Religion, Relationship and Reality

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You probably know the scene. It's a youth event at a school hall or campsite, and the main speaker is up front, microphone in hand, trying to get a feel for the crowd. Maybe they begin by breaking the ice with a fun activity or illustration, or they tell a funny story or a couple of jokes. Maybe they make a bit of a controversial comment designed to shock the listeners. Perhaps an inside reference to youth culture that makes everyone turn to the friend next to them and repeat the joke. But it's important how they start, because they need the group to stay with them.

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When they begin to try to explain theological concepts, it gets a little trickier. By this point, some teens are lying in each other's laps, some are looking around, some are laughing at the wrong times, some are holding their phones. Are they on Bible apps, reading along? Are they on Instagram? Hang on – is that girl even awake? At this point, the desire to tell these kids something they're going to like is almost overwhelming. The person speaking can't (or shouldn't) just keep it light and fluffy, because this stuff is about eternal matters, but there's an urgent need to explain Bible concepts in a way that is simple and unthreatening. Every understanding of

doctrine, every idea about public speaking and every strategy about reaching the teenage mind is busy being tested, and I know, because I've been in that situation many times. That testing, however, is the reason many speakers fall back on concepts and phrases that are actually not entirely biblical, but which have been repeated enough to sound right. I want to zero in on one of them:

'It's not about religion, it's about relationship.'

You've heard it before. Maybe you've said it to someone in an attempt to explain this incredible gospel message. It's a great phrase – short, punchy, alliterative, easy to remember – and it seems to cut to the heart of Christianity. But I believe it's actually inaccurate and possibly unhelpful, particularly with the younger generation who are being told it over and over. To be clear, when I hear that phrase, I do not question the speaker's love of God or their sincere faith, and I know exactly what they are trying to say. But what if we're actually doing a disservice to the gospel by implying that there's a choice between those two options, as if they cannot possibly exist together?

Religion and Relationship Perceptions

It's obvious what is meant by it: the gospel is not lived out through dead religious observance or by the traditions of man, but rather through a living, active, day-by-day connection with God through repentance and faith. That's absolutely true. But words matter, and when we begin to use the word 'religion' as though it's a dirty word, we start to create a negative association with a concept that God Himself might not be so negative about.

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James, the half-brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem, used the word in James 1:27, when he said, 'Religion 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.' I'm no scholar in ancient languages, but there seems to be a general consensus among the reliable translations that that was the word he used. James didn't seem to feel that the word presented a problem, but I have a feeling that if I stood up in front of a group of young people and said, 'Guys, this is the type of religion that God is looking for,' most of them would immediately think I was going down a legalistic road that abandoned grace. Why?

More than the exact word, it's the concept or perception we've attached to it:

Religion implies rules, regulations, boundaries, fear, respect, conformity.

Relationship implies love, grace, connection, emotion, heart response.

You see, in modern thinking, you can only have one of those. But I think that's been the very problem: We've failed to see that the distinctiveness of the gospel is that it involves both. God the Lover doesn't stop being God the Law-Giver. Jesus the Friend isn't afraid to command obedience. Think of some of the things Jesus said to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. After those letters were read in each church, I don't imagine the leaders standing up and saying, 'Just remember, guys – it's not religion, it's relationship.' I think they were quite afraid of Him, and fearfully received the boundaries of His word. I think they applied some religion to that situation, along with the beauty of their relationship with Him.

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I think of Paul writing to the church in Thessalonica that the Lord will one day 'punish those who do not know God or obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.' (2 Thessalonians 1:8) Wait. Obey the gospel? As in… rules? Paul also wrote about calling people 'from among the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.' (Romans 1:5) At the same time, this in no way undermines righteousness by faith and an intimate, heartfelt relationship with Jesus. It just seems, from reading the Bible, that we don't choose between the two but rather hold them together.

Western Christianity actually needs something of a return to religion, not a rejection of it. And we need to take that word back, because it's been hijacked and used for the wrong purpose. Religion is good, necessary and legitimate, and should live alongside relationship as the partner of it, not its antithesis. Go ahead, take a pair of scissors and cut out every reference to an external instruction, boundary or rule in the New Testament. It'll fall apart.

Young people, in particular, are being actively encouraged to erase boundaries and throw off laws, but they do not need half-truths – they need to be taught to respect God and His rules. For many, that balance of religion and relationship could ultimately be the difference between shipwrecking their faith or running until the end.

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Years ago, when I had far more time on my hands, I volunteered at an old age home where I would spend time reading the Bible and praying with some of the lonely people in the frail care

center. One man, Alan, became a good friend. He must've been about 90 and was nearly blind. He'd lie in his bed trying to make out the shape of my face, and I'd hold his hand, read the Bible to him and pray. His mind would dart from subject to subject, but when he thought about God, he'd often say, 'God – I've got a lot of respect for Him.' I would get quite irritated but try not to show it, and always responded with, 'He wants you to love Him, Alan, not to respect Him.' He never quite understood what I was saying, or perhaps just didn't know how to do it.

To The Younger Generation

In all honesty, if I could go back to those moments, here's what I'd say to him now, and it's the same thing I would say to the young generation that is growing up on misinformed phrases:

Respecting God, fearing Him and keeping His commands is a wonderful thing, and you should always do it. He's God, He deserves our respect and honour, and we should always remind each other that we are dealing with the God of heaven, not some mate of ours. But also, He wants us to have a relationship with Him; to walk and talk with Him, and to love Him deeply. He wants us to look into His eyes and see the full extent of His love.

It's a mystery, but it's what's involved in knowing and serving this incredible God: laws and love, fear and friendship, religion and relationship.