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Scholar's View: Religion, Relationship, or Ultimate Reality?

December 01, 2008 | Karen Swallow Prior

“It’s not a religion — it’s a relationship.” This is a common explanation we Evangelicals offer unbelievers to explain the difference between other religions and Christianity. But is “relationship” the sum total of Christianity?

Not according to Charles Colson, who spoke at Thomas Road Baptist Church’s recent InnovateChurch Conference. Colson has long been one of the most insightful and articulate defenders of the church within a post-Christian culture. In his talk, drawn largely from his new book, “The Faith,” Colson made the point that one of the names for Christ, Logos (John 1:1), means not only “word” or “truth” — the most common translations — but also “ultimate reality.” To be in a relationship with Christ, then, means more than simply having a relationship with Him (although it certainly is this). Indeed, to have a relationship with Christ is to be connected with ultimate reality in a way that is not otherwise possible. And the historic doctrines of the church are the framework by which we understand this ultimate reality.

Unfortunately, many in the contemporary church are abandoning these doctrines. One need only look at countless surveys and studies that show little, if any, difference between self-identified, born-again Christians and non-believers on a whole array of attitudes and behaviors, from the belief in absolute truth to statistics on divorce and abortion. Clearly, having a relationship with Christ does not automatically guarantee right thinking and application of that relationship to ultimate reality. Yet, we cannot fully be in a relationship without understanding the nature of the One with whom we have that relationship. The fact that Christ is the ultimate reality has implications for every aspect of existence and therefore for how we think and live. This is the essence of what is meant by “Christian worldview.”

And while Christians are lulled by the comforts of relationship, Colson pointed out, the world is attempting to understand and define ultimate reality with its own worldviews — feminism, Marxism, materialism, and nihilism, just to name a few. These ideologies are advancing into the culture — even into the church — with seductive lies and half-truths about the world, filling the gap left when Christians view Christ merely as a relationship but not ultimate reality.

A helpful analogy can be seen in marriage. Marriage is certainly one of many kinds of human relationships. But it is much more than a relationship; it is a covenant that alters the ultimate reality of those who enter into it. Relationships change — they can grow, they can crumble. Seeing marriage merely as a relationship is probably why so many marriages end in divorce. But understanding marriage as an ultimate reality — the transformation of two into one flesh — makes it much more than a relationship. Rightly understood, marriage changes who one is and how one relates to the world.

Similarly, we err in understanding Christianity solely as a personal relationship. More than that, it is a personal relationship with the One upon whom the very foundation of the world is centered. And that truth provides insight into ultimate reality that no mere religion can offer.

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