

New Testament Religions

Introduction. You have certainly studied before that sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). Therefore, in order to get back to God, we have religion. The word "religion" basically means to "tie or bind back to God again." This fundamental belief in sin and redemption has fueled the development of many varied religions in the world. These are simply various, misinformed attempts to get back to God.

It would probably be an understatement to say that the religious world is in a state of confusion. With hundreds of denominations in this country and thousands of religions worldwide, it is suffice to say that many people simply do not know what is going on.

The word "religion" is used five times in the King James Version and it is important that we consider New Testament religions. These are religions which existed 1,900 years ago, but some of their characteristics are still among us today.

I. ***The Jew's Religion (Galatians 1:13-14)***

- A. These people were set apart for God (Exodus 19:5). Can you imagine the feeling one would have had being one of God's special people?
- B. However, Paul discovered that this was not the true religion (Acts 9:9-31). He was able to find true religion through Jesus Christ.
- C. One really never realizes what all Paul gave up when he became a Christian. He was probably close to the pinnacle of the Jewish hierarchy. After Gamaliel died, Paul would have probably been the successor of this very important Jewish position.
- D. People today are still trying to hold to this religion, but we cannot make ourselves right in the sight of God by going back to the Old Law. When Jesus died on the cross, He put to death the Old Law (Colossians 2:13-14; Hebrews 8:13; 10:9-10).

II. ***The Pharisees' Religion (Acts 26:5)***

- A. This was a sectarian religion. There were other sects in the first century, such as the Sadducees, Zealots, Herodians and the Essenes. Today, there are sects such as Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Episcopalians, Lutherans, etc.
- B. Could an Israelite just be an Israelite without being a Pharisee, Sadducee or an Essene? I believe they could. Can someone just be a Christian without being in a denomination? The Bible says they can.
- C. The Lord's church differs from denominations.
 1. They differ in their nature.
 - a) The Lord's church contains only those who are saved by God's direction (Acts 2:47). It contains those who have been "called

out” of the world and of sin. It is therefore exclusive in its nature.

- b) Denominations see themselves as one part of the great whole of God’s people. They accept into their fellowship those who have been “saved” by methods of human wisdom. They are therefore not exclusive in their nature.
2. They differ in their standard.
 - a) The Lord’s church uses only the word of God (1 Peter 4:11; 2 John 9-11; Colossians 3:17).
 - b) Denominations use culture as their standard. They change constantly to fit the world and remain attractive to the crowd. In fact, some men in the ultra liberal churches of Christ are openly declaring themselves “change agents.”
 3. They differ in their function.
 - a) The Lord’s church has a spiritual function (1 Timothy 3:16; John 6:63). Its mission is to save souls.
 - b) Denominations have a social function. They cater to the outer man with day centers, hospitals, benevolent programs, entertainment, recreation and lectures on finances and health.
 4. They differ in the government.
 - a) The Lord’s church has Christ as its head (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23).
 - b) Denominations have people as their head. They are controlled by councils, conventions, boards and synods.
- D. We must be willing to explain our distinctiveness to people and not become like the denominations around us.

III. ***Vain Religion (James 1:26)***

- A. This was a useless or worthless religion. It did a person absolutely no good whatsoever. It is futile to try to get back to God when we cannot control our tongue.
- B. Some people talk and it ruins religion. We forget the eternal wisdom of God in Proverbs 13:3, “He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.”
- C. We need to be very careful of whispering (Proverbs 16:28; Romans 1:29; 2 Corinthians 12:10), talebearing (Leviticus 19:16; Proverbs 11:13; 20:19; 26:20), and slander (Numbers 14:36-37; Psalm 101:5; Proverbs 10:18).
- D. Too many times brethren let their words fly and ends up doing a lot of damage (Ephesians 4:29). If our religion is to be worth anything, we must have self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). James spoke of just how destructive the tongue could be (3:1-12).

IV. **Pure Religion (James 1:27)**

- A. This is true religion. True religion is more than visiting and keeping oneself unstained from the world, although this is commanded (Galatians 6:10; 2 Thessalonians 3:13). The part of speech that is used here is synecdoche and it simply means that a part is used for the whole.
- B. James 1:22 states that we must be doers of the word. James 2:18-20 says that we must add action to our faith. Pure religion demands:
 1. Fear and respect of God (Deuteronomy 10:12; Ecclesiastes 12:13).
 2. A love of God (Deuteronomy 10:12; Mark 12:29-30).
 3. A knowledge of God (Hosea 6:6).
 4. Humility (Micah 6:8).
 5. A love for ourselves and for our neighbor (Romans 13:10).
 6. Righteousness greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20).
 7. Faith (John 8:24).
 8. Repentance (Luke 13:3).
 9. Confession of Christ (Matthew 16:16; Romans 10:10; John 11:27).
 10. A new birth (John 3:5).
- C. We have to be strong and have self-control to enjoy pure religion. We must also be dedicated servants and ready to do our share for the kingdom of God. If we are faithful, we will get back to God by restoring a right relationship between us. This will take away all those sins which separated us in the first place.

Conclusion. So which religion do you belong to? Which way are you going to try to get back to God? Are you going to get back the true way, or will you get back through one of the sectarian ways? The Lord calls you to be a part of His church. -- the church that is built upon the New Testament.

Pure religion requires work and obedience. If you are willing and ready to walk that path, then come and obey the gospel, partaking of the grace of God.