

CAN YOU RECOMMEND YOUR RELIGION?

There are a staggering number of religions in the world. According to a survey taken in the past decade or so, atheists only account for about 2% of the world's population, and about 16% consider themselves "non-religious." So, out of the other 82% of the world, there are reportedly 19 major religions, and those 19 are made up of 270 large groups. When you take into account all of the divisions, within just Christianity, there are about 34,000 distinct religious bodies. Over half of those are not affiliated with any other group of people. You know, it doesn't take more than a casual look to see that many of those religions are very shallow, they have very little to do with the truth of the Bible, and are not worth recommending. Yet, most of these groups are trying to persuade others to become part of their religion. They would like to convert you, and they would like to convert me. I think we, as people who have a conscience about doctrinal things and religious matters, are usually interested in converting people to our way of thinking about God's word. Most churches recommend their religion to others as being the right one to follow. If you're a member of some church and someone sincerely asked you for advice about what church to be a part of, you would likely point them to your religion, whatever that might be. But, do you have a RIGHT to recommend your religion? Living in a free society, of course you have the civil, constitutional right to do so, at least for now. What I'm asking is, do you have the MORAL right, the spiritual right to recommend your religion?

Psalms 66:16 "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul."

That verse is the psalmist's way of saying, "I can honestly recommend my religion to the whole world." But what about you? Can you recommend yours?

Religion is not a bad word. We hear people tell us that what we need is Jesus—not religion. Friend, serving Jesus IS a religion. The word 'religion' is defined as follows.

Def. religion (*noun*)—a particular system of faith and worship; a pursuit or interest to which someone ascribes supreme importance

Well, Jesus is to be worshipped, and He is of supreme importance, so I would call serving Jesus a religion. Wouldn't you?

James 1:27 "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

So, true and pure religion is a good thing, and it is certainly worth recommending to everyone. Now, it's not enough to recommend your religion simply because it is YOUR religion. I consider myself very blessed to live in a nation with religious freedom. That is, we're free of government persecution or any government mandate concerning whatever religion we want to practice. However, I'm afraid that we've been subtly led to believe that because the government cannot impose a religion upon us, neither can

anyone else, including God. You see, we have the civil freedom to worship as we see fit, and we have the freedom to express our beliefs, so we seek to convince others to follow our beliefs. We have every right, from a civil standpoint, to do so. My question today is, do we have that right in the sight of God? Can you recommend your religion simply because that's the religion you've chosen, and that you think is best? Is my religion credible enough to be recommended to others? Do I have a religion that is WORTH recommending to others? The answer might surprise you.

1 Peter 3:15-16 "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ."

Notice what Peter tells us. We must have a reason for the hope that is within us. Today, we'll see what that reason is. Also, he points out that we must have the credibility to recommend our religion to others. Paul put it this way:

1 Timothy 4:16 "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee."

You see, whether we realize it or not, every day, we either recommend our religion as the greatest treasure we have ever found, or we are renouncing it as not even being worth anyone's time or effort. I want to give you a few tests that will tell us whether we have a religion that is worth recommending to others.

Let's begin with what I believe to be a most fundamental question: Can you recommend your religion in light of God's word? You see, everything else is really in vain if we can't pass this first test. Consider these two questions: Can you prove what you believe and practice? Does God approve of what you believe and practice? By answering one of these, you answer the other, because the Bible teaches that God DOES NOT APPROVE of a religion that cannot be proven by His word. How do we know that?

1 Thessalonians 5:21 "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

John 4:24 "God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth."

Even the great apostle Paul didn't expect anybody to accept his teachings simply because he was preaching it. He defended his apostolic credentials in I Corinthians 2 as follows:

I Corinthians 2:1, 4-5 "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God...And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God."

Paul didn't come with fancy speeches. He didn't expect them to listen to him because of the clothing that he wore, or because of some sort of earthly credibility. Rather, Paul said that he had God's seal upon every sermon that he preached and every letter that he wrote. That seal is the Holy Spirit, which

inspired him to speak and to write those things. The power of the Holy Spirit allowed him to demonstrate that he WAS speaking by inspiration of the Spirit and that he WAS God's spokesperson.

Today, I'm not inspired by the Holy Spirit, like Paul was, and neither is any other preacher. I can't work a miracle to prove the veracity of my preaching, and neither can any other preacher. All I can do, and all I must do, is point you to God's holy word, because that's where the authority belongs. So many people today are religiously gullible. They're unlike those noble Bereans of Acts 17.

Acts 17:11 "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."

These people diligently searched to make certain that what Paul and Silas were preaching was the truth. So many people today will accept a man's claims, based on his charisma, his fine speech or his exciting ministry. I watch television preachers and listen to radio preachers, and some of them are saying things that are so distant from the teaching of the Bible! In fact, many times, there's hardly a reference to the Bible! Some of their claims and teachings are so absolutely outlandish and unscriptural that one has to wonder how anybody can take the time to pay them any attention or give them any credence! But somebody is, else how could they continue to live those exorbitant lifestyles? Somebody is sending them a check and keeping their ministry in business. We need to be very careful because the Bible warns us that there are, and will be, false teachers.

There was an interesting encounter between Jesus and His disciple, Thomas, after His resurrection. I guess as long as I've lived, I've heard Thomas referred to disparagingly as "old doubting Thomas." But I think many overlook something important in the passage.

John 20:20, 24-25 "And when He had so said, He shewed unto them His hands and His side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord...But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe."

I don't know where Thomas was, or what he was doing. Perhaps Thomas should've been censured for not being there. I do know that he missed a great blessing by not being where he could've and should've been, but the fact is, Thomas was not there. So, he didn't see the nail prints in Jesus' hands or the scar in His side that Jesus allowed the other disciples to see. When the other disciples told Thomas about having seen Jesus, he didn't say, "I won't believe." He didn't rule out faith. However, he was skeptical. Now, is that a bad thing? Didn't Thomas hear Jesus say, in the sermon on the mount, to beware of false prophets?

Matthew 7:15 "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves."

It had only been a few days since Thomas had heard Jesus say this:

Matthew 24:4-5 "...Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many."

So, Thomas said, "I won't believe UNTIL I SEE..." Well, Jesus appeared to the disciples again, including Thomas, and He invited Thomas to not only see, but to reach out and touch His scars.

John 20:27-28 "Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God."

The Bible is given to reveal to us the Christian system that Christ brought to earth and instituted. The plan of salvation that He authored (Hebrews 5:9), the church that He built (Matthew 16:18), the worship that He authorized (John 4:24), the life that He commanded (Matthew 5:16), and we are not left to guess about any of those things. We are not left to make it up as we go, or proselytize people to our homemade religion. The Bible is, in part, given to us as a blueprint. So I want you think seriously about the church that you identify with, in light of that. Is it the church that you read about in the Bible: in name? in creed? in organization? in worship? If someone asks you for a reason for your religion, can you point them to the scriptures? Not your exciting youth ministry. Not your nursery for children. Not your large membership. If someone asks you about your religion, can you point them to your religion in the scriptures? Can you show them in the Bible WHAT you believe and HOW you worship? Or is it your religion because it was your parent's religion? Or your grandparent's religion? Or a friend's religion? Or it's the most popular religion or the most carnally appealing religion? It doesn't stand the test if you can't recommend it by the Word of God.

Here's another test: Can you recommend your religion by the life that you are now living? Did you know that the greatest advertisement that you can give anything, is by the visible impact that it has had on your own life? You can tell the difference between a salesperson, who merely has a job, and a salesperson who really, truly believes in the product that he's selling. And he believes in it because that product has worked for him. It's made a difference for him.

Titus 2:10 "Not purloining, but shewing all good fidelity; that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things."

Our lives must "*adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things.*" Now, there are a lot of religions today, unfortunately, that consist of worship on Sunday, but absolutely no change of life on Monday.

2 Corinthians 5:17 "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

You see, the religion of Jesus doesn't just change a few things about you, sweeping around the doorstep of your life; it makes you a "*new creature.*" So, do you still do the things you used to do before religion became a personal thing in your life? Do you still drink? Curse? Lie? Cheat? Commit adultery or fornication? It's not hard to find someone who will tell you they believe in Jesus. It's hard to find someone who LIVES like they believe in Jesus. If a man's religion doesn't change him from the inside out,

that man needs to change his religion. Too many churches today are about large numbers, or positive reinforcement, or pep talks on how to have a successful, prosperous life on this earth, while the message of REPENTANCE is long gone from the majority of pulpits today. Friend, Jesus preached about repentance:

Luke 13:3 "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

The apostles preached repentance:

Acts 17:30 "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent:"

Hebrews 12:14 "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:"

Jesus said, "*Ye shall know them by their fruits.*" (Matthew 7:16) The fact is, you either recommend or renounce your religion every day without even saying a word.

James 2:14,18 "What doth it profit, by brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?...Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works."

Do you see what James is saying? That's how you recommend your religion to others. You won't have a hard time finding someone to discuss the Word of God with you when your life personifies the truth within that Word. Can you recommend your religion by the life you're living? Remember the story that Jesus told of the good Samaritan in Luke 10? How the man fell among thieves, was stripped, beaten and left to die on the side of the road? There were three people who came by and saw him there: a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. The first two people had great reputations of religion. You'd think that if you were stranded, wounded and dying on the side of the road that you'd want to see a preacher, or one with a reputation of being upstanding, moral and religious! Not one whom the Jews of that day looked on as a 'half-breed' or a dog: a Samaritan. But Jesus said that the priest passed on the other side of the road. He said that the Levite came over and looked at the man, but went on his way without helping him. But the Samaritan stopped and cared for his wounds and carried him to an inn where he secured lodging until he could convalesce. Then Jesus concludes that gripping story with this question:

Luke 10:36 "*Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves?*"

Do you know what Jesus is asking there? Who recommended their religion? Can YOU recommend your religion by the life that you're living?

The last test I want you to consider is this: Can you recommend your religion by the way that it works for YOU? Can you recommend your religion when you suffer a tragic death? Can you recommend your religion when you suffer a debilitating illness? What about in the sudden loss of a relationship or a financial collapse? The religion of Jesus, the religion you read about in God's word, can be recommended even in the darkest and deepest sorrows and trials of life.

The apostle Paul didn't have an easy road. He was persecuted nearly everywhere he went. He was opposed, and he looked at those burdens and hindrances as a *"thorn in the flesh"* that he begged God to take out of his way (2 Corinthians 12:7). But God refused, saying, *"My grace is sufficient for thee."* Well, the attitude that Paul carried from that was, *"sorrowful, yet always rejoicing"* (2 Corinthians 6:10). Oh, life brought its share of sorrows to Paul, but he said he was always rejoicing!

Psalms 3:3 "But thou, O Lord, art a shield for me; my glory, and the lifter up of mine head."

Psalms 57:1 "...yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities by overpast."

Is your religion an anchor or is it a dead weight? Is your religion a source of joy or is it an albatross that has to be set aside until things work out and you find it convenient to practice it again? OR is your religion unimportant to you UNTIL you suffer some trial, THEN you go running to it for comfort? You see, that's not the religion of Christ. The religion that's worth recommending is worth living by, and it's worth dying by. It's not enough to have a creed to uphold; you need a creed that will uphold YOU. I want to recommend this religion to you today. Not because it's my religion, but because you can read it in God's holy word, and because it will absolutely transform your life from the inside out. Because it will be your staff to lean upon in the best of days AND in the worst. I'm excited to recommend that kind of religion to you, and I hope you'll embrace it in gospel obedience today. You won't be sorry, and there will be no mistaking that you have found the religion of God's word when you can open up His word and point to it, live by it and see the transformation in your life.

I hope you'll give very serious thought to the questions we've considered in this study: Can you recommend your religion by the word of God, by the life you're living, and by the way it works for you?