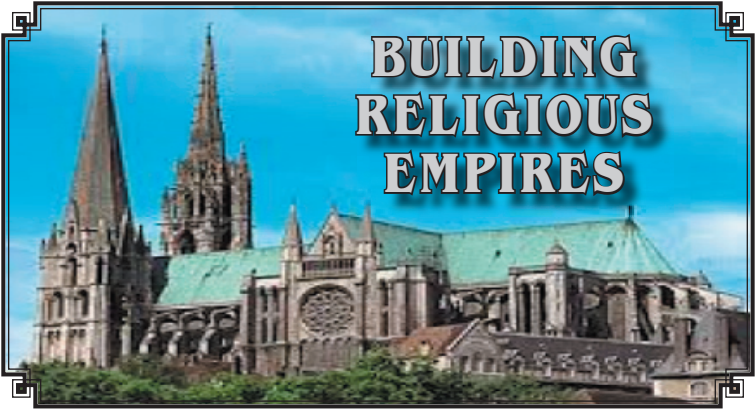


BUILDING RELIGIOUS EMPIRES



On January 1, 2024, a film was released that was based on the heroics of Sir Nicolas Winton. In 1939, Sir Winton rescued 669 Jewish children who were on their way to Nazi death camps. Though he rescued these children, the parents went on their way to the camps, never to be heard from again. As a result the rescue, four generations of survivors, that today number over 6,000, now live in the United Kingdom. They owe their very existence to the bravery of Sir Winton.

Back in 2014, Steven Sachur of BBC HARDtalk, had an interview with Winton, who at the time was 106 years old. During the interview—that was recently aired again on BBC—Sachur eventually came around to the “faith” of Winton. He ask Winton about his faith at the time he was carrying out the rescue. Winton responded that while in England at the time of Hitler’s invasion of European countries, he was a very devoted ‘Christian,’ even being baptized. He said he prayed with others in England that God would deliver England from the Germans. But then he revealed that when he arrived in Czechoslovakia, that was at the time under Nazi control, people were likewise praying. The religious people (“Christians”) of that nation were praying that

they would be delivered from the English. In witnessing this religious confusion, Winton then revealed that he discarded all religion. He concluded that he would be guided only by his own ethics, and not religion.

Winton died a year after the interview, and I am sure he has since changed his mind. Nevertheless, his conclusion from the confusion of the religions of men at the time is not unique. Unfortunately, he did not see the inconsistency of his own conclusions. He stated that during and after WW II, “ethics” was his moral guide. But on the other side of the ethics matter ... the side of the Nazis ... they too were driven by their “ethics.” Many years after the war, and during the trial in Israel of the war criminal, Adolf Eichman, Eichman was asked during the trial, “How did you feel when women and child were gassed to death in the death camps?” Eichman responded, “It was the right [ethical] thing for us to do for the German people at the time.”

When people give up on the moral codes (“ethics”) of God, everyone is relegated to determining their own ethical values according to their own desires. In the ignorance of the word of God, this is he moral values upon which religious empires are built.

In the world today, there are people driven by their own “ethics” to invade other countries and murder innocent people. Nothing has changed since the “war to end all wars” was fought over seventy-five years ago. Some religions today even call for the annihilation of other nations that do not conform to their religious “ethics.” Some have even hijacked the word “Christian” and tagged it on to the most horrific behavior

of twisted minds. Being “faithful” in some religions today means that one must commit murder in order to validate one’s faith in a god who has been created after the imagination of twisted minds.

All this confusion in the religious world today must set us on a diligent journey to discover the difference between religion and Bible-based faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If we do not take this journey, we may have consigned ourselves to the fate of all those who were in the bondage of the “Jews’ religion” in the first century.¹

A little history brings our minds into the context of a fallen religious empire in the first century, specifically the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The city fell as the Roman army, for several months, besieged the city. As “faithful” Jews within the city of Jerusalem at that time died of disease and starvation during Roman’s war against the city in A.D. 70, Josephus, the historian who was there, said that the dead bodies of the “faithful” Jews littered the grounds outside the walls of the city. The Romans had the problem of climbing over those dead bodies in order to get to the walls. But the “faithful” Jews on the inside of the walls threw their starved wives and children over the walls of Jerusalem as a consequence to their rejection of the incarnate Son of God who came to save them from such a fate.

The rebellious Jews had forty years to repent after they had rejected and crucified their Messiah and Savior, hanging Him on a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. Ironically, where they had crucified and buried the body of Jesus, their own dead bodies littered the ground just outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Nothing has changed with millions of religionists around the world today. Religious empires are still con-

structured and maintained on the foundation of lies and twisted Bible. So lest we lead ourselves astray in following after some man-made religious empire we have created after our own misguided “ethics” or religious heritage, we must investigate this urge to be empire builders and sustainers. We must take the journey to discover whether our faith is truly Bible based, or just the invention of our religious minded forefathers who handed us an empty faith that is based on religious traditions and man-made “ethics.” It may be that our forefathers also did as Jesus judged those who accused Him: *“All too well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your own [religious] traditions.”*²

~ **STONES FOR BUILDING EMPIRES** ~

Can God command things to be done, which things when obeyed, can become the identity of religion? For the sake of clarity, we need to ask this question from another perspective. Are there some things that God has commanded in the past, which if obeyed today, we would be considered religionists? The Jewish Christians of the first century sought to continue the Jewish religious empire of their forefathers by binding on Gentiles ordinances of their identity of the past that God Himself had commanded only for the Jews.

If one has a difficult time answering the preceding questions, then the problem may be that one is having difficulty separating the Sinai law that was given to the nation of Israel, from the law of faith and grace under which Christians now live today. In fact, if one does not understand this problem, then he or she could be preaching the “other gospel” about which Paul warned the Christians in Galatia.³

Therefore, a few examples on this matter are in order. If we bind on ourselves and others that which God made void, even though He initially commanded such to be done for different reasons before the cross, which reasons no longer exist, then we will fail to understand how God dealt with the nation of Israel in order to bring the Savior into the world. We are religionists if we practice these God-ordained commandments of the Sinai law today that He originally issued to preserve Israel until the Messiah showed up in history to deliver us from the curse of the Sinai Law. If we do not understand this, then we will bring into our faith and grace a system of meritorious law-keeping that is contrary to the gospel of grace. We will deny the gospel, and thus be alienated from the cross.

If one binds on the consciences of people that which God has not bound, then he or she is teaching another gospel, and in teaching another gospel, he or she is severed from Christ.

• **Religious empire builders bind where God has loosed:** Consider as an example the rite of circumcision. Circumcision was first commanded to Abraham. It was then included in the Sinai law for Israel as a nation in order that the Jews remain separate from the Gentiles.⁴ Circumcision was a command of the Sinai law, and thus, when a male child was born of a Jewish family under the Sinai law, he was to be circumcised the eighth day after birth in order to validate that he, as part of the nation of Israel, was in a covenant relationship with God. But the law that required circumcision was nailed to the cross.⁵ Christians today **are not** required to be circumcised in order to conform to the

law of circumcision that God gave to Israel. Believers come into a covenant relationship with God today upon their obedient response to the gospel.

In their obedience to the gospel, Christians are made dead to the Sinai law. They are no longer under the God-given law of circumcision. And in the context of such laws, Paul wrote to the early Gentile Christians, *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free [i.e., from the law of circumcision] and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”*⁶

Unfortunately, some Jewish Christians in the first century did not understand this point. They diligently wanted to continue the Jews’ religious empire that had stood firm for 1,450 years. Therefore, they sought to bind the rite of circumcision on the Gentile disciples in order that the Gentiles became a part of their Jewish heritage, and thus, saved. In fact, they taught that *“except you [Gentiles] are circumcised after the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”*⁷ These Jewish empire promoters tried to continue a religious empire when they bound on the new Gentile disciples something that was a part of the Sinai law. But at the time, the Sinai law had been made void by the death of the Son of God on the cross. In this way, the Gentile disciples, through their obedience to the gospel, became in their lives as Paul instructed in Romans 7:4: *“My brethren, you also became dead to the [Sinai] law through the body of Christ.”*

These Jewish disciples were binding a religious code of identity on those who had been made dead to the law of circumcision through their obedience to the gospel. The Jewish disciples proclaimed, therefore, that the new Gentile disciples could not be a part of

their religious empire because they had not been circumcised.

Those who seek to build religious empires do so by forcing on those who are free the restrictions of what defines their man-made religious empire.

- **Religious empires are always based on another gospel:** It was for this reason that the Holy Spirit stated that those who were preaching the law of circumcision in the first century were preaching **another gospel, and thus, resting their faith on their Jewish heritage.**⁸ In this particular historical case, Paul comforted the Gentile Christians of Galatia by writing, *“If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”*⁹

These are serious words. In fact, by the time Paul arrived at the revelation of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5, the Spirit directed his hand to write, *“You have been severed from Christ, you who seek to be justified by law. You have fallen from grace.”*¹⁰ In other words, if one would bind on Christians today that which is not bound by God under the new covenant of Christ under which gospel obedient people are now living, **then that person is severed from Christ.**

That which validates and sustains a religious empire inherently causes one to fall from grace. When we bind where God has not bound, even if that which we bind was a law of God that was given to Israel, then we are severed from Christ.

- **Empire religion is built on the stones of legalism:** Religion is defined as a system of legal rites and

ceremonies that are required to be performed by any religious establishment in order for the adherents to be considered “faithful,” and thus saved. Even if the rite or ceremony was in the past once a requirement of the law of God for a specific person or nation, when that law of God was made void by the cross, so also were the precepts of that law.

Once void, **any rite or ceremony of law becomes a religious ordinance if bound on Christians.** To bind such on those who are now under the law of faith and grace would be turning people into a religious sect. Therefore, those Jewish Christians in the first century who bound circumcision on Gentile Christians as a rite to be saved had fallen back into the bondage of the Jews’ religion from which they had been set free in their obedience to the gospel. Those who taught these things were subsequently changing the gospel of freedom into the bondage of a religious empire.¹¹

• **Building religious empires on the catechisms of the past:** This brings us to another illustration that should make us cautious about building religious empires by binding that which may have initially come from God, but was made void when it was supplanted by God’s latter revelation of the truth of the gospel. In particular, we must be cautioned about bringing ourselves into the bondage of the religion of our forefathers. The ceremonies of religious forefathers are not inherently authoritative.

Every generation must use the Bible to sort out religious traditions from their forefathers’ religious traditions and practices. In other words, there must be a restoration to the authority of the word of God

with every new generation simply because we often carry on with the traditions of our fathers.

There is a very good example of this in one of Paul's mission journeys. When Paul traveled through Ephesus on one of his extended mission journeys, he encountered about twelve disciples who were meeting in someone's house in the urban area of Ephesus.¹² Upon his initial contact with these disciples, he asked them concerning matters of the Holy Spirit. They replied, "*We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.*"¹³ Paul's obvious reply was, "*Into what then were you baptized?*"¹⁴ They responded, "*Into John's baptism.*"¹⁵

It is important to note that this encounter Paul had with these disciples took place many years after the Pentecost of Acts 2. These disciples, therefore, though they were sincere, had already established a religious tradition among themselves. As Paul discovered, their religious tradition was erroneous, for it denied the truth of obedience to the gospel (baptism in the name of Jesus), about which inspired Scripture was later written in Matthew 28:19,20, Mark 16:15,16; Romans 6:3-6. It was a religious belief and practice, therefore, that had to be replaced with gospel obedience to the gospel of Lord Jesus Christ.

The baptism of John was certainly from God. In fact, "*John came in the wilderness baptizing and preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*"¹⁶ But between the time of John's ministry to introduce the Son of God into the world, and about twenty-five years later when Paul encountered some of John's disciples in Ephesus, John's baptism became a religious rite because it was replaced by baptism in the name of Jesus.

John's baptism was annulled by baptism in the name of Jesus Christ on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30. If it were bound as a religious rite after Pentecost, then it brought those who obeyed it into the bondage of what had now become only a religious practice, even though it had originally come from God through John. Though in ignorance, the twelve Ephesian disciples' sincerity was revealed in their being baptized into John's baptism, the only baptism they knew. However, their sincerity to obey the current will of God could have turned into rejecting the word of God for the sake of keeping their past religious traditions.¹⁷ If they refused to obey the new teaching that Paul introduced to them, then they were building a religious empire on the foundation of John's baptism.

Luke recorded in Acts that there were about twelve disciples whom Paul encountered on the Ephesus visit. We could assume that one or two of the group had initially encountered John years before on a visit to Judea, or possibly were baptized by Apollos who initially knew only the baptism of John. Apollos then possibly left them, and rushed on to Corinth.¹⁸

Apollos had been erroneously teaching the baptism of John, but was corrected in Ephesus by two tentmakers, Aquila and Priscilla.¹⁹ After hearing the teaching of Aquila and Priscilla, he proved his sincerity by changing his beliefs on this matter. Unfortunately, he may have left the twelve disciples in ignorance, which disciples Paul later encountered when Apollos went on to Corinth. This may have been a possibility, but we feel that it was not in the nature of Apollos to leave the twelve walking in what had become at the time only a religious rite. Ephesus was a large city at the time. It

would be reasonable to conclude that this small group of disciples simply became lost in the maze of a large population, and thus, retained the belief and practice of the baptism of John.

Apollos had been preaching a religious rite out of ignorance because the baptism of John had been supplanted by baptism in the name of Jesus on Pentecost about twenty-five years before. Nevertheless, his ignorance of what was required by God after Pentecost was no excuse not to change what he believed and preached at the time he arrived in Ephesus.

The twelve Ephesian disciples were sincere when they heard that they must be baptized with John's baptism in order to receive remission of sins. **But at the time, they were sincere religionists.** Whether they heard this message from one or two of their number who had encountered John the Baptist many years before, or from Apollos, **John's baptism had been supplanted with baptism in the name of Jesus.**

By the time the twelve disciples heard of John's baptism, it had become, as circumcision, a religious rite, a rite that had originally come from God. But at the time God revealed this baptism to John, it was not a religious rite. It was a commandment of God that had to be obeyed if one wanted to receive remission of sins, and thus, fulfill all righteousness.²⁰ But by the time Paul encouraged the twelve disciples, John's baptism, as circumcision, was only a religious rite. If one obeyed either with the belief that both were necessary for salvation, then one obeyed another gospel. He or she would have brought themselves into the bondage of religion. (Those who teach tithing according to the Sinai law, as opposed to gospel-inspired giving under

Christ, need to seriously consider this point.)

• **Proclaimed Religious Empires:** Only the baptism of adults in the name of Jesus is valid today. We know of a great number of people who have stood before audiences and made their own self-declaration that they are saved. But this is nowhere found in the Bible. Some were baptized as infants, thus supposedly receiving remission of sins upon the basis of the parents declaration. But this is nowhere found in the Bible.

Instead of knowingly—this is knowledge from what is written in the Bible—being baptized in the name of Jesus into Christ for the remission of sins,²² some people have simply declared their own remission of sins, and thus, assumed their salvation while still remaining outside Christ. In declaring their own salvation, they have joined themselves to some religious group that accepts the conclusion of their personal declaration, rather than the testimony of the written word of God.

After their self-declaration of remission of sins took place. The self-proclaimed were baptized as a religious rite of the church to which they joined. Fortunately, it is God who proclaims our remission of sins upon the basis of our obedience to the gospel of His Son. We have no right to steal this right from God by making a self-proclamation of our salvation for ourselves. There is no such thing in the New Testament of one proclaiming his or her own salvation. There is only a written declaration of remission of sins when one has followed all that the word of God instructs in order to have the remission of sins, and thus, salvation.

We must ask ourselves that if we make baptism a re-

ligious rite that we perform following our own self-declaration that we are saved, then is this baptism for the remission of sins?²³ If we have remission of sins upon the fact of our self-declaration of salvation, then why would we even be baptized? If we were baptized, then were we not baptized as a religious work of merit?

Some have been baptized as a meritorious work of law. If we made our own self-declaration of salvation by “receiving Jesus,” “bringing Jesus into our lives,” saying some “sinner’s prayer,” and then were baptized, then we may have made our own baptism a religious rite, or simply a work of meritorious law-keeping. If we do this, then we are religionists who made a self-declaration in reference to our salvation. Our obedience to the gospel in baptism was probably not in response to the gospel of the incarnate Son of God who declares the remission of our sins upon our response to the gospel in baptism. We were baptized as a simple religious rite.

We must not forget that baptism is not a meritorious work of law. **It is a submissive response of gratitude because of one’s understanding of the incarnate sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross.** This is exactly what Paul meant when he wrote, “*You are not under law [of baptism], but under [the gospel of] grace.*”²⁴ “*And if by grace [you are saved], then it is no more by works [of merit or law], otherwise grace is no more grace.*”²⁵ “***For by grace you are saved through faith*** [in the gospel of God’s grace].”²⁶

We are not saved because we have been legally immersed in water. The action of immersion is not a work of merit by which we can put God in debt to save us. If we were to suppose such, then no apostate Christian

would ever be lost.²⁷ One would be saved on the merit of his baptism, not on the loving gratitude of his faith in the faith of Christ who went to the cross for our sins.

Paul rebaptized those in Ephesus who had obeyed John's baptism, which baptism was relegated to a religious rite when the gospel was first preached twenty-five years before on the day of Pentecost.²⁸ We would suggest that anyone do the same as the Ephesians if they feel that they made baptism a religious rite because they had before their baptism declared their own remission of sins. They were baptized under the authority (name) of the wrong person—their own authority— and thus, not in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They became their own self-declared authority for the remission of their own sins. But it is God who declares our remission of sins, and subsequent salvation when we are baptized into and under the authority of Christ.²⁹

Each person must be his or her own judge of this matter. It is not our place to judge the hearts of people. We can only read what is stated in the New Testament in reference to the purpose of baptism in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins. If one does have questions concerning his or her motives for being baptized many years ago, then it would certainly be wise to be baptized again for the right motives, and with the right knowledge on the subject, in order to have a good conscience before God. One must be his or her own judge in reference to these matters. At least when the Ephesians recognized that they did the wrong thing, in their sincerity, they corrected the matter.

When we speak of baby baptism, a whole new set of problems are uncovered. But it is appropriate in the

context of the Ephesian situation to remember that the Ephesians individually heard and were baptized as adults into John's baptism. But later, they individually heard and responded to Paul's teaching that they be baptized in the name of Jesus. No parents made any decisions or declarations for them as infants. No parents baptized them with John's baptism. No parents immersed their babies in the name of Jesus.

If one cannot get the point on this matter, then certainly he or she cannot understand that baby baptism is nowhere in the New Testament. But if one was "baptized" as a baby, and gets the point of the Ephesians' freedom to choose concerning their own salvation, then he or she, if baptized as a baby, should find someone, and then head to the water in order to be truly baptized in the name of Jesus. We must keep in mind that one's parents out of their ignorance were practicing a man-made religious rite and ceremony that was handed down to them as a tradition of their forefathers. When they handed you over as a baby to be sprinkled or immersed by a priest, that was not your voluntary decision. It was theirs. It was theirs in order that they conform to the religion of their fathers. Baptism in the name of Jesus must be our own decision as an adult. We would urge people to be like the Ephesians. When one learns something new in the word of God, then just do it.

We must never forget that if we are obedient to religious doctrines and teaching that have no foundation in the Bible, then we are either building or perpetuating some religious empire. But if we allow our lives to be directed by the word of the Lord Jesus Christ, then we are upholding His kingdom reign over all things. It

would be good to conclude here with an exhortation from Jesus:

*He who rejects Me and does not receive My words,
has one who judges Him.
The word that I have spoken,
the same will judge him in the last day.³⁰*

If you love Me you will keep My commandments.³¹

Encouraging Research: **1.** See Galatians 1:13,14, **2.** Mark 7:9; see Mark 7:1-9, **3.** See Galatians 1:6-9, **4.** See Genesis 17; Ex 12:44,48, **5.** See Romans 7:1-4; Colossians 2:14, **6.** Galatians 5:1, **7.** Acts 15:1, **8.** Galatians 1:8, **9.** Galatians 1:9, **10.** Galatians 5:4, **11.** See Galatians 5:1, **12.** Acts 19:1, **13.** Acts 19:2, **14.** Acts 19:3, **15.** Acts 19:3, **16.** Mark 1:4, **17.** See Mark 7:9, **18.** Acts 18:27; 19:1, **19.** See Acts 18:24-28, **20.** Matthew 3:15, **21.** Read 2 Corinthians 4:15, **22.** Acts 2:38, **23.** Read Acts 2:38, **24.** Romans 6:14, **25.** Romans 11:6, **26.** Ephesians 2:8, **27.** See 2 Peter 2:20-22, **28.** Acts 19:5, **29.** See Acts 22:16; Romans 6:3-6; Galatians 3:26-29, **30.** John 12:48, **31.** John 14:15

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