

WORLD RELIGIONS

Introduction

Lesson 1

The world is full of religions, some formal, some informal, and the worshipers in those religions range from highly committed to not committed at all. There are those who deny that God even exists and in doing so make themselves into a god. There are others who worship many gods. Even within certain religions there are often various sects, groups, and denominations. There are some two hundred Baptist denominations in the world. While they all claim to be Christian and all believe in believer's baptism, yet they differ on certain points of doctrine. All of this can be very confusing.

When witnessing to people you may have heard the common reply, "There are so many religions and denominations in the world, how do you know yours is the right one?" This is a smoke screen question which all unbelievers seem to be born with and use to deflect the gospel. Consciously or unconsciously in their hearts, they are looking for reasons not to believe in God. They see hundreds, if not thousands, of religions in the world and they say to themselves, "How can anyone know which is true? It would take so long to investigate all of these religions that I am not even going to try." Thus they resign themselves into not doing anything at all and put their eternal soul in peril.

Others begin to search, trying to find the "right" religion, until at last they find the one they want. They often aren't looking for the truth, they are looking for a religion that aligns with what they want to believe. They go shopping to find the religion that fits them best. They then cling to it tenaciously and profess it to be "the right and true religion" by which they mean, "the religion that meets my felt needs the most."

Some are brought up in a certain religion, others get involved in religion to pursue a relationship with someone, or get healed, or to get God on their side. The reasons people "get" or "pursue" or "believe" a religion are legion. Yet all the religions in the world do teach us something very important, mankind has an awareness of God and a desire to worship God.

So what do we do about all of the religions and how do we answer the person who says to us, "There are so many religions and denominations in the world, how do you know yours is the right one?" In this class we will learn the answer to this question. We will discover that the many religions in the world can be very simply categorized into two groups. We will also see why there is so much diversity among religions themselves. We will survey both Christian, cult, and occult religions and compare them to the central teachings of biblical Christianity. In doing this we will discover that Satan has promoted many false religions to obscure true, biblical Christianity from those who need it the most. It is as if he has constructed a forest of plastic trees that look very real and genuine on the outside, in order to deceive those looking for the real thing.

In this lesson we will define terms and discuss the biblical foundations for man's desire to worship something and why there is such a great variety of religions in the world. In the weeks to come we will begin by looking at Christian denominations, then progress to cults and pseudo Christian groups, then to the occult, and finally to those religions whose adherents pretend to have no religion at all.

I. DEFINING KEY TERMS

A. Cult

1. *Christianity on the Offense*: "According to Dr. Charles S. Braden, "A cult ... is any religious group which differs significantly in some one or more respects as to belief or practice from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expressions of religion in our total culture." Historically in Western civilization, the "normative expression of religion" has been Christianity. Thus Christians identify a cult more precisely as a group "which surrounds a leader or a group of teachings which either denies or misinterprets essential biblical doctrine."¹
2. *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary*: "Deviant and heretical pseudo-religious group. Cults may originate either within the host Christian society, as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism and Christian Science, or be imported from another hostile culture, as Hare Krishna, Unification Church, Bahatism, and Scientology. Pseudo-Christian cults have extrascriptural source of authority, deny justification by grace, brainwash their members, devalue Christ, and maintain punitive disciplinary practices for members who question their scriptural legitimacy."²

B. Denomination

1. *Josh McDowell's Handbook on Apologetics*: "The Protestant Reformation caused a portion of the church to split from the Roman Catholic church. However, those who rejected the Catholic system were not in total agreement among themselves concerning various matters of belief and church government. While agreeing on the essential doctrines of faith (the Trinity, the deity of Christ, etc.), their differences interfered with their unity, and denominations arose."³
2. *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes*: "Church historian Bruce Shelley suggests that the denominational

¹Dan Story, *Christianity on the Offense: Responding to the Beliefs and Assumptions of Spiritual Seekers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1998), 117.

²George Thomas Kurian, *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary: The Authoritative Resource on the Christian World* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Pubs., 2001).

³Josh McDowell, *Josh McDowell's Handbook on Apologetics*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

theory of the church that arose in England in the 1600s was based on the following principles:

- a. Considering the human inability always to see the truth clearly, differences of opinion about the outward form of the church are inevitable.
- b. Even though these differences do not involve fundamentals of the faith, they are not matters of indifference.
- c. Since no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth, the true church of Christ can never be fully represented by any single ecclesiastical structure.
- d. The mere fact of separation does not itself constitute schism. It is possible to be divided at many points and still be united in Christ.⁴

C. Heresy

1. *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes*: "Teachings held by a factional religious party which deny some aspect of established doctrine. NT writers give no toleration to heresies in the church."⁵
2. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*: "Any teaching rejected by the Christian community as contrary to Scripture and hence to orthodox doctrine. Most of the teachings that have been declared heretical have to do with either the nature of God or the person of Jesus Christ. The term heresy is not generally used to characterize non-Christian belief. That is to say, systems of belief such as atheism or agnosticism, or non-Christian religions such as Buddhism or Islam are not technically heresy. The term heresy is generally reserved for any belief that claims to be Christian and scriptural but has been rejected by the church as sub-Christian or antisciptural."⁶

⁴Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 202-03.

⁵Martin H. Manser, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes. The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1999).

⁶Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 58.

D. Nondenominational

1. *Oxford Concise Dictionary*: "open or acceptable to people of any Christian denomination."
2. *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*: "not connected with a particular religious denomination."

E. Occult/Occultism

1. *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*: The word "occult" is derived from a Latin word meaning to "conceal" and hence means not revealed, secret, abstruse, mysterious, and relates to those who involve themselves in supernatural or supernormal powers or some secret knowledge of them.
2. Many other words might be placed under the general category of "occult" such as magic, sorcery, astrology, divination, witchcraft, Satanism, spiritism, fortune telling, etc., all of which involve engaging in supernatural or supernormal powers.

F. Pseudo Christianity – is a synonym for "cult." Pseudo means false and therefore pseudo Christianity means "false Christianity." Satan has raised up many false religions that are very similar to Christianity in order to deceive people into trusting in a lie. Even within biblical Christian churches there are those whose faith is false, making them pseudo Christians who are trusting in damning heresies.

G. Polytheism

1. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*: "The term polytheism comes from the Greek word *poly*, meaning "many," and *theos*, meaning "God"; hence, it involves a belief in many gods, or in a plurality of gods. History has noted many nations and societies that were polytheistic: early Romans were animistic; the people of India were pantheistic as well as polytheistic; Egyptians worshiped a multiplicity of gods, including the sun, the Nile, frogs, and even gnats."⁷

⁷Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997), 186.

2. *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion*: "Belief in and veneration of more than one god or divine being. Many pagan religions are polytheistic."⁸

H. Religion

1. *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*: "The service and worship of God; an institutionalized system of religious beliefs and practices."⁹
2. Karl Barth: "Religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed we must say that it is the one great concern of godless man ... It is the attempted replacement of a divine work by a human manufacture."¹⁰
3. Blaise Pascal: "Religion is so great a thing that it is right that those who will not take the trouble to seek it, if it be obscure, should be deprived of it."¹¹

I. Sect

1. *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary*: "Dissenting religious group within organized religion whose adherents follow a special set of teachings or practices and reject the mainstream or traditional church. Unlike a cult, a sect may hold orthodox beliefs, like the Plymouth Brethren, but although sociologists use it as a technical category, the term is more generally used pejoratively."¹²
2. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*: "Sects are generally groups that have split off from a larger group or have maintained a unique identity within a larger group. They simply may be unorganized religious movements. Sectarianism is rigid devotion to a sect. In another sense sectarianism refers to the belief that one's

⁸C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 94.

⁹Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1118.

¹⁰Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Alresford, Hampshire: John Hunt Publishers Ltd, 2000), 858.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²George Thomas Kurian, *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary: The Authoritative Resource on the Christian World* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Pubs., 2001).

own group is the true church in distinction from other groups that are deemed false churches.”¹³

J. Syncretism

1. *Zondervan Dictionary of Biblical Themes*: “The incorporation into religious faith and practice of elements from other religions, resulting in a loss of integrity and assimilation to the surrounding culture.”¹⁴
2. *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*: “The term syncretism is used by anthropologists and historians to refer to the blending of religious beliefs. This typically occurs when the social circumstances of one group bring them into contact with another. As the two groups interact, members of one group may begin to assimilate aspects of the religious beliefs of the other, resulting in a transformation of the traditional religion. For Christians throughout history, the notion of syncretism has had largely negative connotations and is sometimes associated with heresy.”¹⁵

II. SCRIPTURAL REASONS THERE ARE MANY RELIGIONS

- A. **Mt. 7:15** “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.
- B. **Mk. 13:5-6** And Jesus began to say to them, “See to it that no one misleads you. 6 “Many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am He!’ and will mislead many.
- C. **Acts 20:28-30** “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 “I know that after my

¹³Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 106.

¹⁴Martin H. Manser, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes. The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1999).

¹⁵Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

- D. **Rom. 1:18-23** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. 21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.
- E. **I Cor. 10:20** No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons.
- F. **II Cor. 11:3-4** But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. 4 For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.
- G. **Col. 2:18-19** Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, 19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.
- H. **I Tim. 4:1-3** But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, 3 men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.

- I. **II Tim. 2:15** Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

- J. **II Pet. 3:14-16** Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, 16 as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.

- K. **Jude 4** For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

- L. **Rev. 9:20-21** The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; 21 and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts.

III. **APPLICATION**

- A. It is apparent from what we have studied in this lesson that religions abound in the world. Knowing that only one can be true, it is apparent that many are deceived. We must be on guard lest we be deceived too.

- B. Many have gone astray, not knowing how to study the Bible correctly, therefore we must make the effort to learn sound Bible study techniques lest we too be led astray.

- C. Many fail to understand that the Word of God alone is our sole authority for faith and practice, not the church, not experiences, and not teachers who claim to have higher insights than others. Therefore we must look to God's Word alone for truth.

- D. We have learned that behind all false religions are demons whose design it is to damn people to hell. We must therefore study the truth, that we might be able to spot what is false.

- E. Though we would never want to study what is false to the exclusion of what is true, it is helpful, for evangelistic purposes, to understand false religions by comparing what they teach to the Bible. This can assist us in sharing the gospel with those deceived by Satan's lies.

- F. Since those in false religion are destined to perish if someone does not lead them to Christ, we must be faithful to pray for them, that their eyes would be opened to the truth of God's Word.

- G. We must be prepared to encounter those deceived by false religion who appear to know more than we do, who know the Bible better than we do, who have degrees, and who make convincing arguments against the truth. Knowing they are out there, we should be prepared to make a defense for the hope that is within us.

Satan labors might and main,
by false teachers, which are his messengers
and ambassadors, to deceive, delude, and forever undo
the precious souls of men.¹⁶

¹⁶Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, (Philadelphia: Jonathan Ponder, 1810) 299-300.