**A “Personal” Relationship with God**

*by Jeremiah Cox*

The word “religion” has been given a negative connotation by many in the world today. They say it speaks of rules, regulations, and merit, as opposed to a gospel message that speaks of grace. When discussing the connection from God to man, and man to God, it is not uncommon to hear the phrase, “I have a personal relationship with God.” The world uses this phrase in an attempt to eradicate the importance of religious practice. That is, the boundaries, expectations, and nature of God’s relationship to man, and vice versa, are left to the discretion of each individual. This concept is not scriptural in the least.

Certainly, the Bible discusses a relationship between God and man. However, “relationship” is a general word that must be considered in context in order to understand its meaning. Webster defines it as “the state of being related or interrelated; the relation connecting or binding participants in a relationship.” The nature of a relationship depends on the nature of its participants. It is illogical to assume that we have an input as to the components of God’s relationship to man when it is God who initially created that relationship. We are the creature, and God is the Creator! We have about as much input as to what our relationship with God should be as a machine has with the machinist! It is God who defines His relationship with His creation. He revealed to us via scripture, *“Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all”* (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

When the world mentions a “personal” relationship with God they are truly indicating that the defining factors of the relationship belong to them, not God. When this occurs, there is no longer an **objective** standard, but a **subjective** standard. This shows self-centeredness, and pride, which God hates. People who claim to have this type of relationship with God imply that they are somewhat special in comparison to everyone else. On the contrary, Paul wrote, *“the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men”* (Titus 2:11). It did not appear to individuals, but mankind as a whole (cf. John 3:16). Furthermore, this grace is not idle, but teaches – *“teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age”* (Titus 2:12). The pedagogical aspect of God’s grace is not divisive amongst its recipients, rather, it promotes unity. In fact, Paul exhorted the Ephesian brethren to *“keep the unity of the Spirit”* (Ephesians 4:3). The parameters, and expectations of God’s relationship to man remain the same from individual to individual. If it were not so, we would not be able to maintain the same mind and judgment (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 2:2). Surely we are special, or God would not have sent His Son to die for us. However, not one of us is of more value than the other.

While on earth, Jesus had physical relationships. He had a fleshly mother, and siblings (cf. Matthew 13:55-56). However, when Jesus was notified that His earthly family was asking for Him, He replied, *“’Who is My mother and who are My brothers?’ And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, ‘Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother’”* (Matthew 12:46-50). He redirected the attention from His “personal,” or fleshly relationships, to His spiritual relationships. His physical family received no greater benefit than those who would obey His Father’s will. Two of His fleshly brothers, James and Jude, mimicked this attitude when they wrote their epistles. Neither one mentioned that Jesus was their physical brother. Rather, they mentioned their spiritual relationship with Christ which was no different than that of their recipients – they were bondservants of Jesus Christ (cf. James 1:1; Jude 1). God expected the same from them as He does from us.

The only way in which we possess a “personal” relationship with God has to do with our own responsibilities. Paul wrote, *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”* (Philippians 2:12). *“For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil”* (Ecclesiastes 12:14). God will not judge a man by other men, but by His word, and that man’s actions (cf. John 12:44-50). The nature of the relationship from God to man, and its requirements, are the same for each man. However, we must individually take heed of God’s expectations to ensure our own salvation.

**Beware of Your Influence**

*by Jeremiah Cox*

Influence is a powerful thing to possess. Everyone wields the ability to influence, although some have greater influence than others. A parent has a colossal influence on their child; a grandparent to a grandchild; siblings to one another; a teacher to a student; an elder to a local church; a mature Christian to a babe in Christ; etc. A position of influence comes with great responsibility; for influence can be both positive, and negative. Therefore, we must be creatures of integrity and virtue to ensure our influence is purely positive.

In part, Christians are created for the purpose of influencing others. Jesus preached on influence when He metaphorically stated that Christians are salt and light in the world (cf. Matthew 5:13-14). We are seen by men, and what men see must be what is acceptable to God. Otherwise, our influence will bring destruction to those who follow.

The apostle Peter is an apt example of the power of influence, and how we must be constantly aware of our actions, and those who witness them. In Paul’s epistle to the church in Galatia he mentioned a confrontation he had with Peter. Although Peter was aware that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews (cf. Acts 10), he played the hypocrite and showed partiality. He would eat with the Gentiles, but when his Jewish brethren arrived he withdrew himself from their company (cf. Galatians 2:11-13). This behavior was intolerable. Appropriately, Paul “withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed” (2:11). His actions were disgustingly inappropriate, and inconsistent. However, what is more alarming is the negative influence he had on others who looked up to him as an apostle of the Lord: “And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy” (2:13).

Assuredly, their actions were a result of free-will, but Peter’s influence obviously played a monumental role in their decision. The power of Peter’s influence was emphasized by Paul when he said, “so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.” Barnabas was no babe in Christ. He was practiced in the faith, and had accomplished much good for the sake of Christ’s kingdom. The Holy Spirit revealed that Barnabas was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). Nevertheless, Peter’s influence was sufficient for the devil to lead this good man down a path of sin.

No doubt Peter regretted his actions and learned a lesson about the influence he possessed. If only we would do the same without experiencing a failure ourselves! We must recognize that leading someone astray via example is tantamount to leading them astray via teaching them false doctrine. We will be judged not only by our words, but our deeds (cf. Colossians 3:17; Romans 2:6)! God is watching always, and others spectate in addition! What are they seeing, and how are they reacting?