



Religion Reimagined

What Is “Good Religion”?

During the Jesus Movement in the U.S., a phrase that became popular in talking about Christianity was that “it’s not a religion, it’s a relationship”. Because I was young in my walk with God, I really wasn’t sure what to make of the phrase. I understood what was being emphasized that if you are Christian, the most important part of it was connecting with God and for Him to connect with you. God was not and is not too far away for us to communicate personally with Him and so there really is a personal relationship there between us and God. He is a real person who actually connects with us in personal ways. The other part of this insistence was that Christianity is not about rituals and lifeless religious activities that could never be altered by new generations of believers. Christianity is fresh and alive for each new batch of believers. All of that was reasonable but then in my morning readings from the Bible I came upon James 1 and discovered that the Bible uses the term religion to talk about our life with God. What was I supposed to make of that?

Here is the passage. **If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.** (James 1:26-27 NIV) Clearly James values those who want to be religious and religion itself is a part of how we are to live our lives. It is not religion that God decries, it is bad religion; religion that is “worthless”. Let me translate verse 26 directly from the Greek New Testament and despite the Greek being a bit choppy, I think you will find the translation helpful. **If a certain one supposes religious activity to be not bridling his tongue, yet useless religious activity deceiving the heart of this one.** (James 1: 26) We have here two types of religion. The first is what is described in verse 26 which is worthless or useless religion that fools the person practicing it into thinking their religious activity is actually good or helpful. This is a religion that doesn’t bother to control the tongue. The person practicing this form of religion says whatever he or she wants without giving in to the Holy Spirit adjusting what he or she is saying.

Remember, we are talking about religion now, religion where one has entered into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior. Those who have nothing to do with religion are outside the scope of what James describes. People all the time monitor their words. They are careful generally about what they say. It is completely normal for all people to not just blurt out anything that comes to mind. You don’t swear at your boss regardless of what you believe about God unless perhaps you don’t care about your job. You don’t have to be Christian to be careful about what text messages you send. It doesn’t require Christianity to keep you from repeating what you heard about certain family members when you are around them. Christianity is not the magic potion for carefully watching what one says. However Christianity is unique in this. Christians have the Holy Spirit guiding them even in what they say and how they say it. To not let Him govern your speaking is useless religion.

Let me share a couple of examples from the Bible to illustrate this. Hezekiah was a great king of Judah. He was faithful and a true follower of God. Rather than give up when faced with insurmountable odds as the hated Assyrians surrounded the capital city Jerusalem, Hezekiah trusted God to see him and his people through it and his faith was rewarded when the Lord decimated the vast Assyrian army by sending a plague

upon them. But when the new city state and developing empire sent emissaries to Jerusalem to meet with Hezekiah, the king could not stop blabbering on and on about how wealthy he was and what a great country he led. He showed them his riches and the wealth of his city. Later, the prophet Isaiah confronted him and his unbridled tongue. By showing the Babylonians all he had, Hezekiah gave them the motivation to come later and conquer the land. Sometimes, the best thing you can say is nothing. As you become familiar with the Holy Spirit and how He gets through to you, He will be there to get you to stop talking when you are about to say too much and make a mess of things.

Naomi was another one who should have bridled her tongue. After she became a widow and lost both her sons, Naomi returned to her hometown Bethlehem along with the widow of her son. Ruth immediately tried to make the best of things, scurrying about trying to find work to do to help the two of them get back on their feet. Remember that Ruth also was a widow, and she too was impoverished and starting over. Yet it was Naomi, the one who had the most experience in following God, who had been raised with faith in Him, who showed the most unbelief. When warmly greeted by her friends and relatives after she returned home, Naomi told them all not to call her Naomi but rather Mara which means bitter. **"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."** (Ruth 1:20-21 NIV) Granted, Naomi had suffered greatly. Her losses were unimaginable. Yet, why is it that Ruth could maintain her faith in God and Naomi couldn't? We see this all the time; those who should remain firm in their trust in God losing it. Grief is a terrible reducer of the human personality. It can bring mentally tough individuals into a severe depression. It can also be the stepping-stone to greatness and inspired courage. This is a case where Naomi, by unleashing her anger towards God out loud to anyone in earshot, made statements she most likely regretted.

Not much later, her daughter-in-law Ruth married a kind and generous relative of Naomi's and the two had a child together. The women of the town helped Naomi reorient her thoughts. **The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."** (Ruth 4: 14-15 NIV) Some of us use our words to tear down faith in God, pushing unbelief and criticism of His ways. Others, like Naomi's friends notice God's goodness and encourage faith in Him. It is like that in so many ways. Some use their words to inspire courage, determination, strength, and creativity. Others push people down with their criticisms, complaints, and derogatory comments. The example of Jonathan, the son of King Saul is inspiring. Jonathan's dad the king became insanely jealous of the popularity and success of his young general David. Although his son Jonathan was best friends with him and vouched for David's goodness, Saul in a rage drove David out of town and was bent on having him killed. While David was in hiding in the desert with a number of men loyal to him, Jonathan secretly went out to meet with his friend David. **And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this."** (1 Samuel 23: 16-17 NIV)

You can use your words to build others up or use them to bring discouragement. You can inspire faith in God or tear it down. We all are talkers and each of us has much to say. The question is not if we are going to express ourselves, its when and how. The Greek term used by Jesus to describe the personality of the Holy Spirit is "Paracletos" which is rendered counselor in the NIV but is in fact a difficult term to translate precisely. It is literally "one called alongside" and is perhaps best rendered encourager. God is an encourager for you and that is most exciting to know. He goes alongside you in all your troubles and victories, with your hardships and sorrows and picks you up, pushes you onward, cheers you up and helps you see things as they really are and not how your despair prompts your thoughts. Our best place to be if we are to practice real religion is to encourage, support, uplift and be genuinely kind in what we say. Build up the faith of others. Help them see it God's way. Before you speak, think about what the Holy Spirit would say and then voice those words.