

#255 "The Only True Religion"

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The word "religion" conjures up all kinds of thoughts, images, and belief systems, and it brings with it a ton of baggage along with a history full of abuses. The question at hand is, "Is religion inherently bad, and, consequently, should born again Christians abhor the idea of religion in general?" To avoid confusion, let's define religion as being a set of beliefs about the cause and nature of the universe, about man's purpose, and possibly about a deity. Religion is often connected to ritualistic behaviors such as baptism, confession, communion, charity, prayer, incense, self-abasement, etc. It is also often associated with images such as crosses, stained glass, holy items, statues, etc. Some religions make pilgrimages to appease a deity and earn heavenly merits. Others attend church every week and go to every possible midweek service to impress God. Others quiet their minds to the point of emptiness so that they can connect to the universe. Others worship themselves, and still others worship pleasure. We cannot mistake religion for only that which happens in various places on a Sunday morning or on a holy day. Rather, we must understand religion as an entire worldview, a synthesis of all that a person believes, because it is this that dictates how a person lives and what a person decides about Jesus and the Bible. Even agnostics or atheists are religious because they, too, have a set of beliefs about man, nature, a deity or the lack thereof, etc. Simply claiming to not have the answers is still an attempt at an answer and thus a religious worldview. All people have a worldview whether they realize it or not, and their beliefs have a strong influence on the choices that they make in life. It could also be said that in many cases people choose what they believe based upon the worldview that is most convenient to the choices that they would prefer to make. Thus, man has a propensity not only to sin but to self-justify and to rationalize his sin away, even using religion as a means to that end.

The reality is that religion is everywhere, and it must be reckoned with. Some try to solve the world's problems by laughing at religion and arguing that the world would be better and achieve world peace if only religion was eradicated. But as we have said, a philosophy that argues for a lack of religion is still a religious worldview. Others try to argue for the peaceful coexistence of all religions by attempting to find common ground in all of them. The problem, however, is that there is no reconciling different religions because religions are inherently contradictory. Christ said that He came to bring a sword (Matthew 10:34), and the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God, cutting to the joints and marrow of the true thoughts and intentions of the hearts of all people (Ephesians 6:17, Hebrews 4:12). He believed the gospel to be unique and the only way to God. This view of Jesus as bringing a sword is actually the only true way to bring eventual peace on earth, for only through Jesus' rule in the future will there be peace on earth (Micah 5:5). Any other semblance of peace will be a far cry from the peace of Jesus' future rule and short-lived. Satan will one day use a worldwide false religion to capture the minds of the masses once the church has been raptured, but even now he sows the seeds (Revelation 19:20). World domination through spiritual deception is his ambition, and this can only be achieved by casting truth to the ground (Daniel 8:12) and persecuting God's people. As we have seen throughout history, worldviews matter greatly, for great masses of people can be led astray. The truth is that only a religion

that believes in Jesus as God and in the authority and inerrancy of Scripture is true and able to bring reconciliation and unity. The world accuses Christians of division, yet only in Christ are people of all nations, of all backgrounds, and of all economic strata made into one.

Religion matters because only true religion can accomplish bringing about a picture on earth of what God will complete and perfect in heaven. He wants His will accomplished on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10), and part of this is to make the church a visible representation of purity and unity according to the truth of Christ and the forgiveness found only in Christ. James 1:26-27 says, "If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Many times as Christians we come to conclude that Christianity is not a religion but a relationship. While the meaning of that phrase is meant to say that we connect to God by Him indwelling our hearts rather than by working our way to Him through good works, it is not totally fair to say that true Christianity is not in and of itself also a religion. Religion is what we believe about the universe, about man, and about God, and Christianity certainly has much to say about all of these things. According to the Bible, true religion is that which truly changes the heart of a person. As the love of God by way of the indwelling Person of Christ in our hearts changes us and creates in us a new person (2 Corinthians 5:17), we come to love others in a way that is impossible without this inner heart change (John 13:35). There is, in fact, a true and undefiled religion that exists in the world today, and it is the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Only He perfectly and fully kept Himself unstained by the world. Therefore, through His perfect sacrifice, He Who knew no sin became sin for us that we may be the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). The gospel is the only undefiled and pure religion because only Christ can change people for good and from the inside out. This gospel work in the heart causes people to repent of their sin, to learn to love, and to act on that love out of gratitude and compassion by caring for those in need, such as orphans or widows. The sufficient power of Christ and His indwelling Word and Spirit enable Christians to overcome sin as God sanctifies hearts. Only through Christ can a person learn to bridle his tongue and speak that which is wholesome and edifying rather than that which is crude and demeaning.

In James 1:26, we see how easy it is for man to deceive himself and to not weigh the state of his heart correctly. Apart from Christ, man is enslaved to sin and the devil, and just doing some patchwork on the outer man is not going to purify the soul. God doesn't need people who are religious for the sake of being religious. Rather, what He desires are people who are purified and transformed by the gospel. It is not good enough to do a lot of good social works in this life or to simply keep from doing some of the more heinous sins (Isaiah 64:6). Neither is it meaningful to claim to know the gospel and yet have no good works as fruit to show that the heart change is genuine (James 2:26). God calls us to walk as Christ walked, to live out a pure and undefiled religion before Him by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross and by the power of His indwelling presence. We won't be perfect in practice, for sanctification is a lifelong process. But we should see signs of progress and evidence of change in addition to being moved internally to share the gospel and to care for those in need. That is the only religion that offers any kind of meaningful solution to what ails the world.

Religion isn't the problem; it is just that most people believe the wrong things and do the wrong things. In Christ, by grace through faith, true religion is possible. It is a religion that goes beyond mere images, icons, and rituals, and it is a change of the heart that enables the saved to live differently and to tell others of the reason why. Jesus Christ and His gospel is true religion.