

# Is Christianity about relationship, not religion?

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**Q: Some of my co-workers seem think that I believe that my religion saves me. They say that Christianity is about a relationship, not a religion.**

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A: This is a very good question. Of course we are brought into a new and miraculous relationship with God through his Son, Jesus. What a massive gift! But there has been this strange rise in a false dichotomy between faith in Jesus and faith in the church he founded. You find more and more people who maintain that they “love Jesus but not the church.” It is even another step away from the truth to claim that a person doesn’t need the church. There are so many reasons why this is not only shortsighted but is demonstrably false and contrary to the way in which God has interacted with his people.

First, before we go into any more complex reasons why the church is not optional, you could ask your friends who believe in Jesus how they know who he is. You might get some responses that include “He is my Lord” or “He is my savior” or “He is God.” Someone might even state the formulation, “Jesus Christ is true God and true man.”

These would all be good answers. But then you could ask the necessary next question: How do you know that? They might say that they know this from reading the New Testament. And that is good. But there are at least two critical errors with that simplistic answer.

First, where did they get the New Testament? Who chose those particular Gospels and not any others? Who selected those writings of St. Paul and St. Peter and others and did not choose other writings that existed at the same time? If they are basing their knowledge of Jesus off of the Bible, we are able to point out that they only have the Bible because of the Catholic Church, because the Catholic Church gave us the New Testament (and even codified the writings of the Old Testament).

What is more, how do they know that Jesus is true God and true man? There was quite a bit of debate over Christ's identity in the early centuries of Christianity. Some doubted whether Jesus was fully human. Others maintained that Jesus was part-God and part-human. The Catholic Church consistently defined and defended this reality of Jesus, and the Council of Nicaea in 325 settled the matter. There are many, many things that people who "don't need the church" believe that they merely inherited from the official and visible institution of the Catholic Church.

But that doesn't even begin to scratch the surface regarding our need for the church. This goes all the way back to the way God entered into relationship with people from the very beginning. From the start, when God entered into covenants with people, they always involved an individual and a corporate component. For example, if a man was brought into relationship with the Lord God, he would be circumcised, and this meant that he was not only in covenant relationship with God but also with the People of God (the Jewish people). There was never merely an individual relationship with the Lord God. And this is brought to fulfillment in the New Covenant.

When we are baptized, we are made into sons and daughters of God the Father, but we also become members of the household of God (Ephesians 2:19). We are brought into a family. If there is one thing we need to remember about family, it is that family implies real relationship. And real relationships involve real rights and real responsibilities. Because we are part of God's people, we have access to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. But we also have responsibilities to God — and to his family, the church. This is how God has established it from the beginning, and he did not abolish it, but brought it to fulfillment in Christ (Matthew 5:17).

We have to do away with this silly notion that "religion" is a bad word. Actually, let's look at the word itself. Religion comes from the word *"religare"* which means "to bind." At this point, I can hear someone saying, "Exactly! That's all religion does! It makes people 'bound' to man-made rules and regulations!"

But that isn't what the word refers to. Yes, it refers to the fact that religion "binds" us to the Lord and to his church (we are made into members of his body), but it is more (Ephesians 5:30). But there is another aspect.

Consider the word "sin." This word has a complex etymology, but one strain of the word comes from the word "sunder." To sunder is to be divided, to be pulled apart, to be split. And this is our experience. Sin has sundered our hearts and our relationships, not only within ourselves, but also with God. Isn't "binding" exactly what a sundered heart and a sundered world needs? If you agree, then you would also agree that this world needs religion, not merely a relationship.