

Introductory Overview of Religion and Christianity

[note: you will see many Bible references throughout our study, the order of each reference is the name of the Bible book like “Ephesians,” then the chapter number like “2,” and finally the verse number like “8” (a colon always separates the chapter and verse number). Ephesians 2:8 says, “It is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”]

I. How do we begin when there are so many religions?

- A. First of all, the word “religion” is hardly used in the Bible. In the ESV version of the New Testament it’s used five times. Here are two of the uses in context:

James 1:26-27: *“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”*

- B. In general usage (as well as biblical usage), however, the word “religion” is used in a very broad manner and encompasses any number of worldviews (a way of understanding life and whatever it is that gives us purpose and meaning). The word used in this way does not assume the existence of the one true God or a personal God. For example:

Acts 17:22-23: *“Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.’”*

- C. That is to say, the Greek Atheneans were “religious,” but didn’t know God at all. They held to a different system of belief altogether and St. Paul employed a strategy that used their ignorance as a launching pad for proclaiming the true God.
- D. The practical ramification of this is that we can take no false comfort in being “religious.” Consider what St. James says about demons:

James 2:19: *“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.”*

- E. People can therefore “believe in God” and consider themselves religious, but this is no assurance that they have a living faith in the true God.
- F. This is true, because the devil seeks to distract from the true faith and the true God. He distracts by making his ways very religious and impressively spiritual.

2nd Corinthians 11:13-15: “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. ¹⁵It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.”

G. It is therefore imperative that we find the true religion, aka the true saving faith.

II. In the meantime, religions are – in and of themselves – quite diverse.

A. There are literally thousands (no exaggeration here) of distinct religions.

B. The largest religions in the world (in order of size) are:

- 1) Christianity with about 2 billion adherents.
- 2) Islam (Muslims) with about 1 billion adherents.
- 3) Non-Religious (though this is probably a misnomer) with about 1 billion.
- 4) Hinduism approaching a billion.
- 5) Buddhism approaching half a billion.

C. How do we begin to discern?

Christianity

All Other Religions

God-centered

Person-centered

God of Grace

Action by the person

Agape (selfless love)

Eros (self-centered love)

Love Neighbor for Neighbor

Love Neighbor for Self

Pardon

Parole

(Manske and Harmelink, *World Religions Today*, '96, page I)

D. At the end of the day, thousands of religions may be reduced to two basic types:

1. Those religions which tell you what you must do to save yourself (works-righteous religions).
2. The religion called “Christianity” that tells you what God has done to save you (Gospel-oriented or grace-oriented).

- E. “Gospel” = Good News of our being rescued from sin, death and the power of the devil by the free gift of God’s Son Jesus Christ; “Grace” = God’s free gift of love and mercy in and through His Son Jesus Christ.

III. So how do we wade through the religions?

A. Distinguish between these:

1. World religions (non-Christian ones include Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, etc.).
2. Cults (including Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witness, Mormons/The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Scientology, etc.).
3. Denominations within Christianity (Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Baptists, “Non-Denominational,” etc.).

B. In general you can discern when a world religion or cult is NOT Christian by knowing the key marks of Christianity (regardless of denomination):

1. God is Triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. Man is fallen into a state of sin and needs salvation.
3. God sent His Son Jesus Christ to be our Savior.
4. Jesus Christ is true God and true man and the only Savior.
5. We are saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ alone (note: this one is less clear in some Christian denominations).

C. Christianity, however, is definitely unique as it claims that Jesus Christ is the Only Savior of the world.

- Note:
- 1) Christianity (is the world religion of those who belong to Christ).
 - 2) Christian = “Christ’s possession” or “one who belongs to Christ”
 - 3) “Disciple” of Christ = a hearer/learner and follower of Christ
 - 4) Jesus = means “Savior”
 - 5) Christ = means “King” or “Anointed One”

John 14:6: *“Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”*

Acts 4:12: *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”*

IV. So why are there so many Christian denominations?

- A. First of all, the concept of even being a “church” was not a man-made idea. It is based on the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 16:18: *“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”*

(note: the word “church” in the original New Testament Greek means “called out ones.” That means God calls people to have faith in Jesus Christ through His Word. When the Word of God is proclaimed, God “calls” people and the Holy Spirit creates faith, e.g. Romans 10:17).

- B. God’s plan was for His Church to grow!

Matthew 28:19: *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...”*

Acts 1:8: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

- C. And it has grown to the largest religion in the world. Furthermore, for the first 1000 years, the church was also united.

1. The members of the Church were first called “Christians” in Antioch.

Acts 11:26c: *“The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”*

2. Over early church history, the Church established main locations in places like Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome.

- D. It is important to understand that during this early era, the united church was also called “catholic” which means “universal” as in an organic whole, like a body.

1st Corinthians 12:27: *“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”*

- E. So even though there were different important locations of the Christian Church, the Church was nevertheless united (there were no denominations/sub-divisions).

- F. At the same time, the main locations like Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, etc. had key local leaders called “bishops” which is a term that expresses headship and leadership (a kind of lead pastor).

G. Over time, however, certain main locations of Christianity were more prominent than others and therefore made their respective bishops more prominent and powerful than others.

1. In A.D. 1054, this is what occurred:

“Apart from the obvious cultural differences between the Latin-speaking West and the Greek-speaking East, the political course of events produced entirely different situations in the two branches of the church. In the West, the demise of the Empire created a vacuum that the church filled, and thus ecclesiastical leaders – particularly the pope – also came to wield political power. In the East, the Empire continued for another thousand years. It was often beleaguered by foreign invasion or by inner turmoil, but it survived. And its autocratic emperors kept a tight rein on ecclesiastical leaders. This usually led to civil intervention in ecclesiastical matters, particularly in theological debates.” (Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1*, 251)

*“After the Arab conquests, relations between Rome and Constantinople grew steadily worse. The restoration of the western Empire under Charlemagne meant that the popes no longer needed the support of the Byzantine Empire. And the prolonged controversy over the use of images convinced the West that the Eastern church was a puppet in the hands of the emperor. All this led to what the West called ‘the schism of Photius’ (867). Photius had deposed Patriarch Ignatius. Both Photius and Ignatius turned to Pope Nicholas for support, and he took the side of Ignatius. Photius then declared that the entire West was heretical, because it had tampered with the Nicene Creed by including in it the word **Filioque** – ‘and from the Son.’ The old Creed said that the Holy Spirit proceeds ‘from the Father.’ By adding ‘and from the Son,’ so Photius argued, the westerners were tampering both with the Creed itself and with the ancient understanding of the Trinity, which affirms that the Spirit proceeds ‘from the Father, **through the Son.**’”* (ibid, 264)

“The final schism came in the eleventh century. The Bulgarian arch-bishop, Leo of Ochrid, accused the West of error because it made clerical celibacy a universal rule, and because it celebrated communion with unleavened bread. When the dispute grew, Pope Leo IX sent an ambassador to Constantinople to deal with it. But his choice was most unfortunate. Cardinal Humbert, his legate, knew no Greek and did not care to learn it. He was a zealous reformer whose program included clerical celibacy and the autonomy of the church from civil rulers. To his mind, the Eastern married clergy, and the authority that the Byzantine emperor had over the church, were the very enemies which he had vowed to destroy. He and patriarch Michael Cerularius exchanged insults. Finally, on June 16, 1054, when the patriarch was preparing to celebrate communion, Cardinal Hubert appeared at the cathedral of Saint Sophia, walked to the high altar, and on it placed in the name of the pope – who actually had died shortly before – a sentence of excommunication against ‘heretic’ Michael Cerularius, as well as any who dared followed him. He then walked out, shook the dust from his feet, and set out for Rome. The break between East and West was finally accomplished.” (ibid, 265)

H. So as of A.D. 1054, the Church went from unity to a split and two denominations were formed: the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Eastern Orthodox Church in the East.

I. In the West, the church went forward in such a way that it started added teachings not found in Scripture. Here are the historical examples:

1. A.D. 593 Purgatory
2. A.D. 754 Temporal Power
3. A.D. 1075 Greatest mass divorce in history forced upon the clergy by Gregory VII
4. A.D. 1100 Money for Masses
5. A.D. 1184 The Inquisition
6. A.D. 1190 Sale of Indulgences
7. A.D. 1215 Transubstantiation
8. A.D. 1226 Adoration of the Host
9. A.D. 1415 Cup denied to layman by Council of Constance
10. A.D. 1545 Council of Trent decisively turns from the authority of Scripture to the authority of tradition
11. A.D. 1600 Invention of Scapulars
12. A.D. 1854 Immaculate Conception of Mary
13. A.D. 1864 Church/State separation condemned
14. A.D. 1870 Papal Infallibility
15. A.D. 1908 Invalidation of “mixed” marriages not performed by a Roman Priest
16. A.D. 1950 The Assumption of Mary

■ See more complete list in Manske and Harmelink, p. F.

J. 500 years after the first schism, the next schism came during what is known as the “Reformation.” The Protestant Reformation was essentially a reaction to what you see above, especially when the Roman teaching essentially put forth:

Faith + Good Works (Love) = Salvation

Those who teach this try to justify it biblically through:

James 2:17: *“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”*
And

James 2:24: *“You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”*

And

James 2:26: *“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”*

However, these Scriptures are not teaching faith + good works = salvation. Why not?

1. First because if they did they would totally contradict other Scriptures:

Romans 3:28: *“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”*

Titus 3:5a: *“he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.”*

2. Second because the context of James is to a struggling and persecuted church that was tempted to idleness in their faith. James is describing the sanctified life that will automatically accompany true faith. He is speaking to those who are already Christian (who already have saving faith) so as to spur them to live out their faith.
3. St. Paul teaches the same thing (notice verse 10 especially):

Ephesians 2:8-10: *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God –⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*

4. That is, first we are saved by grace through faith alone (without works), and then because we have been given faith, we are “created in Christ Jesus to do good works”...that is, good works are the inevitable sign that faith is living. Jesus says at Matthew 7:17: *“every good tree bears good fruit...”*.
5. In other words, we don’t do good works in order to be saved, but we do good works *because we are already saved! Christians bear good fruit.*
6. So, the Protestant teaching says:

Faith in Christ = Salvation

NOT

Faith + Good Works = Salvation

7. Christians therefore do not do good works in order to save themselves, but they do good works out of gratitude in their hearts to God that they have been saved by Christ. Because we are saved, we can’t help but do good works; the light of Christ simply shines through us. Illustration: God creates the sun and because the sun is the sun, it bears light. The light follows God’s creation of the sun. God creates a Christian by grace through faith in Jesus and because the Christian is a Christian, he or she does good works. That’s what Christians do.
8. This has immense motivational ramifications: If we go along with the idea that faith + good works = salvation, then why do we do good to our neighbor? Answer: because we want to be saved (though Scripture does encourage us to make our salvation sure – 2nd

Peter 1:10, we do not lose sight of our main motivation which is the love of Christ as 1st John 4:19 teaches: “We love because He first loved us.”). If we, however, believe that we are already saved by grace through faith, then why do we do good to our neighbor (primary reason)? Answer: out of love for Christ and our neighbor, no strings attached. In the first scenario, I love others in order to get something for myself (namely salvation); in the second scenario, I love others because I’m already saved and my love for my neighbor is self-less and free.

9. Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk, priest, and then professor within the Roman Catholic Church. But he like some before him questioned the additional teachings of Roman Catholicism which during his day included the spreading of indulgences. Because of confusion regarding the doctrine of repentance, Luther posted 95 thesis to challenge the abuses going on in the Church. His protest started a firestorm and the eventual breaking away of Roman Catholicism.
10. Enemies of Luther’s return to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the main doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone apart from the works of the law started to call those who agreed with Luther, “Lutheran,” a derogatory term that Luther himself objected to. Luther believed that followers of Christ should be called “Christian.” However, in time, the term “Lutheran” was regarded to be synonymous with “Evangelical” (of the Gospel) and the term was no longer seen as negative, but as a way of reinforcing the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the first Lutherans were also called “Evangelicals.”

K. The Protestant break from Roman Catholicism led to four immediate schisms:

1. Lutheranism (1517)
2. Church of England (Anglican) (1534)
3. Calvinism (1536)
4. Anabaptists and Others of the Radical Reformation (1520)

L. The rest of this course will present the basic teaching of the Christian faith according to the Lutheran confession of that faith. It is a confession that emphasizes the following:

1. Sola Scriptura/Scripture Alone: Our teaching is based on the Bible (the Holy Scriptures) alone and not on tradition, or popes, or reason, or anything other than Scripture.
2. Sola Gratia/Grace Alone: We are saved on the basis of God’s free gift of love and mercy towards us in the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. Sola Fide/Faith Alone: We are saved through faith in the heart in Christ alone; trusting Him and in Him alone for our salvation.

4. Sola Christus/Christ Alone: We are saved on account of Jesus Christ alone, especially through His life lived for us, His death that had His blood covering our sins, and His resurrection that assures us of everlasting life.
- M. In the 18th century, the Enlightenment led to the elevation of human reason above the Bible as the source of knowledge and truth. The humanistic philosophers ruled the day. This influence seeped into the Church especially in the 19th century. The main line denominations in the U.S. were impacted by the early 20th century and more and more of the mainline churches began to lean towards liberal theology. This caused a reaction from concerned Christians that found expression in American Christian Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism which is the basis for today's non-denominations. That is to say, non-denominations were a response to the mainline churches giving up the Word of God! However, not all mainline churches did. One of them that did not is the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (not to be confused with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). It is interesting to stand back and see what is happening in many non-denominational Christian Churches today in the 21st century. Some of them are doing exactly what the mainlines did in the 20th century and giving up their original Bible-based emphasis.
- N. Catechism reading: It would be good to cover pages 246-283.
- O. Please see Appendix #1 and Appendix #2 (see attached).