

Religion-less Spirituality

How do you reach people who think church is the problem, not the answer?

by Tim Keller

"Growing numbers of Americans say they are spiritual but not religious," says Robert Wuthnow in *After Heaven*, his assessment of American spiritual development since 1950. It is a spirituality without truth or authority but filled with belief in the supernatural. It is a trend born of the modern fears of religion. The powerful critiques of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche have penetrated our popular psyche. Freud saw religious performance as a way that guilt-ridden people cleanse themselves and force God to bless them. Marx saw religious principle used by one class of people to oppress another. Nietzsche asserted that *anyone* claiming to have the truth is making a power play. He asked the powerful: "Why do you call for love? Is it not just a way to keep anyone from revolting against your authority?" He asked the powerless: "Why do you call for justice? Is it not just a way for you to get on top?" These critiques are powerful because they have the ring of truth. They're the reasons many who seek spirituality reject religion. What shall we do then? We must address the real issues of self-righteousness, exclusion, and power-plays. The church must echo Jesus' *own* powerful critique of religion and visibly demonstrate the difference between religion and the gospel.

Right word, right time

First, we must do it in word—in our preaching and communication. Even more than Freud, Jesus condemned self-justification through moral performance, at one point claiming that religion was more spiritually dangerous than overt immorality. Jesus gives us the classic picture of the failure of *both* religion and irreligion in his parable of the two sons in Luke 15. The elder brother represents the religious leaders; he never disobeys any of the father's laws. As a result, he tries to control his father and exclude his brother. In the end, he is the one who misses the feast of salvation rather than his profligate brother. There could not be a more powerful warning: The elder brother is not lost *despite* his obedience to the father but *because* of his dependence upon it. Jesus shows us that the problem is self-justification, the belief that we can win God's favor through our virtue. In Luther's terminology, religion is just another form of works-righteousness, which leads to profound internal instability. We are never sure of our worthiness, yet we need to feel superior to those who do not conform in order to bolster our insecurity. Following Jesus, we must agree with our critics about the danger of religion, but show them that they are wrong about their solution to it. Secular people see religion as *a body of fixed doctrine and ethics that one must adhere to in order to acquire rights to blessing and heaven*. They see how often religion leads to self-righteousness, exclusion, and oppression. Modern culture, however, wrongly identifies fixed doctrine (the idea of absolute truth) as the poisonous element. Both traditional religion *and* the new spirituality are forms of self-salvation. The religious way of being our own savior leads us to "keep" God's laws, while the irreligious way of being our own savior leads us to "break" his laws. The solution is the gospel. The gospel shows us a God far more holy than a conservative moralist can imagine—for he can never be pleased by our mere moral performance. Yet it also shows us a God far more loving than the liberal relativist can imagine—for his Son bore all the weight of eternal justice. His love for us cost him dearly. Practically speaking, this means in our preaching we must be extremely careful to distinguish between general moral virtue and the unique humility, confidence, and love that flow from the gospel. I'm convinced we must learn carefully from Jonathan Edwards: "An experience of God's grace is the only basis for ultimate and enduring ... true virtue." Edwards says that most virtue is secondary virtue, based on self-love, and therefore on fear (of punishment) and pride (in our superior decency). Edwards appreciates that common morality makes the world a liveable place, but he essentially agrees with Nietzsche that it is really a power play. General moral virtue does not come from a heart that has given up its need to feel superior to others. Only an experience of grace and free justification can create a heart that does good out of delight in God himself, out of delight in goodness itself, and out of love for our neighbors in themselves. Without the gospel, we can *restrain* the human heart, but not *change* the human heart. The gospel calls for repentance over our self-righteousness. The

true virtue that results creates an attitude of acceptance toward the poor, the outsider, and the opponent that neither religion nor secularism can produce. Religion is outside-in; the gospel is inside-out.

Show me your faith

Second, we must demonstrate the difference between religion and the gospel in our deeds—how we embody the gospel in our community and service. Even more than Marx, Jesus condemned religion as a pretext for oppression: "*If you only greet your brothers, what do ye more than others?*" (Matt. 5:47). Lesslie Newbigin makes the bold case that Christianity is a better basis for true tolerance of opposing beliefs than any other religion or even secularism. Saved only by grace, Christians true to the gospel will not feel superior to those with whom they differ. This must be more than rhetoric. Only when Christians non-condescendingly serve the poor, only when Christians are more firm yet open to their opponents will the world understand the difference between religion and the gospel.

What does this mean practically?

We will be careful with the *order* in which we communicate the parts of the faith. Pushing moral behaviors before we lift up Christ is religion. The church today is calling people to God with a tone of voice that seems to confirm their worst fears. Religion has always been outside-in—"if I behave out here in all these ways, then I will have God's blessing and love inside." But the gospel is inside-out—"if I know the blessing and grace of God inside, then I can behave out here in all these ways." A woman who had been attending our church for several months came to see me. "Do you think abortion is wrong?" she asked. I said that I did. "I'm coming now to see that maybe there *is* something wrong with it," she replied, "now that I have become a Christian here and have started studying the faith in the classes." As we spoke, I discovered that she was an Ivy League graduate, a lawyer, a long-time Manhattan resident, and an active member of the ACLU. She volunteered that she had experienced three abortions. "I want you to know," she said, "that if I had seen *any* literature or reference to the 'pro-life' movement, I would not have stayed through the first service. But I did stay, and I found faith in Christ. If abortion is wrong, you should certainly speak out against it, but I'm glad about the *order* in which you do it." This woman had had her faith incubated into birth our Sunday services. In worship, we center on the question "what is truth?" and the one who had the audacity to say, "I *am* the truth." That is the big issue for postmodern people, and it's hard to swallow. Nothing is more subversive and prophetic than to say Truth has become a *real* person! Jesus calls *both* younger brothers *and* elder brothers to come into the Father's arms. He calls the church to grasp the gospel for ourselves and share it those who are desperately seeking true spirituality. We, of all people, ought to understand and agree with fears about religion, for Jesus himself warned us to be wary of it, and not to mistake a call for moral virtue for the good news of God's salvation provided in Christ.