

TIME TO MOVE FROM RELIGION TO A RELATIONSHIP

Today's Text: 1 Tim. 4: 1-16

Extracts:

Now the Spirit expressly says that *in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who know and believe the truth...If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed. But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come [1 Tim. 4: 1-3, 6-8]*

My place of worship marked its 30th adult harvest anniversary in November 2015. One popular activity each year is a dinner to which we invite top leaders of our church and other denominations. In 2015, however, we opted to invite beggars and the destitute in line with the Lord's injunction that when you give a dinner or a supper, you should not ask your friends, brothers, relatives and rich neighbours who can reciprocate but, instead, you should invite "the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind" who cannot invite you back [Lk 14: 7-14]. So we brought in physically challenged people, gave them the best seats and served them food and drinks. They really enjoyed themselves. As they were leaving, their spokesperson thanked us, saying, "Because you have treated us as human beings, may God also treat you as human beings."

Jesus has said that we are His friends if we do whatever He commands us to do [Jn 15: 14]. Without saying a word, we had preached His love to people, most of whom were Muslims or non-believers. In our churches these days, emphasis has shifted away from relationship to religion. There are thus as many gods/Gods as there are religions or denominations. Consequently, strange doctrines are creeping into the body of Christ. In today's Bible verses, Paul addressed the challenge of apostasy that was already infecting the Ephesian church that the young pastor, Timothy, needed to watch out for and guard against. According to Paul, it was time to move away from religion to a relationship with God through Christ. There are important principles that we can learn therefrom to guide our modern Christian walk to true worship and salvation. Let us find out more from today's study.

1. Background: Religion kills but a relationship saves!

The church at Antioch, a Gentile city, was an interesting collection of believers from varied backgrounds [Acts 13: 1-4]. There was Simon (also called Niger, that is, black), Lucius of Cyrene (near Libya) and Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch). Then there were Barnabas, a rich Levite from Cyprus who had sold his land and given all the proceeds to the early church [Acts 4: 36-37] and Paul, formerly known as Saul from Tarsus, a dual citizen of Israel and Rome and a well- educated Pharisee who had studied law under the highly respected Gamaliel [Acts 5: 34; Acts 22: 1-3, 22-29]. Yet, when they operated under the influence and command of the Holy Spirit, it was the “lower class people” (Simon, Lucius and Manaen (among others) who laid hands on Paul and Barnabas when they were commissioned for their first missionary journey [Acts 13: 2-4]. They did so because there was more than religion at work. They had a relationship because it was in that church that believers were first called Christians [Acts 11: 26]. How did the early Christians behave? They “were of one heart and one soul” [Acts 4: 32]. *They were all related by blood- the blood of Jesus!*

Fast forward the setting to Peter’s visit to that same Gentile city and church some time later [Gal. 2: 11-21]. Present were Peter, Paul, Barnabas and some other Jews plus their hosts, worshippers in the local church. The visiting Jews and local Gentiles ate and prayed together as believers in Christ. Then, messengers came from Jerusalem, from James, the brother of Jesus who was one of the pillars of the early church (along with Peter and John) [Gal. 2: 9]. As soon as the Jewish messengers from Jerusalem joined them, Peter “withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.” The rest of the Jews played the hypocrite with Peter “so that even Barnabas was carried away with the hypocrisy” [v. 13]. Paul openly challenged Peter because he “saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel” [v. 14]. In other words, *in the church at Antioch, religion threatened the traditional genuine relationship between Jews and Gentiles who had accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour.* Are we different? What is the situation in your place of worship or your local Christian community?

My personal experience in Lagos (Nigeria), the most populous city in Africa, is that it is on days of worship, especially Sunday, that Christians congregate into ethnic or denominational “ghettoes.” That is when you hear of Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostals or Charismatics, among so many others, each with its own mode of worship and rituals. Even within denominations, worshippers go to church centres pastored by their ethnic kith and kin! When you listen to sermons, the impression you get is that only believers there will go to heaven; they are the only ones who will be raptured when Jesus returns! What most of them share in common, however, is undue emphasis on material prosperity and building “fire walls” to safeguard the loyalty of each congregation! It is, therefore, not

surprising that many worship centres are embroiled in leadership tussles and accountability crises. Is that Christ's mission for His church?

As we face end times, are we adequately prepared to face the growing persecution of believers (openly by Islamic fundamentalists and subtly by evil rights movements in Western societies)?¹ How can we move away from emphasis on religion to a true relationship with God by Christ Jesus? Is it not time to move from religion to a relationship?

In attempting to address those issues, the fourth chapter of Paul's First Letter to Timothy becomes very helpful here. Based on what the Holy Spirit had told him, Paul was warning the young evangelist, Timothy, about the apostasy coming to his congregation at Ephesus in "latter times" when "some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" [1 Tim. 4: 1]. For his congregation to remain on course, Timothy had to ensure that emphasis was more on a relationship with God than on religious rituals. We can analyse Paul's admonition around the following themes:

a) *Religion divides*

Paul wrote that in latter times, "some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy" [vv. 1-2]. In other words, congregations are going to be split into denominations and factions as pastors, evangelists and prophets draw away worshippers from one fold to another. In that sense, religion divides.

You can imagine the hostilities that then build up between and among believers who are now conned into fighting with fellow believers- just to defend their own point of view. You can see why there are succession battles in many congregations, with the possible exception of the Catholic Church and some established orthodox churches. Such, for example, was the sectarianism in the Corinthian Church that Paul had to address it as follows [1 Cor. 1: 10-13]:

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you... for it has been declared to me concerning you... by those of Chloe's household, ... that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?

Clearly, a congregation that places more emphasis on denominationalism than Christianity cannot enable the building of a relationship among members, not to even talk of one with Jesus.

¹ "Is Sin a Civil or an Evil Right?" *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 8 No. 10, 1 April 2007; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_8/PDFs/Sinaciviloranevilright.pdf

b) *Religion emphasizes rituals*

Paul refers to emphasis on rituals, such as “forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” [1 Tim. 4: 3]. Paul is against such rituals if they do not promote true worship and the building of true relationships among believers in Jesus Christ. Indeed, there are as many rituals today as there are denominations/congregations. In some places, you must close your eyes to pray. In some places, women must cover their heads or stay outside. In some, you cannot wear your shoes to enter the church. In some, you must kneel down if you want to pray. In some, you cannot receive Holy Communion if you have not confessed your sins to a priest. ***There is nothing wrong with any of such rituals as long as it is not a political statement- to separate ‘us’ from the ‘rest’!***

c) *But the key to salvation is faith-based godliness!*

Paul also wrote, “For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.” The true believer’s trust is in the living God “who is the Saviour of all men [and women], especially of those who believe” [vv. 8-10]. God does not look at physical features but the heart [1 Sam. 16: 7].

When, for example, the scribes and Pharisees upbraided Jesus because His disciples transgressed the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands when they ate bread, Jesus asked them why they themselves transgressed the commandments of God because of their tradition. They drew near to God with their mouths and honoured Him with their lips but their hearts were far away from Him. They worshipped in vain, Jesus concluded, because what they taught as God’s doctrine were the commandments of men [Matt. 15: 1-9].

From the foregoing, we may now be able to understand why there is so much politics in the house of God. Most worshippers tend to place more emphasis on their relationship with the pastor/head and church rank than on godly relationship with others for the sake of God and His kingdom. How can we move away from such unprofitable practices? How can we build a strong relationship with God that we cannot see through those people around us?

2. Building a strong relationship

Paul wrote to Timothy, “Let no one despise your youth, but ***be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity***” [1 Tim. 4: 12]. Paul is also throwing the same challenge to us, namely, how can modern believers be an example to others in word, conduct, love, spirit, faith and purity?

Those are the building blocks of an everlasting relationship. By using the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar [**Jn 4: 1-42**], we can try to answer Paul's challenge as follows:

a) *Learn to interact*

You can be in a crowd and still be alone – and lonely! Unless and until you interact with others, you cannot have a relationship with them. For example, how many of the people you sit close to in public transport or in the church, office, classroom or restaurant do you know or interact with? Therefore, the beginning of building a relationship with others (and ultimately with God) is learning to interact with them.

The encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well is a classic example. As Lord and God, He knew when and where to find the woman, remembering that it is He that chooses us [**Jn 15: 16**]. In those days, women went out to draw water at evening time [**Gen. 24: 11**]. Jesus came to the well at six in the evening [**Jn 4: 6**].² Therefore, He came when he would be able to meet His target. Therefore, go to where you can interact with your target. If you are looking for a spouse, go to where you are most likely to find an eligible one, not your gender's club! When Jesus was about to begin His earthly ministry, He went into a synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath Day [**Lk 4: 14-16**]. In like manner, ***if you want to begin a relationship with Jesus, go to where they are talking about Him, preferably in a place of worship. Interact with fellow worshippers, especially those from whom you can gain a godly relationship.***

b) *Then pay attention*

You can listen and not hear, look and not see or touch and not feel! So, a measure of interaction is to pay attention. For example, the Samaritan woman could easily have drawn water and left without noticing the handsome young man by the well. After all, Samaritans had no dealings with Jews and she was living with a sixth man as husband [**Jn 4: 9,18**]. So, to draw her attention, Jesus asked her to give Him a drink. That drew her attention and the rest you know quite well!

Unless and until you pay attention to the words of God, especially in the Bible, you may be hearing nothing. Give as much attention to the word of God as you do to your favourite television programmes or unending conversations on social media. God keeps in perfect peace those whose mind is stayed on Him because they trust in Him [**Is. 26: 3**].

c) *Become committed*

² The sixth hour in John's Gospel means 6.00 p.m. because he used Roman time. In the other Gospels, the sixth hour would be 12 noon, Roman time [see for example, **Lk 23: 44**]

By the time the Samaritan woman came to know that the Man speaking with her was the Christ, she threw away her water pot, went her way into the city and told others, “Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” The people went out to meet Him and many of them believed in Jesus on account of the woman’s testimony. But after He had spent two days with them, “many more believed in Him because of His own word” [Jn 4: 27-42]. ***By your fruit, others will indeed know that you have a personal relationship with God through His only begotten Son, Jesus.***

Religion thrives on numbers and affinity but salvation on personal relationships with God. In religion, you are either Jew or Gentile, male or female, orthodox or Protestant. But in a relationship, you are ALL one in Christ Jesus [Gal. 3: 28]. Abraham is God’s friend, not because of his circumcision but because he believed (even before he was circumcised) and it was imputed to him for righteousness. That is why he is the father of all the people of faith [Gen. 15: 6, Is. 41: 8, Rom. 4: 16]. So, go with God, not with your hypocritical church leaders if you are interested in salvation. That is Paul’s challenge for us all in today’s study.

3. Conclusion: God is the Father only of believers!

God the Father is invisible; so is the Holy Spirit. But Jesus came in flesh and we have drawings of His physical features, no matter how distorted! When Philip, one of His disciples asked Him to show them the Father and that would be sufficient for them, Jesus answered, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” [Jn 14:7-9]. ***Therefore, relate to Jesus as your brother and friend by accepting Him as your Lord and Saviour and obeying Him completely [Lk 6: 46]. Then He will introduce you to His Father for adoption. That is what makes you a son (or daughter) of God and a joint-heir with Christ [Rom. 8: 14-17].***

You are now family. You have moved from religion to a relationship. You have graduated from a mere servant to His friend. Consequently, you can now love your neighbours, no matter their colour, creed or gender; you will obey whatsoever Jesus commands you and in return, He will make known to you all things that He has heard from His Father [Jn 15: 9-15].

It is time for you to move from religion to a relationship.