

Ritual and Liturgy

READING

Exodus 12

Numbers 9

Deuteronomy 16

2 Kings 22,23

Galatians 4

Romans 2

I'm not sure why, but it seems to be in our nature to want to formalise and ritualise our religion.

I suspect it's something about us wanting to feel like we have contributed in some way, so that somehow we have done something towards earning our own salvation, that we have done something to repay God for what he has given us.

If you read Exodus 12 the instructions for the first Passover were pretty simple. Eat a, (perfect), lamb, cooked in a certain way, and be ready to move.

Later in the desert they celebrated it again. And the instructions were the same simple thing. (Numbers 9)

And later in Deuteronomy 16 the feasts were listed again, and still the Passover was a simple meal of remembrance.

No great ritual. No liturgy. No extras. No special cups. Simple, poignant, symbolic, powerful.

But over the years it became a whole liturgy where this boy has to ask this question, and that man has to answer this way. And then this person has to pass that cup to this person and ask these questions.

It's in our nature to complicate religion with ritual. We think we're doing the right thing. But we're not.

We also seem to have an inbuilt desire to build temples to our gods too. Even Christians seem to want to do this. God actually lives in us. Our bodies are his temple. We know he doesn't live in temples made by man. And yet, we see church after church where the buildings are grand and extravagant.

Somehow it's in our nature to want to "bring glory to God" by building big and impressive temples. But Christianity is supposed to be different.

God lives in **us**. Get it?

Perhaps if we didn't have such grand temples that might even give us opportunities to tell people why not - that God is different, and he lives in people now. God wants to have a relationship with us, not empty ritualised religion, but a relationship. Religion is lifeless, dead, worthless. But relationship is life.

Religion is us trying to earn something from God. Relationship is us realising that we can't earn it, and rejoicing in the fact that we don't even have to.

In 2 Kings 22,23 we read how young king Josiah had the temple cleaned out. They even found idols to other gods, and prostitutes. In Yahweh's temple! Little by little they had forgotten the relationship they had with him.

They also found the Book of the Law. They read it. They realised how far they had fallen and what they had lost. They repented.

How about us? How far have we fallen? What have we lost? ;

In Galatians 4 Paulus laments that the Galatians are celebrating special days and months and wonders if he has wasted his time with them. The historian Josephus also lamented that Christians of his day were very quick to run off and join pagan festivals, but amazed that the pagans would never consider joining the Christians.

Around the 4th century the church stopped celebrating Passover and started celebrating Easter and Christmas instead. Easter and Christmas were both "Christianised" versions of existing pagan festivals. It seems that the church adopted these pagan festivals in order to make itself more attractive to the pagans. "You don't have to run off to the pagan festivals, we have something like that right here."

Of course, they dressed them up as being about Yeshua, but they are still ritualised religion in the place of relationship.

The most common argument I hear for "doing" Christmas and Easter is that if it wasn't for these celebrations we would never get some people to come to church.

So what? We're supposed to go to them, not get them to come to us. And should we do evil that good will result? (Romans 2).

If you think one day is special, that's between you and God. But I wonder how much of our ritual has come about because we have tried to make church more attractive to non-Christians. Church isn't for non-Christians, it's for Christians. If non-Christians don't like it, that doesn't matter.

Maybe it's time for a clean-out of the church. Like in Josiah's day. To go back to the Book and see what we have lost.

Maybe it's time for repentance.