

Characteristics of a Pharisaic System:

Defining the problem

This section lists the categories in which Pharisaism is most evident in the Church today (as shown on the preceding wheel) and gives examples of each. This is leaven made-visible and Jesus did not include it in His teaching or ministry.

Business: Pharisaic religion has all the earmarks of a thriving business and budgets are a universal feature. After all, mortgages, salaries, benefits and retirement accounts have to be paid; maintenance, utilities and program expenses have to be met. As in any business, there are properties and facilities to own and manage, employees to hire and supervise, insurance and taxes to pay, goals to set, organizational charts and job descriptions to write, vetting and hiring processes to follow, policies and procedures to implement, planning and programs to define and execute, marketing strategies to devise, equipment to maintain and upgrade, advertising and printing projects to fund, accountants, secretaries, receptionists, and on it goes. Thus the never-ending need for fund drives, pledges, building campaigns, weekly collections, and the annual pep-talk on tithing (which is erroneously presented as both a New Testament principle and a way for individuals to wring blessings from God's hands). And if you happen to be attending a "prosperity" church, the talk of money never seems to end. After all, the system runs only when the money is there to fund it, so talk of it we must.¹

Pharisaic religion makes a grand effort to present itself as respectable, attractive, entertaining, stable, and mainstream for the sake of its bottom line, just like any business. One way it accomplishes this is by constructing and owning impressive buildings and property. And though one might argue that owning property makes "doing church" and spreading the gospel easier, or that it makes good economic sense, it almost invariably leads to a variety of compromises and stresses: church-growth campaigns with their emphasis on numbers and demographics; a preoccupation with fund-raising strategies; hiring efforts that focus on a candidate's ability to attract and retain members (rather than godliness or commitment to truth); a tendency to embrace the "bigger is better" mega-church philosophy, leading ultimately to unmanageably large congregations; and many decisions that feed the corporate desire for comfort and nicely appointed surroundings. Bottom line? The church ends up setting a little smidgen aside for the poor or for missions and spends the bulk of its resources on itself.⁴⁹ We start collecting and building things. Bigger and better things. In honor of God, of course. We think that big churches and big congregations are a sign of God's approval or of true worship, even if we have to

¹ Lest someone be tempted to argue that Jesus had a budget and used money, let us just say that we are not saying money itself is evil, or that people don't need money, inside the church or without it, or that giving is evil. We *are* saying that a church that revolves around the need for large sums of money is at risk of compromise and is probably pharisaic.

compromise our principles or the Scriptures to achieve them. We all know that God's temple post-cross is the human body of a believer and the idea that God dwells today within a building that is sacred is faulty thinking and leads to all sorts of compromises. And yet virtually all religions have temples or church buildings and pharisaic Christianity is no exception. It is a mini-reflection of the world, and careers and personal ambition are the lifeblood of the system.

Realize this: once your church owns property, it is responsible to protect the investment of so many. Policies and procedures will be drafted (or mandated from higher up the ladder) to make sure that that investment is not threatened. These policies and self-protective procedures will virtually always trump the leading of the Holy Spirit in any case where the two are in conflict. After all, we have a business to maintain and assets to protect. And who wants to risk getting sued these days? In our hair-trigger, politically correct and litigious society, we can't risk saying something that might offend a certain segment of our population. That would be practical suicide. Just foolish.

Hierarchies: Boards, councils, presidents, denominational committees, mission boards and various other groups control our churches. Organizational charts illustrate the chain of command. In the Catholic Church, there is the Magisterium of the Church, the cardinals, archbishops, diocesan bishops and pope who call the shots and determine right doctrine that all must adhere to. This hierarchical approach emphasizes and establishes the leader/laity division, in direct opposition to Jesus' own words.² An entire cadre of individuals, almost a separate caste, are "in charge" of the churches and direct their every move. This is characteristic of Pharisaic religion. Never mind if these individuals are not Spirit-filled believers. They have control of the property and the programs and dictate everything from sermon subject to worship songs to Sunday schedule to statements of faith. They are almost invariably titled (reverend, senior pastor, father, cardinal, bishop, pope) and salaried office-holders with status in the church and community. They often wear distinctive attire that separates and elevates them and identifies them as members of a special class (vestments, collars, robes, cassocks, stoles, miters, tassels). Jesus instructed us specifically to avoid this practice, and yet we have almost completely ignored His warnings.

This is not to say we cannot have any organizational or oversight functions in the churches. Certain tasks require organization (for example, distributing food to the widows) and elders are responsible to protect churches from false Christs, false gospels and false brethren and to discipline or evict those who threaten the purity of the Body. But humans have a tendency to elevate people, and people have a tendency to elevate themselves when they feel inadequate.

² Mat. 23:8-12

This practice produces pharisaic qualities in our churches. Equality of value (not necessarily function³ or gifting) among the brethren is essential.

Performance: Going to a pharisaic church is a lot like going to the symphony. We sit in a pew and watch the performance, impressed and awed by the talent of those “in leadership.” Dynamic, attractive speakers, amazing musicians and singers, even actors grace our stages, moving us with their incredible abilities, eloquence, humor and knowledge. Finely crafted three-point sermons are rehearsed, jokes and all, for maximum effect and then repeated word-for-word from service to service. Having a meaningful part in this drama is the goal for many. The rest of us (the sheeple) dutifully and quietly play our part as appreciative and admiring spectators in this “divine drama,” sitting or standing on cue, occasionally clapping, often fully convinced that what we just witnessed was actually “church.” It’s not. It’s a show, complete with lighting, a stage, audio-visual equipment, music, speakers, costumes and yes, an audience. That’s our part. We get to participate here and there: repeat certain phrases now and then, sing the songs we are told to sing (that’s the best part), greet our neighbor on command, maybe hand out bulletins or pass the collection plate, and then spend a few minutes chit-chatting afterward with other theater-goers. But it’s all part of a carefully orchestrated performance that is timed down to the minute and woe to anyone who disrupts the schedule. Because ultimately it is this *performance* that is most responsible for attracting and holding the members who pay the bills, and if they aren’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.

Credentials: The qualifications for ministry in a pharisaic system are very similar to those in the world of business. Appropriate degrees, impressive resumé’s, obvious professionalism, proven talent (in oratory, teaching, writing, exposition, leadership, musical ability as the case may be), intelligence, charisma, appearance, bearing, self-confidence, personal vision, poise, organizational/administrative ability, charm, wit, popularity, notoriety, all conspire to recommend individuals to positions of leadership. Churches compete for the best and brightest on the employment circuit. Of course reputation and character are usually factored in as *disqualifiers* more than as primary criteria. This is because unless we choose our leaders from among ourselves, we cannot know someone well enough in a couple of interviews to make qualified judgments about their sanctification and character. We can and do *investigate* people to some degree and that is necessary in a pharisaic system because we have no way of knowing the individual other than via second-hand information (unless he happened to rise through the ranks at our own church). Individuals without appropriate credentials are just not qualified to lead for the most part in our churches. And yet look whom God chose as His leaders: stammerers, little boys, and know-nothing hicks. God doesn’t like being upstaged, nor should He be.

³ Though Paul says “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted.” (1 Cor. 14:31)

Membership: Pharisaic systems emphasize membership in place of true relational intimacy and unity. If you're a bona-fide member in good standing, you're part of the church. Or even if you just come regularly and sit in the same pew or section each week, regardless if you ever speak to anyone or participate in any church activities, you are a member. Some churches have actual commitment documents that are required for those who want to belong, just like any other club. It is an artificial unity; a pretty picture, but an illusion. Intimacy and transparency are almost impossible values to cultivate in large pharisaic churches. A quick "Hi, how are ya?" during a 10-minute fellowship-time hardly makes for authentic and durable relationships. Masks are worn to protect individuals, especially those in leadership, from the fallout of being truly known. Public confession and repentance are usually out, or limited in various ways. Pseudo-spirituality and pseudo-unity are in. Modern cell groups are an effort to counter this flaw and they can do so to some degree depending on how they are conducted, but too often they are simply a smaller version of the Sunday service with similar limitations (a set agenda, a prescribed study, formal teaching and even scripted sharing). Everyone puts on their best face and tries to conform to the expected norms in order to be accepted.

Sects: Pharisaic churches are often willing to divide over non-essential doctrines. They also will *unite* around a gifted leader or around particular theological systems or constructs. This factionalism is the root of denominationalism, Christian cults and rigid systematic theologies. These sects spawn a variety of appendages, such as seminaries, schools and publishing houses that promote their particular ideologies, further hardening their positions and making it almost impossible to revise or abandon the originating doctrine(s) at an institutional level. So denominations become self-perpetuating entities, little kingdoms, indoctrinating both children and adults into their camps through a variety of means: summer camps, vacation bible schools, newsletters, creeds, statements of faith, Sunday Schools, claims of exceptionalism and so on, hardening the divide. It is an alienating dynamic and emphasizes exclusiveness.

Even in the area of missions, pharisaic religion often focuses on making converts to its own sect or denomination rather than to the Body of Christ. It also often relies on human methods and strategic plans rather than allowing the Spirit of God to direct His saints to do the work of evangelism. Evidences of this pharisaic approach include denominational mission boards, vetting processes, support requirements (based on western standards) and methods, mandatory formal cross-cultural mission training and academic degree requirements. Often these requirements are so burdensome that they end up strapping the potential missionary with unmanageable debt or sapping their enthusiasm, not to mention defeating simple faith in God's protection and provision.⁴ Rather than submitting entirely to God and allowing the Spirit to direct our steps, we

⁴ "Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts; or a bag for your journey, or even two tunics, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support. And into whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it;

create a canned program complete with rigid policies and procedures and then ask God to rubberstamp it. Or we prohibit those with passion, commitment and faith from following their calling until they meet *our* expectations and requirements for ministry rather than God's, who is often more interested in obedience than any degree of human preparedness. Spontaneity is one of the hallmarks of God's participation. "The wind blows where it will and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)⁵ Denominations actively work against this principle by setting up a series of hoops for people to jump through and criteria to meet before they can simply obey God.

Forms: Pharisaic churches tend to promote a formulaic approach to God and faith. Some examples of forms include: ritualized sacraments, liturgies, novenas, litanies, orders of service, responsive readings, rote prayers, the Mass, rosaries, stations of the cross, candle-lighting rituals, statues, icons. For some, it is this "pomp and ceremony" that gives church its reverent flavor and they find it comforting and uplifting. Reverence is good if it's directed at the right thing. And in the New Covenant, there is only one thing that deserves our reverence. Unfortunately, it is very easy to participate in these repetitive forms week after week without any real heart involvement. When this happens, it is akin to a robotic "body of Christ." It moves, it walks, it talks, but it is often devoid of the Spirit ("which gives life from the dead").

Traditions (of Men): Traditions are the backbone of the pharisaic church. They insure continuity and, at the same time, limit access to "new" concepts, insights, interpretations or emphases. Growth in understanding over time is stymied. Traditions include such things as Lent, Holy Days of Obligation, Christmas and Advent, Easter, the formal priesthood, celibacy, vegetarianism, eating fish on Friday, required attendance at Mass, Masses for the dead, prayers for the dead, baptism for the dead, Limbo, Purgatory, indulgences, holy water, various feast days, Church fathers, various false theologies, papal dogmas, beatifications and sainthood, the principle of apostolic succession, Jewish Oral Law, laws of the church, praying to saints, processions honoring Mary, doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception, Assumption and perpetual virginity, the Friday crucifixion, the three wise men, various forms of self-abasement or self-flagellation, infant baptism, Christian culture and lingo, and so on. All of these are "add-ons" to the simple

and abide there until you go away." And so on. It's true these men did not go to cities outside of Israel at this point, but they did later and it doesn't appear that they went to language school beforehand.

⁵ Yes, Jesus sent the 12 and the 70 out with basic instructions for the mission at hand. But He did not send them with money, let alone their entire financial future provided or planned for, including their retirement (something the Scriptures know nothing of). Nor did He require that they be formally educated. He required that they trust God completely, both for their daily provision and for the supernatural power they would need to carry out their mission. This was the case with all who came under His call. The reason? He wanted them to experience God's miraculous provision, His encouragement, His faithfulness, His power, so that they would have stories that would sustain them in future missionary endeavors and never be hindered by serious doubts about God's involvement in all that He had called them to do.

Gospel of Jesus Christ and keep people trapped in practices and rituals that do not advance the Kingdom of God nor accurately portray its values.

Orthodoxies: Pharisaic religion is a *prescribed* religion, where orthodox beliefs are spelled out and strict adherence is required for admission to membership or ministry. Challenging the prevailing view is practical suicide. The freedom to “work out one’s own salvation with fear and trembling” is missing. This is characterized by creeds, canons, church councils, confessions, statements of faith, theologies, formal dogma, catechisms, papal infallibility and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. Examples include Reformed Theology, Calvinism’s five points, the Westminster Confession, the Catholic catechism, Covenant Theology, Kingdom Now and Reconstruction Theologies, and even the Trinity doctrine, to name a few. To the degree that these “fences” keep us enslaved to false concepts or hinder our freedom to speak about, inquire about, or challenge traditional precepts, they are pharisaical.

Formal Education: Pharisaic religion values knowledge and exalts the highly educated. Seminaries, bible schools and colleges, professors, academic authorities (men of reputation), degrees, impressive resumés and systematic theologies are all highly esteemed. The myriad of books, commentaries, magazines, and denominational publishing houses are also a reflection of this priority, along with the extensive personal libraries valued by many in ministry.

Pharisaic churches are characterized by an obsession with words – eloquent and erudite words reminiscent of Paul’s “cleverness of speech”– rather than the power of the Holy Spirit or personal experience with God. “Church” revolves around the pastor-teacher, the weekly sermon, the gift of teaching, Bible studies, and expository preaching. Hiring focuses on a person’s facility with words, their ability to charm, captivate, convict, exhort, humor, entertain, or exposit the Word better than others. This talent becomes, for all intents and purposes, a measure of spiritual maturity.⁶

Unfortunately, an academic emphasis on homiletics, hermeneutics, and hyper-literal word-parsing often conspires to deprive individuals of the capacity to see into God’s heart. Many seminary students will say that their education, with its emphasis on analysis, exegesis, facts and tradition robbed them of their passion for God and replaced it with an elitist mentality and a dead heart. To make matters worse, Pharisaic religion often practices defensive, adversarial debating, a loveless and argumentative approach to evangelism that is more concerned with proving oneself right and convincing the mind than winning the heart of an unbeliever (reminiscent of Paul’s noisy gong in 1 Cor. 13). Unlike the man born blind who received his sight and testified of the One who healed

⁶ We are not saying Jesus did not use words. Of course He did. Words are often required for precise communication. However, Jesus did not come to them with words only. That is what we do. He, on the other hand, came with power also, as did Paul. (1 Cor. 2:4-5)

him, we powerless (and sometimes arrogant) Christians are frequently left with nothing but argument or service, both of which are often seen by the lost as arrogant and/or manipulative. It is good to understand biblical typology and the depths of God's revelation, but not at the expense of a personal encounter with this God and a testimony that shines with genuine faith and confidence in both His existence and His love, for self and others.⁷

The fact is, the majority of Christendom throughout the ages has been illiterate and Jesus' own apostles were not formally educated, and yet they turned the world upside down. The gospel is not in any way dependent on formal education, literacy, books, or the money to print them. Jesus gave us two main tools—baptism and communion—to illustrate the gospel, simple living pictures that even a child can comprehend. Note that we don't just read about them, we experience them. Faith, repentance, forgiveness and submission to the Holy Spirit are not difficult concepts to convey and the transformations they effect catalyze more of the same when the Church is functioning as it was intended. Unfortunately, relegating evangelism, teaching, preaching and discipleship to a formal clerical class leads individual believers to abdicate their rightful role in favor of those who are "trained," fostering feelings of inadequacy among rank-and-file believers. Just as Satan would have it.

Programs are a hallmark of Pharisaic religion. A formal, programmed approach to just about everything relating to church and ministry means that spontaneity⁸ is eschewed for the predictable, safe and easily controlled. Nothing is left to chance and often that means that nothing is left to the Holy Spirit. Examples include preprogrammed worship, rehearsed sermons, rigid preaching schedules, timed orders of service, structured fellowship programs (small versions of "big church"), strategic planning, and canned outreach or discipleship programs. In many churches these programs *are* led by Spirit-filled individuals who are genuinely trying to disciple others or win the lost, but they are often restricted or controlled by higher ups who prohibit certain approaches or activities because of various perceived dangers, policy issues, risk management, or rigid ideologies. Or they operate by human strength and wisdom using business-oriented strategic planning methods. Pharisaism is an effort at living the Christian life without the active participation of the Holy Spirit and programs are the perfect vehicle for man-centered ministry. The emphasis is on "doing" church or "going to church" rather than "being" the church 24/7. Does this mean that God does not use these vehicles to reach people? No, He works through those individuals who are submitted to Him regardless of the form that constrains them,

⁷ We are not saying Jesus or Paul never engaged in any form of argument. They were often confronted by adversarial "debaters" and they responded as they were led. Sometimes they confronted back. Sometimes they attacked verbally (i.e., Matt. 23). But always because they were passionate in defense of the truth and were frustrated with the hard-heartedness of those who vigorously opposed them. Keep in mind, the Pharisees and scribes made up the bulk of that group, if not the entire group. Jesus called them out publicly and exposed them because no one else could even see it and no one else in that society could afford to do it. Jesus had nothing to lose. He didn't need their respect or acceptance.

⁸ John 3:8

but, as it were, with one hand tied behind His back. There are limits to what God can do when “religion” and “programs” and “policies” rule the day and take precedence over the Holy Spirit.

Politics: The pharisaic church involves itself in the kingdoms of the world and actively attempts to make them over in its own image, not by wooing and winning the lost to Christ (its true mandate), but by imposing its views and morés on an adulterous generation. Jesus said His Kingdom was not of this world and commissioned the Church to make disciples by spreading the good news. Pharisaism, on the other hand, settles for trying to impose its beliefs and practices on society at-large without converting hearts, believing *that* alone will produce a better, more Christian world. Unfortunately, cleaning the outside of the cup is not adequate for the Church of Jesus Christ. And it’s the wrong emphasis. This effort to conform the world to Christ by external pressure, legislation or political control is doomed to failure and only motivates more resistance to Jesus and the Gospel. Love and individual evangelism is our mandate and method to win the world to Christ. Any attempt to circumvent that primary commission is compromised. Many of our ancestors and many contemporary American Christians would like to create a theocracy or bring peace to the world before Jesus returns in power and glory. Any attempt by man to create this earthly Kingdom of God apart from Jesus’ physical presence is doomed, marred by fallen humans and their native lust for power and authority as well as their limited understanding of who God is and what He desires.⁹ This does not mean, however, that the Kingdom of God cannot reign unopposed in our own hearts, or that we should not speak up for righteousness when given the opportunity, or stand against evil, in whatever context we are allowed. Unfortunately, politics is the art of compromise and requires that we give ground to the enemy (the god of this world) or work within his world system to achieve any portion of our political agenda. Jesus did not compromise with the political elements of His day because He was fully aware of this reality, and neither should we. We only need look at what happens to a politician who stands up for traditional values in today’s climate to see how inhospitable our society is to God. The people however can rise up and vote for the most godly individuals they can find who will uphold the

⁹ This should not, in any way, be construed as an encouragement to Christians to abandon their civic duties and callings. We can and should vote our conscience. We can be involved in politics as long as we can do so without compromising our Christian principles (a near impossibility in the world of politics, since politics is the art of compromise). Some may be called to this, as salt and light in a fallen world. But we shouldn’t confuse this world with the world to come. We cannot install the kingdom of God on earth by our own efforts, nor by constraining fallen men to conform to Messianic ideals. That role belongs to Jesus and His Bride when He returns. Our job is to put our lives on the line, both by our testimony lived out and our confession of faith and love for the lost, in the hopes of drawing men to Jesus. But just as He does not, we cannot force them to embrace Him or His commandments on a heart level. We can lobby for true justice and righteousness to be the standard for all of our laws as it should be, but we cannot force those standards on a world that hates God and wants no part of His truth. If they reject Him, they will reject us and our message. Christianity is an individual faith lived out, and America is not a theocracy. Our leaders must represent all of our citizens, aiming to bring them to a truer understanding of the common good. If we choose leaders who understand that “good” as Jesus did, we will be blessed, even if some despise the outcome. Unfortunately, in a society that is almost diametrically opposed to God’s truth, there is not much likelihood that a truly godly person will be elected. But for many years America was blessed because she gave, at the very least, lip service to the true God and defended Israel. This is rapidly fading, and God’s blessing with it.

Constitution and that should be encouraged by all means. But trying to establish the utopian Kingdom of God on earth by political means is doomed to failure.

NOTE: Notice that we did not include elements like Faith, Repentance, Perseverance and Obedience in this chart. There are many faithful believers who are involved, unknowingly, in Pharisaic religion and yet are truly saved, Spirit-filled and walking with Jesus. Their faith, repentance and obedience is no less real than that of someone who is not captive to this false system. However, there will also be those whose understanding of these elements *is* deficient. For example, for some the idea of faith may have more or less exclusive reference to a set of doctrines they believe. A “head-faith,” if you will. Their view of repentance may have the flavor of a one-time initial act of entering into salvation rather than an ongoing accountability. And obedience may be to a less onerous standard because they believe “once saved always saved.” Thus perseverance may be something they consider to be automatic. But since there is a mixture of both in pharisaical churches, we did not include these elements as distinctives.

K.C.