

Grace to You :: Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time

Christianity Is Not a Religion, It's a Relationship

Scripture: Romans 5:10-11; James 1:27

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by Cameron Buettel

The word *religion* has become a pejorative in the pulpits of too many preachers, and it has spread to the pews, as well. Well-meaning evangelists and church leaders are willing to labor long and hard to portray religion like a straight-jacket of rules and regulations. The way of Christ is then put forth as the fresh alternative to the villainy of *religion*. Such efforts are more based in the desire to erase negative perceptions than in an accurate portrayal.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the commonly used Christian cliché, “Christianity is not a religion, it’s a relationship.”

Finding Religion

You don’t have to knock on doors, shave your head, avoid meat, or ride a mountain bike while wearing a tie to be “religious.” A group of people adhering to a particular set of beliefs and practices qualifies as a religion. In that sense, all people are religious in some way. Atheists are far more religious than they are rational about their unbelief, insisting that *nothing* created everything. Sports fanatics idolize their favorite players and attend every performance. Epic guitarists are worshiped by their fans as rock gods. And large groups of everyday “irreligious” people spend their days devoted to their electronic devices.

Don’t be deceived. You are religious even if you religiously deny that you’re religious. The critical question is whether the religion you adhere to is true or false. Does your religion honor God or does it offend Him? Scripture sheds light on this matter by defining a religion that is pure and reflects a right relationship with God: “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” (James 1:27). In his commentary on that passage, John MacArthur explains what biblical religion looks like in practice:

Godly religion, that is, biblical Christianity, is a matter of holy obedience to God’s Word—reflected, among other ways, by our honesty in regard to ourselves, by our selflessness in regard to the needs of others, and by our uncompromising moral and spiritual stand in regard to the world. ^[1] John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998) 92.

The pure and undefiled religion, as described in James, is the overflow of a human heart in right relationship with the one true God and thus obedient to His commands. And this points us to the second half of the cliché: “Christianity is not a religion, *it’s a relationship.*” The religion we practice *is* a reflection of our relationship with God.

What Kind of Relationship?

Evangelists who offer sinners “a relationship with Jesus Christ” are too late. The crucial point that seems lost on many modern evangelicals is that *everyone* has a relationship with Jesus Christ. The question is whether that relationship is a good one or a bad one.

The New Testament defines mankind’s relationship with God under two major categories—those who are His enemies and those who are reconciled to Him. And conversion is the transition between those two states.

For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by His life! And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have now received this reconciliation through Him. (Romans 5:10–11)

Christians ought to have a proper appreciation for the wickedness of our lives prior to salvation. It’s not as if we were somehow spiritually *neutral*. In Adam we all rebelled against God, and that rebellion sets the tone for our lives from the moment we are born. The vileness of our sin coupled with the holiness of God’s character is what makes grace so amazing. It is a barrier so impossible to cross that it required God, in human form, to fulfill the law that we have broken, suffer the punishment that we deserved, and appease God’s just wrath against us (Colossians 2:14). But that’s lost when we boil down God’s work in salvation to an invitation into a vague “relationship.”

The problem was never that we lacked a relationship with our Creator, but rather that it was hostile. And that remains the relationship status for all unbelievers. It’s why Paul describes evangelism, not as the ministry of *relationship*, but as “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18)—we are calling people to be reconciled to God through the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Saying that “Christianity is not a religion, it’s a relationship” actually creates a false dichotomy. It deceives people into thinking that they have to choose between a religion and a relationship. Instead, the division needs to be made between true and false religion, and between a reconciled and an estranged relationship. Are you reconciled to God and, if so, is that reconciliation evident through the practice of “pure and undefiled” religion?

Clichés: Their Detection and Response

There is an over-arching principle that we hope you will take away from this series on Christian clichés. There is a critical difference between something that *sounds* right and something that *is* right. In order to differentiate between them we need to have deep biblical roots and sharp biblical discernment. Clichés often sound right in the same way that political promises sound believable and greeting cards sound sincere—we want to believe them, so we do. But clichés, like every other truth claim, must always be measured against the plumb line of Scripture. We need to discipline ourselves to think in clear, biblical terms, and not merely those that *sound* biblical.

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