***Why I Joined A Dead Religion***

The man in the white dress was coming around, handing out gifts to the children on their knees. We mixed group of silver-haired saints, sticky faced toddlers, working class stiffs, and menopausal moms. Some ancient tune being played in the background, the notes brought invisible peace that I didn't know I needed. He put the bread in my waiting hand, I took it and ate. He gave me red wine, I took it and drank.

Nothing changed - but everything had. So I got up, gave a slight bow, and as I walked away from the portal and back to my seat I said to myself, "THAT is why I joined a dead religion."

***Dead.***

That's what I always thought. That's what I was always told. Any stodgy church that doesn't have a rockin' band is dead. Any church that isn't growing is dead. Any church that limits the Holy Spirit is dead. Any church without a youth group is dead. Any church without a coffee shop is dead. Any church that's older than 50 years is dead.
Why on earth would I ever want to be set foot in a rotting graveyard like that?

I'm into "deeds not creeds," ya know? Creeds are for zombies - the dumb moans of spiritless shells. Confessions are for the walking dead - lifeless words that can't cast heavenly spells. No, none of that ancient garbage is for the "true believer." The time for formulas has come & gone, and we've evolved. We're off the map and we're spirit filled. At least, everyone around me was...

Don't you know? In a "spirit filled" church, pastors must wear skinny jeans - they all do, you see. They tell funny jokes, give relevant references to the upcoming Star Wars film and can life coach like nobody's business from the stage. Canned messages from [sermons.com](http://sermons.com/) cast a vision from heaven and all the good little lemmings will jump off the cliff together.

Hipster Pastor has the Words of Life but never uses them, doesn't even know what to do with them except throw out a nugget here or there, but mostly keeps them shut in that book of red letters. Then like the performer that he is, he skillfully turns the mirror on you and there you are; kind of happy about it because you love yourself most of all. Only it's not the squeaky clean image everyone around you sees; no, it's your blackened self, your zombie self. Then he throws a sprinkling of magic words about a Jewish guy and something about a cross and tells you how to repay that holy man for what He's done because you suck so bad and He deserves your best. He tells you to have fun with that and slips away as the words fall to the floor and Hipster Band takes over the room, the lights go down and the smoke machine winds up.

Worship repeats the word "I" a thousand times over so God knows we mean it, so we know how important we are, so we FEEL so we know. Tears must stream down cheeks and bodies must sway while hands touch the sky - it's a sure sign you're really in it. Maybe if you cry that Jewish man will know you're really scared and confused and don't know what the hell you're doing, and maybe THEN He'll hear your prayers and tip towards your tears. But no.

First the plates must be passed and records will be checked for faithfulness - so don't forget, your faith shows through painful giving. You can't cheat God and He's always watching. Fork it over and you'll be blessed. Then that Jewish man will come closer so you don't have to reach out over the edge where all the other lemmings just went.

Then speak languages only angels understand - you must if you are true; if you don't you are not one of us. Make it up, mumble something, anything, slippery words so they all think you can and don't notice when you can't. They'll keep coming back, keep pressing their otherworldly hands on your body to make you morph with them, make you talk like them, make you join their club. So just whisper your prayers; they'll see your mouth moving and it will make them happy, and they'll go away and leave you to tears you want no one to see. God gives it to them, but not to you. They speak His language, but you don't. The pain goes down to infinity and up to eternity.

Next, give your time, your talents, your everything because Someone gave everything - that Jewish man who haunts you - it's the least you can do and it's not nearly enough. Give your attention, your heart, your soul, your gifts, all you are and more. Pray more, get on your knees, get in that prayer closet you heathen; there's still 23 hours in the day and you can't remember everything you forgot, be diligent and get it all out in fresh new words every time.

Stuck in the Matrix. Stuck knowing there's two worlds and not knowing which one is real or which one you should be in. What are those red letters? How to even know what they mean? I know they must mean something. How to hear Him speak, see His face, feel Him near, know He loves, and even maybe forgiveness for the twisty monster in the mirror? Is He even real? Is any of this real? I don't hear the voices, speak the tongues, see the visions - maybe I'm not real...

The smoke machines, the angels overhead and demons at your back, the weight is too heavy, skinny jeans & skits, money & music, slain in the Spirit, drunk in the Spirit, ecstasy all around & I can't fall down, swirling water a symbol of grace, a Saltine symbol of a Jew I once knew, grape juice symbol of blood once spilled. Spirits and saints, gold dust from heaven, purpose and destiny that I can't figure out. There are not enough tears, not enough reaching, not enough asking - it's always for someone else and just out of reach. I just want to give up and make the spinning stop.

***STOP.***
I passed it by a hundred times, never paying any attention; a little building with stained glass windows and a sign about a potluck. LC-MS. What is that anyway? Some kind of cult, probably. But I might look it up, can't hurt to try.

A week later and we go in, sniff the air suspiciously. Little old ladies with polyester jackets, an off-key organ making me cringe, kids crying at inopportune times, burnt coffee, songs I don't know, stand up, sit down, I have no idea what's going on. This is not what I expected, and yet it is.  And I love it. I LOVE IT.

I am told about that Jewish guy, and His name is Jesus. He is the Red Letters. He is the Word. I am told who I am to Him, that yes I am a blackened sinner but He loves me anyway. He knew I was the walking dead heading towards the cliff, so He got on a cross to rescue me. He died, then He was gone. GONE.  And He took my sins with Him when He went.  Then He came back. And I am a saint - because He said I am, not because of what I do or say or think or feel. I'm a saint because He is who He said He is and He did what He said He'd do.

I hear the man in the white dress reading the red letters - all of them, all the time. He tells me what they mean; they are about Jesus - all of them. The Red Letters are the Words of Life and He is the Word. And He is in the words from the very beginning - ALL of the words are Red Letters and He is in them all because they are all about Him. All of them.

And so I take the bread and take the wine, and Jesus is there because He said He is. And I am forgiven and I am free because He said I am.

I do not have to wonder, don't need to muster tears, fake whispers to angels or cast demons from the past, no praying out sins I can't even recall or giving till it hurts, or anything at all.

So what do I have to do? Nothing - absolutely nothing. The Red Letters say my work is to believe in Him and He does the rest.  All of it.

He saved me in my baptism, in water He washed away the death because He was there. The Red Letters told me.
And He saves me in the bread and wine, and brings new life because He is there. The Red Letters told me.
And He comes to me in that book, every black & scarlet word between the covers because He is there. The Red Letters told me.

The man in the white dress came around, handing out the gifts of God to the this child on her knees. I didn't have a vision, didn't speak a language of angels, didn't even think to ask. And yet there He was - right there, giving me everything because He loves.
He put the bread in my waiting hand; I took it and ate. Jesus is the Bread of Life.
He gave me red wine; I took it and drank. Jesus' blood shed for me.

***Forgiven.  Free.  Real.  The Red Letters told me.***

Then I got up, gave a slight bow out of respect for the Holy of Holies, and as I walked back to my seat I said to myself, "THAT is why I joined a dead religion."

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