

“The Trouble With Religion”

Who crucified Jesus?

The *Roman soldiers* were the ones who physically pounded nails into Jesus’ hands and feet. *Pontius Pilate*, the Roman governor, was the one who gave the OK to execute Jesus. Some *fickle bystanders* egged Pilate on by shouting “crucify him, crucify him!”

But do you know who most directly engineered the plot to kill Him? *It was the religious leaders – the high priest Caiaphas, the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees. The people in charge of the organized religion centered in Jerusalem!* Doesn’t this just rattle your brain – that the people most to blame for killing Jesus were *the most religious people* on the scene?

Matthew, in his gospel, makes this clear: “Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way *and kill him*” (Matthew 26:3-4). (Notice, “in some sly way”).

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, it says many people put their faith in Jesus. But some of the people went to the *Pharisees* and told them what Jesus had done. An emergency session of the most important religious leaders was convened: “Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. ‘What are we accomplishing?’ they asked. ‘Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation’” (John 11:47-48). They were afraid if Jesus continued to do miracles, the masses of people would rally around Him. Rome would be afraid of a popular revolt against their government, and squelch the whole thing. And these religious leaders would lose their privileged status and wealth! So what did they decide? “So from that day on they plotted to take his life”(John 11:53).

Isn’t this incredible! It wasn’t the Roman authorities, it wasn’t a mentally disturbed assassin, it wasn’t a band of terrorists, that sealed Jesus’ death – but *sincere, dedicated, religious people!*

A lot of ugly things have been done in the name of religion! The 9/1 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon – the car bombings and terrorist related shootings and knife attacks – carried out by religious men and women who do it praising Allah and in the name of Islam. A few years ago a 29 year-old Donegal grad, teaching English language and computer skills in Yemen, was gunned down and murdered by Islamic fanatics who accused him of trying to convert people from Islam to Christianity

But lest we point a finger just at Islamic religion, Christianity has shouldered its share of evil done in the name of religion, and in the name of Jesus. The so-called “holy wars” of the Christian Crusades. Killings at abortion clinics by religious people. The likes of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, KS – Bible thumping “Christians” who attend the funerals of gay people and military personnel with their hate signs, condemning the deceased people to hell.

Religion has fostered hatred and violence. Religious people can be some of the most miserable, mean-spirited people in the world. Religion can make people self-righteous and judgmental.

One of the things I hope to get across today is this: ***religion and the Christian gospel are not the same! Jesus did not come to make us more religious! Jesus came to offer us life!***

Jesus said, “I have come that (you) may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).
Dr. Henrietta Mears was right: “People are not interested in religion, but in reality.”

How many times do you think are the words “religion” or “religious” are mentioned in Bible? Probably a lot, right? Maybe a couple hundred times? 100 times? 50 times? Well, as far as I can tell, the words “religion” or “religious” are only used in about **4 verses** in the whole Bible (depending on the translation you are using). And *the way* these verses are used is instructive!

There is Acts 26:5. “They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee.” In this verse the Apostle Paul refers to his former religion as a *Pharisee* (not his being a *Christian*). And remember, as a very religious Pharisee, he hunted down Christians, had them arrested, and was responsible for some of their deaths.

Then there is 1 Timothy 5:4. “If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents, for this is pleasing in God’s sight.” Widows are to put their religion into practice by caring for their families.

James 1:26-27 is another passage of Scripture speaking of religion. “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” James is trying to emphasize that religion can be good or bad, depending on what kind of behavior it produces.

That’s it – as far as using the word “religion” in the Bible. It is not even mentioned in the Old Testament! *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* has some helpful words under the section “religion”: “The infrequent use of ‘religion’ in the Bible is due to the fact that the concept of ‘religion’ is itself alien to the core of Biblical thought. The basic meaning of faith to the Hebrew is the concrete response of the whole (person) to God’s call and obedience to his command, not intellectual acceptance of a body of truth or even correct observance of (religious) acts. Primary for faith is (a person’s) relation to God, not (our) relation to faith structure or cult practice.”

Can we understand what this is saying? In the Bible “faith” is not a matter of believing certain doctrines or teachings, or observing certain religious practices. Faith in the Bible has to do *with our relationship with God, and the response of our whole being to Him.*

Jesus didn’t come to make us more religious. He came to give us life, abundant life! There is no record of Jesus talking about religion – but He talked a lot about life and one’s relation to God! I want us to understand that just being religious doesn’t make us a Christian! *There is so much difference between religion, and the gospel (the good news) of Jesus!*

Religion is about our reaching out to find God; the **gospel** is about God reaching out to find us.

Religion is about our doing things to make us acceptable to God; the **gospel** is about what Christ had done to make us acceptable to God.

Religion is about rules and regulations; the **gospel** is about a relationship with God made possible through Jesus.

Truthfully, I'm not that interested in religion, and helping people become religious. But I am willing to spend my life sharing the gospel so people can have a relationship with God and discover new life in Christ!

Let me just say a few more things about this. **Christianity begins with our believing in Jesus.** The scribes, Pharisees, religious leaders, were very sincere in their religion, but *what did they miss?* The bottom line is: *they didn't accept Jesus and His claims.* They devoted themselves to religious rules and practices, but when they were face to face with God's Son, most of the religious leaders rejected Him, and didn't believe what He said.

John 5:36-40 records these words of Jesus as He speaks to the religious leaders: "But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life." Jesus is saying that His works show that God sent Him, but they are refusing to believe the One God sent. Notice, He says, "You refuse to come to me *to have life!*"

Another passage in the Gospel of John is informative. John 6:28-29: "Then they said to him (Jesus), 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'" The religious leaders asked Jesus what they had to do to do what God requires. Jesus' answer: not devote yourselves to keeping a whole slew of religious rules and practices, but believe in the One God had sent!

Being a Christian is not just being religious, but believing in Christ. But here's where we can get off track. Because *what we mean* by "believing" in Jesus may not be what Jesus meant when He said we are to believe in Him! There are a lot of people who "believe" in Jesus – that He lived, that He was divine, that He died on a cross to save us – but it hasn't changed their lives. Their belief is from the neck up – accepting certain *facts or information* about Jesus.

But the word "believe" in the New Testament is the word "pisteuo" – a strong word that means "cling to, stick to, totally rely upon". It's like you are in deep water, drowning, and someone throws you a life preserver, and you hold on to that for dear life. You cling to it and rely totally upon it to save you.

My father was pilot. He had a private pilot's license. Often when he was learning to fly, I'd go to the airport with him. I'd stand on the ground and watch him doing takeoffs and landings. I would follow the plane as he flew in the traffic pattern.. If someone would have asked me, "Do you believe your dad can fly a plane?", I would have said, "Yes!" The day came when he got his license, and for the first time, he was allowed to take me up as passenger. The question was: Did I believe in him enough as a pilot to climb into that Piper Cub and trust him with my life?

There are a lot of people who "stand on the ground" and believe the right stuff about Jesus. But it's only when we "climb into the passenger seat", trust Christ with our life, and "take off" with Him that we become a real Christian and our life begins to change. *Being a Christian and being saved from our sins begins when we "believe" in Jesus!*

Christianity is not about religion, but about a relationship with God through Jesus. Jesus called people to be His disciples: a tax collector Matthew, fishermen Peter and Andrew, James and John, for example. Jesus walked by them and said, "Follow me." He didn't say, "C'mon, let's get some religion!" He didn't say, "Here's a book with facts about Me; we're going to have a class to study it together." He said, "Come on, *follow me.*" Let's get to know each other."

Later on, Jesus would say to them, "I am the vine, you are the branches...abide in me and I will abide in you..." (John 15:4-5). These verses in *The Message* read: "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." (Imagine that! The Lord makes His home in us!). The Apostle Paul, once he became a follower of Jesus, said, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Did you catch that? "It is Christ who lives in me". Ephesians 3:17 says, "So that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith."

My own experience was one of moving from "religion" to "relationship" with Christ. In my early years I didn't go to church. Later on I started to go to Sunday School. I learned about Jesus. I believed what I was taught about Him. Then I started to attend worship. I heard sermons. I went through confirmation class and joined the church. Again, I accepted the religious teachings I had heard. I began to read the Bible. I started to pray. I was becoming religious. Then our church got a different pastor. He was evangelistic. He said we can have personal relationship with Christ, and that it begins when we turn our life over to Him. And I did that. I transitioned from just doing religious things – to beginning to walk with Jesus.

You know, it's very difficult sometimes to get people who've gone to church for years and believed all the right stuff to give themselves entirely over to Jesus so they can begin a relationship with Him! But Christianity is about *relationship*...not just *religion*!

Maybe you've been thinking through all of this, "Harry, are you saying religion is worthless?" That saying the Apostles' Creed, embracing certain doctrines – that's not important? That praying and reading the Bible and going to church doesn't matter? *Of course not!*

Creeds and doctrines express what we believe. It matters what we believe! And praying, reading the Bible, going to church are important spiritual disciplines.

But here's the thing to check out: Are we doing these religious practices to make ourselves acceptable to God, to prove that we're good people, worthy of His love? Or do we do these religious things *as a result of our having a relationship with God through faith in Christ*? And our religious practices are done to strengthen that relationship?

Religion in itself will not save anyone. More than once, Jesus warned these very religious people (leaders) that because they were rejecting *Him*, they were missing out on God, and the eternal life He offers.

A man by the name of Roger Babson once said, "The need of the hour is not more legislation. The need of the hour is more religion."

I don't think so!

It was the most religious people who successfully plotted to kill Jesus, Son of God!

The need of the hour is not for more religion – but for us to wholeheartedly accept God's gift of Jesus, the Savior of the world. To follow Him with all we've got! And in so doing, to have a *relationship* with this Jesus that slowly but surely makes us more like Him!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
March 8, 2020*

