

When You Are Confused in the Religious Marketplace

Matthew 17:1-5, 14-16, 18-21

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured: before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." . . . And when they came [down] to the crowd, a man came up to

him and . . . said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him." And Jesus answered . . . "Bring him here to me." And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. "Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you."

You Can Get Bitter Or Better!

JAMES W. MOORE

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In 1931, a baby boy was born in Indiana—a baby boy destined to become one of the most notorious religious leaders of our time. His name was Jim Jones! Jim Jones became an American cult leader who

Promised his followers a utopia in the jungles of South America. He proclaimed himself "messiah" of the People's Temple, a San Francisco-based evangelical group, and ultimately led his followers into a mass suicide known as the Jonestown Massacre, the Guyana Tragedy. It happened on November 18, 1978.

Earlier, Jones had gained a reputation as a charismatic churchman in Indiana. After moving to California, he apparently became obsessed with the exercise of power. In the face of mounting accusations by journalists and defectors from the cult that he was illegally diverting the income from cult members to his own use, Jones and hundreds of his followers emigrated to Guyana in 1974 and set up an agricultural commune called Jonestown. As ruler of the sect, Jones confiscated passports and millions of dollars, manipulating his followers with threats of blackmail, beatings, and death. He also staged bizarre rehearsals for a ritual mass suicide.

On November 17, 1978, U. S. Representative Leo Ryan of California arrived in Jonestown with a group of newsmen to conduct an unofficial investigation of alleged abuses. The next day, as Congressman Ryan's party and sixteen defectors from the cult prepared to leave from an airstrip near Jonestown, the group was attacked by armed men. When Jones learned that Ryan and four others had been killed and the others had escaped, he knew the jig was up and the authorities would be brought in, so he activated his mass-suicide plan. On November 18, 1978, Jim Jones commanded his followers to drink cyanide-laced punch. Strangely and inexplicably, the vast majority obeyed his com-

mand. Jones himself died of a gunshot wound, which may or may not have been self-inflicted. We don't know about that, but we do know that when Guyanese troops reached Jonestown the next day, they found 779 members of the Jim Jones cult dead! And almost 200 of them were children!

I thought of the Jonestown Massacre a few weeks ago when a twelfth-grade student asked me, "Is religion always good?"

Immediately, my mind flashed back to the Guyana Tragedy, and I said, "No! Religion is not always good. Some of the worst things that ever happened in human history were done because of religion. Some people think it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something, but it does matter! It matters more than I can tell you. History has shown dramatically that wrongly motivated, mixed-up religion can be very destructive!"

Good religion is creative and constructive, and it enables people to do wonderful, God-like things. But bad religion is disastrous. It produces fanatics who are closed and negative, narrow-minded and sometimes cruel.

Does that bother you? Let me document it. Remember the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem witch hunts, the crucifixion of Jesus, to name just a few. Bloody wars, cruel persecutions, brutal rituals, human sacrifices, strange superstitions—all have taken place under the cloak of religion. And in our own time, we have seen acts of terrorism, bombings, skyjackings, mass suicides, kidnappings, blood baths, murders, violence, hostility, prejudice. Bizarre cults engage in

brain-washing and mind manipulation to entice young people to reject their families, friends, and their career plans.

The point is clear: Religion can be very, very good. But misdirected, it can be very, very bad. Religion can produce a Moses, a Jesus, a Paul, a St. Francis, a Mother Teresa, or a John Wesley. But it also can produce a Jim Jones or a Charles Manson. When religious ideas are true, they save, heal, make whole. When they are false, they crush, destroy, devastate.

Some years ago when I was in high school, I had a good friend named Willie. Willie was one of those delightful characters who was always the life of the party. For those of you over thirty, he had what we used to call an Ipana smile. For those under thirty, he had a mouthful of Ultra-Brite teeth. And he was always grinning. Everybody liked Willie. He was a friend to everybody. He was the fellow (you know the type) who was forever broke, always borrowing a quarter in the school cafeteria, but somehow nobody seemed to mind. That was just "good old Willie." He could walk into a room and make people laugh and feel good. He had that special kind of happy charisma that is so unique.

But one day Willie "got religion"; unfortunately, it was the wrong kind. He changed completely, and, sadly, it was a change that was negative and debilitating. Within a few weeks, Willie had become so sanctimonious that everybody felt uncomfortable with him. Some even avoided him. He didn't smile anymore. He rarely spoke, and when he did, it was in a very pious tone. He carried a Bible under his arm and constantly preached a

negative religion, laying it on in a holier-than-thou tone.

One day as we were sitting in the lunchroom, Willie came striding through very pompously, as though he were the perfect blend of John the Baptist, Simon Peter, Martin Luther, and Billy Graham, all rolled into one. Someone was heard to say, "You know, I liked him better before he got religion!"

Now obviously, I am for religion. I have committed my life to it. But I am also aware of an important point in the Scriptures—namely, as far as we know, Jesus never met an atheist. That is, his problems and conflicts were not with irreligious people; he was opposed and betrayed by *religious* people. Religious people can be God-like, but when their motives get mixed up, when their thoughts become confused or self-serving, they may nail somebody to a cross. Good religion will open you up like a flower; it will make you bloom with new life; it will set you free. But bad religion will cause you to wither and die; it can make you narrow and unbending, negative, self-righteous, closed-minded. Jesus said it like this: "If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matt. 6:23).

It's a tremendously important question then, isn't it? How do we tell the difference between good religion and bad religion? Let me list what I think are some basic qualities of good religion. I'm sure you can think of others. I just want to plant some seeds in your thinking so these thoughts can continue in your mind long after this moment.

But before getting into those qualities, let me remind you of life in the ancient marketplace. The ancient

marketplace had an interesting motto: "Let the Buyer Beware!" In other words, "Watch out! Be cautious! Don't be gullible! You may be sold something for an outrageous price that you don't really want!" So let the buyer beware!

It seems to me that is a pretty good motto for the religious marketplace of our time. There are a lot of confusing religious ideas and appeals in our world today, all vying for our attention, all trying to win us to their way of thinking. So it's a good idea to be cautious in the religious marketplace. *Don't be gullible!* It's also my opinion that it's a good idea to stay close to the mainline churches—churches that are history-tested, time-honored, and trustworthy. Beware of the fly-by-night religious personality who zips into town with an easy one-step program to salvation and a few exotic gimmicks, and then just as quickly zips away, never to be seen again. Beware of those who try to steal you away from your church with smooth talk and pious smiles and cloaked innuendoes which suggest, ever so slyly, that the church you are now in just isn't quite as spiritual as they are. Let the buyer beware!

Now to the basic qualities of good religion.

Good religion keeps growing.

It is open to *new truths* from God. Jim Jones closed the book on truth. He thought he was the only truth, and anyone who questioned him was punished cruelly. But you can see how wrong that is! A call to discipleship is a call to grow in the faith, to think, to stretch, to wonder, to probe, to love God with our

minds. For this reason, we need to beware of any religion that shuts down thinking. We need to beware of any religion that says, "Here's what to believe. Learn this, accept this, swallow this. Don't ask questions, and don't bring up any new ideas!"

We also need to beware of being content with one dramatic religious experience. That was Simon Peter's temptation on the Mount of Transfiguration. There he experienced Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. It was wonderful, powerful, mind-boggling. He knew God was in that place, and he wanted to stay there on the mountain top. But Jesus probably said to him, "Peter, this has been good, but we can't stay here. We must move on! We must be open to new experiences with God at other times and in other places." Good religion keeps on growing. It's ever open to new truth from God. Religion is like a parachute; it works best when open! Bad religion, on the other hand, is closed, narrow, negative, stale, and afraid. Good religion says, "All truth is from God, so let me learn!" Bad religion says, "Don't confuse me with the facts. And if you don't do it my way, you are lost!" Good religion keeps on growing and learning. It is open, it does not close the book on truth.

Good religion works in daily life.

Good religion works now. It gives us confidence for living now! It makes us better people now! Good religion is not just an insurance policy for another day. Jesus came off the Mount of Transfiguration, walked right down into the valley, and healed an epileptic boy. So

good religion is not just something that dwells on the past or longs for the future; it works *now*, speaks to us *now*, makes us whole *now!*

Bishop Arthur Moore loved to tell the story of a man who had been away from his home church for some years, involved in all kinds of shady practices and criminal activities. But when he came back to his home church and testimony-time came, he was ready.

He stood and said, "I'm so glad to be back in my own church, and I want to tell you that while it's true that I have beaten my wife, that I have deserted my children, that I have stolen and lied and done all manner of evil and served several terms in jail—but I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that not once, in all that time, did I ever lose my religion!"

Now, if your religion is nothing more than an insurance policy for heaven, if it has no effect on how you live and how you treat others *now*, then first of all, you are missing out on life. And second, you'd better check your motivation. Christianity is good religion because it works in day-to-day life.

Some years ago, Harry Emerson Fosdick received a letter from a young mother in which she told what happened when she moved into a new subdivision:

We tried everything we could think of to make this place something other than a real-estate development. We tried organized recreation, community picnics, and square dancing. We formed a women's club and held bridge parties, and started a garden club. We had a parents' organization and evening discussion groups. We tried everything. But it was not until the church came that we

changed from a subdivision into a community and became real neighbors to one another.

(*Dear Mr. Brown*, 1961, p. 150)

Good religion works *now*—in practical daily living. It gives us a sense of personal partnership with God. Good religion keeps on growing, and it works *now*.

Good religion makes us more loving.

This was Jesus' test. For him, *love* was the measuring-stick for good religion. For him, *love* was the most genuine, the most reliable, the most authentic sign of discipleship. Remember how Jesus put it in John 13:34-35: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you. . . . By this all men will know that you are my disciples."

And how dramatically the Apostle Paul might have put it: "What does it matter if you can speak in tongues? If you don't have love, it's not worth anything! And what does it matter if you can do miraculous things? Without love, it's all empty and worthless! And what does it matter if you can quote reams of Scripture and spout high-sounding theology into the air! Without love, it's only so much noise! Faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is *love*" (1 Cor. 13:8-13, paraphrase). So put love first and make love your aim. That's what God wants you to do.

Now, if you have a religious experience and it makes you more loving, then, in my opinion, it is a valid experience; it's good religion. But if you have a religious experience that makes you narrow or hateful or judgmental or holier than thou, then, in my opinion, that is bad news, and bad religion! Bad religion is