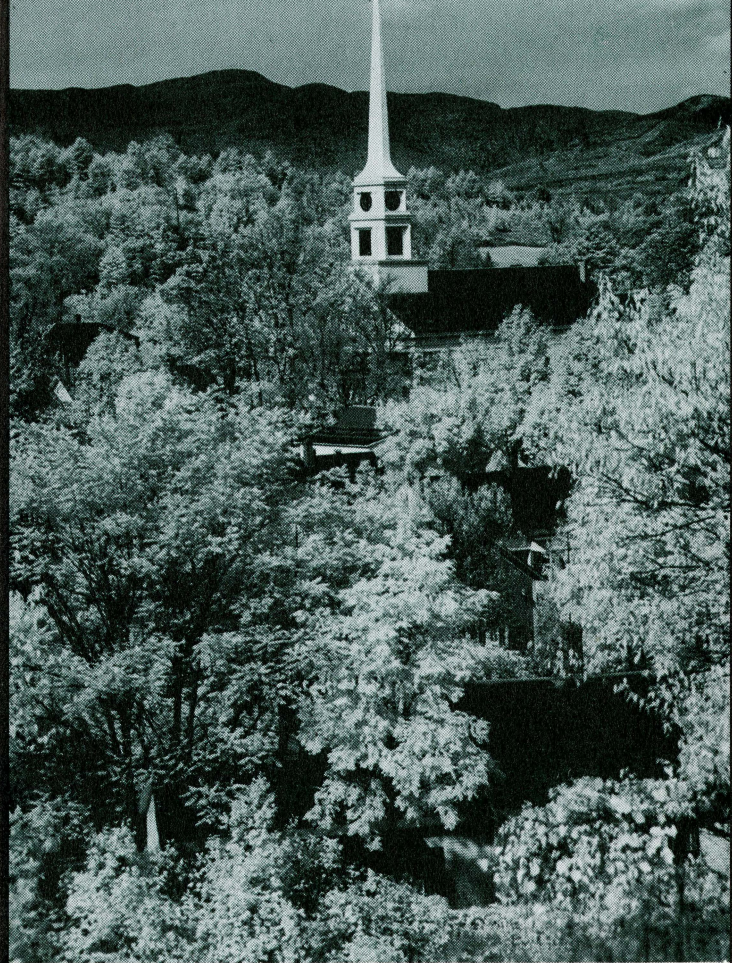
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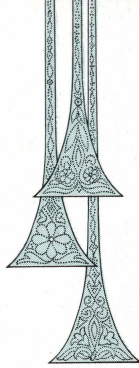
When Religion Becomes Christianity



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When Religion Becomes Christianity

Have you ever attempted to define the word "religion"? Your wife remarks that the man next door is more "religious" than you. Your parents observe that you are not as "religious" as the son or daughter of a nearby family. No word in the English language seems to have more indefinite meanings than "religion." I recently read an encyclopedia article that detailed ten common mistakes made in attempted definitions of this word. The Latin roots do not help greatly, they suggest both "being bound" and "gathering together." Let's face it, most of us, if required to do so, would be at a loss to define the word "religion."

Some have used "religion" as "a generic term referring to all conceivable religions." With this definition we could say that all men are religious, but what have we really said? "Religion" as a legitimate and meaningful word has been largely depreciated in our day. Pictures of empty ritual, meaningless custom, thoughtless tradition, and human dogma arise in our minds when the word "religion" is heard. The famous World War II martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, popularized the phrase

"religionless Christianity" and thus initiated a new theological movement. So confusing are the connotations of this term that one Christian recently observed, "I prefer, however, not to speak of religion but of faith -- faith in the living God and in the revelation of himself in Jesus Christ." (p. 6, Dr. David Stewart, "A Time for Living Faith," 20th Century Christian, August, 1966.)

A sharp distinction is made between religion and Christianity in the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, in the New Testament. Here, in the person of a military officer, the inspired historian Luke describes a deeply religious man who was not a Christian. He was a man, although genuinely involved in definite religious practices, without the "living hope" that belongs to every Christian "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter 1:3).

First, observe Cornelius, the religious man. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that he was "a centurion of the band called the Italian band." The Imperial Army contained thirty-two cohorts of Italian volunteers. Each cohort consisted of six companies or centuries containing one hundred men. Not only was Cornelius a military man but an officer in one of the most famous groups of soldiers in the Roman Empire.

But his religious condition is our main concern. In verse two of Acts 10 we are told that Cornelius was "a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, who gave much alms to the people and was a real man of prayer" (J. B. Phillips, Acts 10:2).

During his three o'clock afternoon prayers Cornelius received a messenger or angel from God who told him that his prayers were recognized and that he should send immediately to another town, Joppa, for a preacher by the name of Simon Peter (Acts 10:3-6). Immediately Cornelius with military dispatch sent two servants and a soldier on the twenty-four mile trip from his town of Caesarea to Joppa (Acts 10:7, 8).

One's true nature is oftentimes best seen by those who live and work with him. The three men sent by Cornelius to Joppa apprise Peter of their master and superior in the following words, "a righteous man and one that feareth God, and well reported of by all the nation of the Jews" (Acts 10:22). Later, when Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, he was informed that the angel from God had said, "Cornelius, thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God" (Acts 10:31).

But nothing more clearly reveals this military officer's religious nature and attitude better than his acceptance of the strange new preacher Peter. After welcoming Peter into his home and relating the angel's visitation, he then assures God's preacher, "Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all things that have been commanded thee of the Lord" (Acts 10:33). Such willingness to listen, such honesty of heart, such openness of mind, such concern for truth, such reverence for God's message, and such acceptance of God's messenger! Cornelius' religion did not close his mind. prejudice his heart, harden his opinions into dogma, and steel him against future and greater truth. Thank God!

Now we must observe, sadly but truthfully, Cornelius the lost man. We first realize this painful truth about him in the angel's message he received. In no sense was he assured of salvation as an accomplished fact. The message said that Cornelius should "now send men to Joppa, and fetch one Simon, who is surnamed Peter: . . ." (Acts 10:5). The three men dispatched told the Apostle that Cornelius "was warned of God by a holy angel to send for thee into his house, and to hear words from thee" (Acts 10:22). The angel also told Cornelius, Peter later recounted to the Jerusalem church, "Send to Joppa, and fetch Simon, whose surname is Peter; who shall speak unto thee words, whereby thou shalt be saved, thou and all thy house" (Acts 11:13, 14). The angel gave no assurance of salvation, but rather hope for new truth which would bring such a desired condition. God said to Cornelius, "I know of your concern for me and mankind. Now send for my messenger Peter so that you and your family can know me fully."

That Cornelius was a lost man at this point is suggested by the way he refers to Peter's message. "We are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all things that have been commanded thee of the Lord," he remarked. This was no time for a social gathering. Peter had a "God-commanded" message for Cornelius. It was time to get on with the serious and vital business of knowing God's will for him and his family.

Peter's message from God further revealed Cornelius' spiritual needs. Peter said that all men were acceptable to God on the basis of "reverential awe" and "righteousness of life" (Acts 10:35). Peter proclaimed Christ, ". . . even Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him" (Acts 10:38). Peter hastened on

to tell of the death of Christ, ". . . whom also they slew, hanging him on a tree" (Acts 10:39). He then proclaimed His resurrection in the words, "Him God raised up the third day, . . ." (Acts 10:40). Peter further promised "that this is he who is ordained of God to be the judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42). He concluded his sermon with the words: "To him bear all the prophets witness, that through his name every one that believeth on him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43).

God then confirmed that the Gentiles were to receive the Gospel of Christ with a miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his family (Acts 10:44). The special purpose of this unusual event is revealed at verse forty-five. "And they of the circumcision (that is, the Jewish Christians who had come with Peter from Joppa, *jac*) that believed were amazed, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 10:45). Later when Peter recounted these events to the Apostles and others in the Jerusalem Church he asked, "If then God gave unto them the like gift as he did also unto us, when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I, that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11:17).

With this mighty demonstration came the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy that "in the last days" God would pour out His Spirit upon "all flesh." Peter then commands "them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:48).

Why was Cornelius unsaved although deeply religious? Most of us find this difficult to accept. First, Cornelius did not know Christ, yet, "in none other is there salvation: for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Second, religion, as such, has never been the basis for God's recognition of man. This truth we must underscore. It is widely ignored and completely misunderstood. I repeat, religion, as such, has never been the sole basis for God's recognition of man.

Samuel revealed this to King Saul in the Old Testament when Saul attempted to mitigate his disobedience of God's command by offering animal sacrifices (I Samuel 15:14, 15). Samuel asked, "Hath Jehovah as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry and teraphim. Because thou hast rejected the word of

Jehovah, he hath also rejected thee from being king" (I Samuel 15:22, 23).

David knew that religion, as expressed solely in ritual was not acceptable to God. "For thou delightest not in sacrifice; else would I give it: thou hast no pleasure in burnt-offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 51:16, 17).

Hosea declared God's word to a rebellious Judah in the following passage. "For I desire goodness, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt-offerings. But they like Adam have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me" (Hosea 6:6, 7).

No voice called for the repudiation of the idea that religious practices will please God more than did Jesus. His words, in the New Testament, are, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:21-23).

The point of all this is that Cornelius could be and was a religious man without knowing God in full forgiveness and salvation. One could then and now be religious but lost.

Now look with me at Cornelius the saved man. Peter's Jewish prejudices heretofore hindered him fulfilling Christ's charge "be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Peter had not seen the full implication of what the Holy Spirit guided him to say on the day the Church began, "For to you (the Jews present, *jac*) is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him" (Acts 2:39).

Peter's vision of all kinds of animals which he was told to kill and eat taught the following lesson, "What God hath cleansed, make not thou common" (Acts 10:15). All men were to receive the gospel. God would cleanse all men through their faith in Him. Upon arriving at Cornelius' house Peter said, "Ye yourselves know how it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to join himself

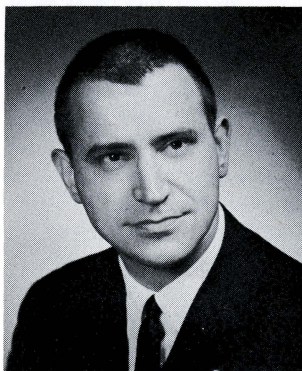
or come unto one of another nation; and yet unto me hath God showed that I should not call any man common or unclean; wherefore also I came without gainsaying, when I was sent for" (Acts 10:28, 29).

He then began his sermon with this statement: "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34). To further impress this truth on the hearts of the entire Jewish church the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit occurred as Peter preached the gospel that day (Acts 10:44-47). When Peter explained this later in Jerusalem, to the Christians there, "... they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

Peter preached Christ, "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). When Cornelius and his family were obviously in agreement with this message; when God had so signified His desire that the Gentiles be given the Gospel message of salvation; and when Peter received no negative replies to his question, "Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we?"; "he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:48).

Please note that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit fulfilled God's promise (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21). It signified the full beginning of the Christian age and the inclusion of all obedient men under the gospel plan. Water baptism, however, was a command for all believers in Christ (Mark 16:16), for all penitent believers (Acts 2:38), by which such individuals received remission of their past sins. Water baptism is the New Testament method of spiritual union with Christ, the way to membership in Christ's body, the Church, and a necessity for the full realization of the "new birth" (Galatians 3:27; I Corinthians 12:13; John 3:5).

They were religious but did not enjoy a saving relationship with God. They were open to the truth Peter preached from God. That truth was Christ (John 14:6). They received the Gospel preached coming to a new faith, a new sense of direction, and a new relationship with Christ in the penitent believer's baptism. Cornelius and his household, our Bible example of "religion" becoming "Christianity."



John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program.

He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series.

A native of Lexington, Tennessee, he began preaching at 15. Chalk and his wife and two children now live in Abilene, Texas where he spends full time working with the Herald of Truth.

He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.