



## True Religion

*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. — James 1:26-27*

It has probably been true to one degree or another during every historical age of the Church, but rarely more so than at present, that we find such a wide range of often contradictory definitions of what claims to be "Christianity". All will, of course, insist that they are the one, true religion (or at least belong to it), but how many such groups, much less the individuals who compose their constituency, can be qualified according to this very succinct biblical standard? These succinct requirements boil down to both a personal standard where one's own behavior is concerned and the treatment of others, not ability, expertise or even gifting. Such is rarely, if ever present among the various organizations, movements and leadership of the many such false things all presently calling themselves "Christian" and yet flunking each of these elementary biblical qualifications.

Within 80 or so years of the death of the Apostle John, the last of the original Apostles to go to be with the Lord, there were far more false movements and groups claiming to be true Christianity than the authentic, minority remnant. Things broke down fairly quickly on a very broad scale. False teaching and the various movements animated by them were so pervasive that orthodox Christianity holding to the plain teaching of Christ and the Apostles had become just another strain of belief and lost its mainstream status. At that time, Irenaeus (130-202) authored *Against All Heresies*, which is attributed as leading a major correction for the Church at large in order to steer them back on course so as to reject the many false movements and effect a return to the plain text of Scripture. Such dealings with false influences have taken place during every period of history, but this one was so pervasive that authentic Christianity came dangerously close to extinction.

We seem to have returned to the same brink. The majority of that which calls itself "Christianity" today is consumed by such major false projections as the signs and wonders movement, the church growth/"Purpose Driven" movement, an ecumenical return to the Catholic Church, the embrace of Eastern Mysticism in that which calls itself the "Emergent" church, the Word-Faith and Prosperity gospels, an overwhelming embrace of a social gospel which no longer preaches sin nor the need for repentance, and far too many variations to list. Is there **any** evangelical denomination still embracing the original theological soil in which they were planted? Individual congregations across that spectrum seem to be having to choose whether to remain true by becoming independent from their respective denomination's leadership progressively going away from the core values which originally defined them. But overall, the authentic Bible-believing Evangelical has become nothing more than another "strain" of Christianity and is no longer a majority-held position.

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But returning to our opening verses from James, while we can certainly apply the standard to denominations, organizations and movements, the original context in which they are given is decidedly personal. They first and foremost evaluate religion on an individual level. And regardless of the name over the door, it is always the behavior and quality of individual adherents by which we evaluate the larger group to which such profess to belong and represent. The question then becomes, “Are **you** a practitioner of ‘true religion’?” We have two stated qualities which are each very personal and profound changes in our behavior: control of our speech and our overall resistance to the influences of the world.

*And He was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.” — Mark 7:20-23*

James’ qualification when it comes to speech, which reveals the true nature of our heart, is that first of all such a person “**thinks** himself religious”. In other words, instead of measuring themselves against God’s Word and praying for God’s discernment and evaluation, they elevate their own personal opinions and notions for what passes as “Christian”. It’s the same example Jesus gave in the Pharisee and tax collector:

*And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’*

*“But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’*

*“I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” — Luke 18:9-14*

The Pharisee maintained a personal standard of what **he** deemed religion while the tax collector held himself to **God’s** standard.

This is why James specifies that one must “**bridle** his tongue”. This is an outside device used to give the horse directions so as to properly comply with the wishes and intentions of the rider, to no longer go wherever the horse desires but to submit to its master, and most readily equates to the role of the Word of God providing the direction which overrides our personal standard and instead operates according to Christ’s. Anything else “*deceives his own heart*”. All the many false movements, teachings and unbiblical measurements explain the deception embraced by their many adherents who employ their own substitute bridle, or go without one entirely. A heart which does not operate exclusively according to God’s Word and ways and instead clings to its own replacement

notions is spiraling ever increasingly into the depths of self-deception. Notice how they all espouse with their lips the very standards they have embraced which so obviously contradict the plainly stated truth of Scripture.

James continues with a two-part condition which extends the true inner nature of one's heart to how such will be revealed in our outward actions. And it is most telling that he qualifies it as, "***Pure and undefiled*** religion in the sight of our God and Father".

Whenever we come across any biblical variation of "pure", it can best be understood by substituting "unpolluted by sin". As the age-old illustration holds, "Would you drink a cup of water which only has one drop of poison?" James is qualifying that which meets God's minimum requirements as adhering to God's Word to such a degree that it has no room for even one polluting drop of sin. (This disqualifies the notion that possessing or espousing the truth will overcome the shortfalls of not practicing love in the process.)

And what visible action is specified so as to identify authentic Christianity? "...to visit orphans and widows ***in their distress***". By definition, such are not simply helpless, but can never repay what is provided. That which is offered is completely at the giver's discretion, without hope of earthly repayment, and provided in the ultimate gesture of a truly unselfish love. It also expresses seeing and acting on one's personal burden for others without their having to request it.

I have come to believe that this quality is the foremost characteristic by which we can determine whether or not we are not just serving according to the Lord's standards, but specifically in our personal calling and ministry. In other words, is our primary motivation our burden and love for others, or is it really just to achieve something for ourselves? An authentic calling and follow-through into ministry is actually an all-consuming love for those to whom we will minister, never expecting any kind of repayment, and caring for their spiritual and physical condition even if we get nothing in return.

So many "ministries" define themselves by the number of participants they attract or the opportunities provided to the ministers more than the benefactors. A "music ministry" will become obsessed with album sales and concert opportunities to the exclusion of people; a "discernment ministry" will judge everything according to what and who agrees or disagrees with them to the exclusion of actually working to actually disciple those most needing it; a "prophetic ministry" will over-realize God's prophetic Word so as to exclude the practical need for the rest of Scripture where individual adherence is concerned for God's people. There are many such examples where individual kingdoms and empires are set up to the greatest benefit of the ministers rather than to those needing to be ministered as they lose touch with those they intended to reach.

A more subtle variation to which the Internet has given rise is the "teaching ministry", someone who believes they can simply offer the truth without actually getting personally involved with people. I have come across such who actually state openly, "I am not a pastor" so as to justify the distance they put between themselves and people and therefore to not have to deal with them on any kind of personal level. Or worse, the one who openly and often states, "Two-thirds of the New Testament is focused on doctrine and only one-third on behavior, so let's stop talking about behavior and focus on what is most important." Setting aside for the moment how erroneous this statement is to begin with because of the fact that not a single word of Scripture can be forsaken or ignored, it is a device designed by someone who wants to be able to say they are in "ministry", but

without a personal burden to get involved with the ministered. The self-deception revolves around the notion one can serve Christ without having to serve others.

*And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest. And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But **I am among you as the one who serves.** — Luke 22:24-27*

When we have a burden of love to serve any number of people great or small, when such is freely given with no expectation of personal return or benefit, we are on the path of "pure and undefiled religion" whether it takes place with just a few at the local level or grows to include a great many more. Perhaps this is best understood in the character of the missionary, of whom his or her prospective people group has never heard of nor even expects, and whose calling and burden for them is so great that they will leave everything and dedicate their selves to their work and service for as long as it takes with no thought of recompense or personal gain. True Christianity works this way on every level, in every church setting, and regardless of how "big" or "small" we might think our personal contribution. It is never about us and always about a personal burden for others first. (Do you attend church meetings or conferences with a burden for the congregants or simply to seek something for yourself?)

But notice the connection with the second part of James' definition: "...and to keep oneself **unstained** by the world". The external actions of true Christianity characterized as "pure and undefiled" so as to be unpolluted by sin is followed up with a personal lifestyle of consistently resisting sin's pollutive effects. A life dedicated to behaving exclusively according to God's Word and ways not only bridle's our speech to develop an unpolluted heart, and not only assumes a burden and love for others unpolluted by sin, but no longer allows the world's polluted ways of thinking and behaving to drive our lifestyle. All of these things have in common the rejection of our own standards for God's. By first taking the bridle of God's Word to direct and guide us, we are changed into the image and character of Christ from the heart, mind and soul to the point that not only have we completely abandoned the world's way of thinking and acting personally, but experience an increasing unconditional love of others. We are no longer guided according to our desires and will but only according to the direction provided by His Word alone. This the very example Christ personally set for us:

*Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, **the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing;** for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. — John 5:19*

This concise standard of spiritual measurement is, of course, first and foremost to be applied to each of us individually, but it also very useful for evaluating the various organizations, affiliations and movements in which we participate.

- What is talked about the most? What is chiefly espoused? How does this reflect what is at the heart and soul of such things?
- Who is actually being served and why? Who derives the chief benefits of what is taking place? Is there an actual Christ-like burden for others?
- How active is the resistance to the pollutive effects of the world's ways and thinking? What kind of stand is taking place to life **IN** the world but not **OF** the world?

Such reveals much as to whether or not we're participating in something authentically Christian by God's standard or having embraced a substitute, or to what degree there is a great need to address obvious gaps in something falling short of authentic Christianity. But in truth, no group or movement can be "fixed" overall without first addressing each individual falling short of God's standard for true religion.

### ***A Final, Refined Point***

Allow me to put a really sharp point on this, to more frankly provide an application of this teaching. This is the way to know for sure if we are truly carrying out our personal faith and ministry according to God's standards or whether we are in it for ourselves.

As we live our life in the world in general, and especially in the course of carrying out our ministry and fellowship within the Body of Christ, we will always bridle our tongue—that is, we will always be first and foremost concerned not just with **how** we say things, but in how they will be **received**. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:14, we will always be striving to speak the truth in love.

This means we won't presume to think that we can speak, shout and carry on regardless of how we phrase it, or be exempt from using sarcasm, derision and even the cleverest of insults, and always aware in advance to avoid that which we know will insult and repulse the intended audience. We will never "*pay back evil for evil*" (Rom. 12:17)—that is, respond with the same tone, lack of respect or even insults directed at us. This is not just true for our dealings with individuals, but for even the largest of audiences. When we fail to keep ourselves within such biblically mandated boundaries we become real-life examples of what Jesus taught as revealing the pollutive effects of sin residing in our heart. In this day and age this **especially** goes for YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, online forums, blogs, websites, and every Internet-enabled venue.

As to the example of widows and orphans, the greater application is that if our primary self-motivation is not a burden for people, if we are not continually concerned first and foremost with the welfare and condition of the people with whom we fellowship or to whom we minister, it is really all about us. If we are not the Christ-like servant who is consumed with serving, we are only in it for ourselves. We can never operate as if the "ministry" is more important than people because the very biblical definition of ministry is in how it is applied with our love and care of others, no matter how great or small. We never expect anything in return.

It starts out as a desire to lead worship, but then it becomes a "music ministry" that is no longer consumed with connecting people to Christ, but how to sell more songs and schedule more concerts. It begins with a desire to lead the many prodigal sons back from the false movements they're mired in, but it becomes a "discernment ministry" that offers no discipleship or personal help and simply blasts out a message without the requisite

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follow-up to lead them back. It begins with a desire to make others aware of the nearness of Christ's return, but then it becomes a "prophetic ministry" which not only ignores the majority of the rest of God's Word, but hands out sentences of "heretic" or "apostate" for anyone failing to fully agree, and must continue to find things in the news in order to have something new to say each day. It starts out as a desire to teach God's people, but it becomes a "teaching ministry" exempt from having to counsel, disciple or get personally involved with individuals. These are a few of some of the examples of people who think they've carried out a ministry while having achieved a complete personal separation from the flock.

The true minister sees the need, has a burden to act on the need even when such people are incapable of asking for themselves, and *never* operates without first considering those they serve.

But finally, a true calling, ministry and gifting is characterized by an endless daily pursuit to no longer live as we did before coming to the cross of Christ, and making everything else secondary to living exclusively according to God's Word and ways so as to strive ever closer to the goal of "pure", "undefiled" and "stainless". Sanctification goes from being just a concept to an actual lifestyle.

James provides what can be turned into a short test for whether someone is pursuing their ministry so as to produce results which can qualify as spiritual fruit of the Spirit, and that which will not.

- If you think you can phrase things any way you want, are exempt from placing limits on what you say, or don't have to consider how other people will receive it, you might not really be in ministry.
- If you think you don't you have to actually get involved with other people personally, or don't have a burden for certain people or groups more than yourself, you might not really be in ministry.
- If you think that you can carry out God's work while still holding on to sinful remnants of your old lifestyle, or do not actively pursue becoming more like Christ at the expense of self, you may not really be in ministry.

We have to reject the world's notion that success is defined by the number of attendees, the number of views or hits to a website, or that we've simply "put it out there" and no further personal interaction is necessary. The true Christian in the course of his life and ministerial contributions to the saved and unsaved alike controls their speech in accordance with God's Word and ways, always cares more for others than themselves, and continuously strives to be transformed into the image and character of Christ. Otherwise even the best of intentions to leverage good things will cause us to end up in a place with results we never originally intended.

And we can know that others' such efforts are not biblically qualified when they fail to guard their speech, have less concern for the ministered than themselves, and allow the world's ways to live side-by-side with their so-called Christianity. This is how we know both personally and corporately that which is authentically Christian, that which God qualifies as "*true religion*".

In Him,

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