

From Religion to Relationship

Series: Holy Conversations: Talking about God in Everyday Life

Brad Bailey - October 15, 2023

Note: These notes represent more than what could be fully spoken or covered due to time. In particular, the many points about how people dismiss “religion” that are a part of the second point... were noted far more briefly... but for the sake of how further thoughts may be helpful...I have kept all the thoughts here.

Intro

One of the more interesting dynamics in my own experience...is when someone asks what I do. When I tell them I'm a pastor... it often leads to some interesting responses.

Some try to express **appreciation**... some **almost apologetic**... some fascinated...like they just met an alien...and some **express surprise**... as if to say...“you seem so normal.”

But invariably... the immediate direction is similar to what you may experience if you tell someone you went to church... or are a Christian...

They ask... oh **what kind of church... where is your church**...and this **may lead to some more questions** that may reflect that they are **just looking for some reference point**... but can also seem strangely **secondary and separated from the spiritual life that exists in Jesus.**

What I realize is that what fills my heart is a relationship with God...but most people begin with is what we might refer to as religion.

The word “religion” isn't inherently negative in itself. It really depends on what we associate with it. The word “religion” in it's most basic use may simply refer to **“a system of beliefs and practices relating to the divine.”** (Encarta) ...but in our **current cultural use** it has come to **emphasize the external form** of such **systems and structures.**

So today we are **continuing our series** entitled **Holy Conversations: Talking about God in everyday life.** [1]

Many people sense that there is a **minefield of misconceptions and misgivings about Christianity.... so we may think we need to keep our relationship with God private... that we can't talk have conversations about spiritual issues.**

Whether you are committed to Christ... or still exploring ... we should all sense that we've lost something as fundamental as anything in life...if we can't talk about the big questions of life... about spiritual beliefs.

The truth is that many people may be more guarded...but they are not closed.

What those who don't yet know Christ need, is not a sales pitch, argument, or information dump. Instead, they need caring, thoughtful conversation partners.

We are finding freedom to have conversations that can include talking about the big questions of life... about spiritual beliefs... about God.

In this series we are challenging ourselves to see other people as Jesus does... and to find freedom to relate not out of guilt... not out of fear...but out of love.

And today...we are going to explore

Helping conversations get beyond external religion to that of a personal relationship.

Even within the time of Jesus...it had become associated with **how human life tried to reach God in vain ways**...and often became a means that simply divided people... or by which one group claimed to be superior to another.

This challenge has **always** been at hand regarding Jesus.

In this series we are learning from Jesus by drawing from one extended conversation ... a conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman.

Let's listen again to the conversation between Jesus and a woman in Samaria.

John 4:4-26

⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

As we noted in our first week... this conversation arises simply because Jesus was on his way somewhere... and he is thirsty from his travels.

Holy conversations can arise in everyday life. They arise in the basic common ground we share with others... like thirst.

The first thing she says to Jesus...

John 4:9

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

She raises the issue of how they are **separated by their religious identity.**

Many people today... think in **similar categorical ways.** Many times when I meet someone who is of Jewish descent... they may sense some connection... but overall... there is a categorical separation. Two separate religions... two separate groups.

And it's **more about being born into a category...** than **real personal beliefs.**

So this woman begins with saying... ***"We really shouldn't even be talking."***

How does he respond to her about such religious identities?

John 4:10

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

He is essentially saying... **there is something here is so much greater** than what you are thinking. There is something here that **isn't about such social cultural categories...** but about **that which can truly satisfy** our deepest and eternal need.

He is bringing an **eternal reality...** that is **greater than the historical and cultural thinking** she is set in.

John 4:11

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

She raises the **old well history.**

Jesus is talking about living water...and **she wonders if he really appreciates** the history of this well.

Again she is **relating out of her cultural identity.** She is someone who is **associated with this well...** and how **it provides her with a cultural identity.**

It's like someone saying... my family were from this religious background.

(A knowledge of history is a good thing... but it's not an end in itself. It's important to know about those God engaged in the past... but not as a substitute for knowing God in the present.)

It's at this point that **Jesus speaks deeply into her life...** a **prophetic word...** the Spirit gives him.

And we can only imagine how this may have struck her. And indeed we discover that it did indeed strike her...but her initial response?

John 4:19-20

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

What she says... shows she **isn't trying to hide the truth**... what he said only God could have shown... she can see that he is a prophet. But she seems to **digress...or divert the focus**...as she raises the difference between the two religious places of worship.

Jesus is speaking to her deep spiritual need. Through the Spirit's leading he helps her see the deeper thirst of her soul... not yet met through her many relationships. Just when you expect a transforming moment... **she raises a safe religious point** about the different places of worship.

John 4:21-24

“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

Jesus once again shifts her religion orientation towards the relationship at hand.

He says...in essence... all these religious differences are coming to an end.

He then says something that **may sound critical** of Samaritans... he says they worship what they don't know...but the Jewish people know...because salvation comes through the Jews.

He is saying the simple truth that the true living God initially has been revealing himself **THROUGH the lineage of Abraham** and the Jewish people.

God said ALL nations would be blessed THROUGH the Jewish people...and then revealed that He would send a savior for all the nations. So in this sense... the Jewish people are those who know.

But as he goes on... he speaks of Spirit and truth...and some believe that what he is implying is that the **Samaritans may have ignorance and need the truth**...but the Jewish people would not be saved by their religious heritage and historical sites... but only by receiving him and the Spirit he would send.

> **What a fascinating encounter**... Jesus is bringing a relationship with God...and this woman is stuck in a discussion about religion.

This woman's mind is so bound by what we could refer to as religion as it has been formed and sown into her experience and identity.

What we see is that...

Jesus is shifting the conversation from religion to relationship.

It's fascinating because I think **this conversation is still going on today.**

We may want to talk about spiritual life but instead are asked where our church is... whether we saw the PBS show about some obscure aspect of religion... or if we heard about the recent religious leader who's been found in a scandal.

Perhaps this shouldn't surprise us.

This is **what we see Jesus engaging** when he **came as a Jew amidst the religious culture of his day.**

He **constitutes in himself**... what religion could only reveal a need for...but never fulfill.

He **becomes the temple...the Torah...the end of the sacrificial system.**

Jesus is the embodiment of what had been established to point to him.

And to further lead the way... along with his disciples who weren't very religious... **he takes hold of a rising religious leader**...who becomes **Paul the Apostle**...who wrote most of the NT and it is all **about getting beyond religion to relationship through Christ**... the new covenant we can enter through Christ.
> **The entire NT is about this shift** ...from the old covenant to the new...**from religion to relationship**.

But we then see the human religious nature continue to run throughout the long history that leads to today.

We see the **church become an institution**.

What began with the original church...in which **structure followed the spirit**... **we the spirit so often lost to structure**.

We see religion become a cultural identity.

At the **start of this nation**... every college included **religious classes** that were about true spiritual formation...about that which was meant to shape us ...but over time a class on religion presents such as **merely a subject to give opinions about**.

> **So it shouldn't surprise us that so many people engage on that level**.

They may not be so different than this woman.

Maybe this has become **her only experience**...maybe she's only known religion in these way... or maybe she is wanting to keep the conversation on this level **because it is safer**.

It can be a **safe way to frame a discussion** because we can **talk about things as externalized**... as merely a cultural or traditional difference that should have **no real implications for our lives**. It is much safer to talk about Jesus in the context of religious traditions than to discuss who he really is and what he really said and did.

What we see in Jesus ...is that he is going to reach through all of the religious ideas...to extend relationship.

So...

How can we help others get beyond relating to external religion?

1. Recognize the "religious" experience and potential aversions people may have.

We may think that a lot of people have negative feelings towards religion...and assume that is a problem to avoid.

We need to realize that Jesus shared many of those problems...and engaged them...and so can we.

> **We can be explorers of people's experience with "religion".... helping them to interpret their journey and the assumptions they have formed.**

Perhaps there is nothing more helpful than simply asking people about what has shaped their journey. It could be as simple as saying..."I've had an interesting journey in coming to relationship with Christ. What has shaped your beliefs over the years?"

What we will discover is a story that you can relate to... and .. a story that isn't finished.

Let me introduce you to one way that we might be able to openly do this. We can actually ask someone we know...to be a conversation partner.

Conversation Partners

I have prepared a guide for any two people to discuss spiritual beliefs. It is an opportunity to be completely open with someone...by explaining that our community of faith realizes how hard it can be to have healthy conversations about spiritual beliefs... and that Christians haven't always been good. So we are invited to ask someone to help us... to get together and have conversations. There's a guide with 4 topics and so ideally we would try to meet 4 times.

*There's a one sheet guide you can shared with them.
I just did this with my neighbor... he said...when and where.
I am confident of this...I will grow in the process.*

I want to encourage you to begin thinking about someone you might be able to ask to be a conversation partner.

The first week of the conversation guide...is on sharing what has shaped your spiritual beliefs.

2. Provide some helpful perspective to potential false “religious” ideas people may be holding onto.

There are various ideas or narratives that get shared... and become more common. [4]
And there are many ideas people have about religion... that they attach to Jesus... that we might hear. And we can help people think about these more clearly.

As fellow travelers we can help re-present both the problem of religion and the person of Jesus who transcends it. We can do this through helping shape the truth of the problem and telling stories that represent Christ's response.

Let's quickly consider a few... and I will provide **more extended responses** in notes that will be **available online.**

- **Religion excludes and divides people**

True - Actually anything people believe in can divide them. The issue that really seems to effect us is how we relate in our differences.

> But Jesus places grace and compassion as the very center in which we should relate.

Jesus teaching / stories that could be shared:

- “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” - Luke 6:27-28
- The Good Samaritan: Jesus asks this one guy who he thinks he should consider to be his neighbor. He goes on to share about how a traveler got robbed and left for dead. Religious people came along who shared his ethnic and religious background... and didn't help him. A man of mixed ethnic origins who was despised came along...helped him... and is pronounced to be the true neighbor.

Someone described it this way.

Imagine two country clubs. The first has a strict set of rules and only allows in people who have earned their membership. They have to accomplish something, obtain superior wisdom, or fulfill a long list of demands and requirements to qualify for entry. Despite their best efforts, lots of people just won't make the grade and will be excluded. In effect, this is what other religious systems are like.

But the second country club throws its doors wide open and says, "Anybody who wants membership is invited inside. Rich or poor, black or white, regardless of your ethnic heritage or where you live, we would love to include you. Entry is based not on your qualification but only by knowing the owner which all are invited to do. So we'll leave the matter up to you. You decide. But remember, we will never turn you away if you seek admittance." That's what Christianity is like.

Which one is more open and inclusive? [2]

- **Religions are really all the same... they are all just different roads that lead to the same place.**

I can appreciate the desire to find common ground...and there certainly are virtues that are shared and can be appreciated.

But when it comes to ultimate beliefs... it really doesn't respect any beliefs to try and reduce them to being the same when they aren't.

- **Religion is just an escape some people find comfort in.**

It certainly could be nothing more than that. But **Jesus came into this world...** and **engaged it more deeply than anyone.** And what he invites me into...isn't that which escapes this reality...but **expands this reality.**

- **Religion involves imposing beliefs on people and trying to control them.**

True – It seems people make the mistake of believing that something is so right for everyone... that they can't see the problem of using force or coercion to implement it. Trying to force one to believe in something seems to defy genuine confidence in the power of what one believes.... and trying to force a relationship with God is by nature impossible. God has never forced relationship with anyone.

> Jesus denounces control and force. If anyone ever understood the difference between control and influence... it was Jesus.

Jesus teaching / stories that could be shared:

- Peter rebuked for drawing a sword to defend Jesus (Luke 22:49-51; Matt. 26: 51-52)
- Pilate – Jesus : My Kingdom is not of this world
- **“I'm not into organized religion.”**

One of the **most common sentiments** heard today... is that **“I'm not into organized religion.”** Many will express valuing spirituality.... but not organized religion. **We do well not only to try and understand what the aversion may involve...** but also to help recognize that the problem is not with Jesus...but with human nature. [3]

- **Religion is too full of superiority and hypocrisy.**

True – It can be so easy to claim we are good because we believe something good. I think we can all face a gap between what we believe and what we've become... and try to and try to ignore and cover up the gap... which is essentially hypocrisy.

> **Jesus** strips all the religious and moral superiority from everyone by showing that real change is inward... from the inside out.

Jesus teaching / stories that could be shared:

- When religious leaders seem to always point to their outward superiority... Jesus challenges them saying they are like cups that may seem clean on the outside... but should worry about the inside.... like tombs painted up well... but bearing nothing that's alive.
- Peter's process of being humbled. -One of his followers named Peter was a real enthusiastic type who began to think he was better than the rest... beyond fault... Jesus predicted he would deny him three times when things got rough. (Matt. 26:69-75)
- **Religion seems to become self-serving.**

True – Religion can certainly can be self serving. Religious institutions and roles of power can become means to serve one's own power and control. Actually any influence we have can be used to serve or be served. Religion has the added potential to draw on connection to God. It would seem that **whatever position of power one holds...** whether that of love in family relationships... that of money in work

relationships... or any other... the issue comes down not to simply removing all such roles....but renewing the proper nature of their responsibility.

> Jesus is the most transforming influence on the nature of leadership... as he restores the true nature of responsibility through serving and sacrifice.

Jesus teaching / stories that could be shared:

- When some of his team argued among themselves as to who was the most closest to the center of power... Jesus told them that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.
- Washing feet - In one of his final gatherings.... The arrived at a home.... And when normally the servant of the house would then wash the feet of the sandal wearing dirty footed travelers... Jesus took up a towel and basin and proceeded to wash their feet... and then explained that should do the same in their leadership.

This is where Christ transcends religion most...

More than just a servant... Christ explained that he came to die for all... not just some... not just those who were good... or even agreed with him.

He was crucified to fulfill what religion never could or can.

He rose and sent his Spirit to dwell in all who receive him... that through sharing in his death and then receiving his new life... we may have true and eternal life in us.

3. Bring Jesus to the center of life's questions.

We need to help restore Jesus from being thought of as the boundary of a religious group...to that of being the center of life itself.

When people immediately think of Christ in terms of just another religion...it can be helpful to realize that...

- God never started "Judaism" as simply an exclusive religion... rather God was working through a people to rescue and restore the whole world.

Galatians 3:8

"The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you."

- Jesus never started "Christianity" as a new religion or ideology... rather he fulfilled what God was doing to restore relationship with all creation through the Jewish people.

Acts 11:26

"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."

The term "Christian" was not a title that followers of Christ used of themselves... it was first used by outsiders... probably in a derogatory way. It simply meant 'little Christs.'

Initially Jesus was simply the fulfilling of what God had begun through the Jewish people.

The simple truth is that **Jesus never called people to 'become Christians.'**

What is Christ's primary and ultimate call to the lives that encounter him?

"Follow Me" > "Follow" = direction and "Me" = he is the center

It is a call towards himself as the center and which involves direction. [5]

Christianity is not a religion... it is not a moral or ethical code... it is not simply a program for solving life's problems. Christianity is the incarnate and now indwelling presence of God in Christ.

Religion says that you should trust in what you do as a good, moral person. The gospel says that you should trust in the perfectly sinless life of Jesus because He alone is the only good and truly moral person who will ever live. [6]

James Fowler

“Christianity is not religion; it is the reality of Jesus Christ as God coming in the form of His Spirit to indwell man in order to restore him to the functional intent of God whereby the character of God is allowed to be manifested in man's behavior to the glory of God.

The distinctive of Christianity and Christian behavior is the awareness that all goodness is derived from God in personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and that all goodness is behaviorally expressed by the dynamic of God's grace alone, which is the out-working of Christ's life. Our focus must be on the divine source of all goodness.”

What we learn from Jesus is that he is the fulfillment of what human religion aspires to.

CLOSING:

In the final point of exchange with the Samaritan woman...She raises her hope...

John 4:25-26

The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

And Jesus says he is now there. He ultimately makes clear that he is the hope she is waiting for.

While this is unique... I believe we can sense she is expressing hope... the possibility... and Jesus is there.

It finally breaks through... She was known....and God wanted her.

There is a shift that many of us may recall....when the reality of what is at hand breaks through.

Something parts.

Up until then...we exist as if...

God is nowhere.

And then a moment can come...in which we realize...

God is now here.

As you may notice... one simple shift and the meaning of everything changes.

That is what we see in this women's life. It is what many of us may have experienced...perhaps not in a single moment... but in something of a breakthrough.

PRAY

Notes:

1. A “holy conversation” is where two or more lives engage openly and authentically... without coercion....and the reality of God's grace is revealed in such a way that one is drawn forward. This term was used as the title of Richard Peace's book which is a very helpful resource.

2. SOURCE: Lee Strobel, God's Outrageous Claims, pp. 192-193

3. The anti-'organized religion' sentiment is SO understandable. But if we reflect on it a bit, I think it becomes clear that

The essence of the anti-‘organized religion’ sentiment is not that people mistrust organization (we organize our lives in countless ways) but rather we mistrust human authority and control... which operates more notably within all structures and organizations.

We are those who live in “the land of the free” and are a bastion to the world of those who revolt against tyranny... and insist on certain rights and voices for all. (Even though many may now criticize our failures... they are shaped by our success.) Distrust of absolute and abusive authority is in our fabric. (Europe has the history of church and state united in an evil collusion... and America and Latin America have their own forms of religious power being imposed.)

Added to that backdrop... a generation who became anti-establishment... and has experienced even greater disappointment and disillusionment with the established authority figures in life. We have an increasing loss of character and commitment by those in authority (workplace exploitation, political & corporate corruption, scandals, divorce, abuse, etc).

> This leads people into a misguided sense that being independent of anything organized is to be ‘free.’

However... the limits of just trying to avoid the problems of organized religion with having our own spiritual ideas to follow or following some new author who says they are not religious... really just shifts rather than avoids human authority and power. One simply becomes ‘a religion of one’ (or ‘a church on one’, etc) and the concepts really carry all the same vulnerabilities in the long run. The truth is that we can leave what we deem as organized and become our own religion (with more parallels than most would like to admit)... but in the end it implies that everyone else is untrustworthy and flawed but that I am not. It can prove to be a rather foolish and arrogant assumption.

4. 4. Among other associations with religion we could hear and find value engaging are:

- Religion is used to create a political ideology I just don’t agree with.

True - People have tended to simplify Jesus to fit their political perspective... and often feel even more passionate of their political positions because of it.

> Jesus defies simple ideologies. His call to radical love, compassion, justice, and sacrifice tends to leave a lot that could challenge all political positions. He seems to validate the necessary role of governments... but places his call on personal change more than political power.

Stories:

First followers included two who were on the most passionately opposite positions of the moment... a nationalist zealot (terrorist) and a national traitor.(Mark 2:13-17).

Full Story- Fascinating process that often gets missed in who Jesus gathered as his core group of 12 followers. The nation and people of Israel were under Roman rule and oppression. The level of hatred towards the cruelty of Roman power created very heated feelings between those who differed in their position of response. The Zealots were the resistance movement against Rome. They were those who believed that only violent uprising could honor their dignity as a Jewish people. (Others groups advocated a more restrained and accomodating separation.) One of the zeolts named Simon became a follower of Jesus.

Well one day.... Jesus approaches one everyone hated.... a tax collector named Levi. These guys were given carte blanc by the rulers to get as much money from the people as they could with only the official portion going to the government. It was sanctioned corruption. This would be bad enough except that the government that they were collecting taxes for was the occupying forces of Rome. They were collaborators with the pagans that were controlling God’s promised land. They were traitors.They would be first against the wall in the revolution.

You might wonder what was going through the mind of the disciples as Jesus walked toward the tax-collecting booth. "Is this it? Is this the beginning of the revolution, is he going to turn over the table, rip down the booth and beat this guy up? How does Jesus treat this outcast, this corrupt traitor to God's people? He calls him to join him... he calls him out of his destructive lifestyle, and comes to eat at his house!

Later he is referred to as Matthew... probably a new name given by Jesus... as Matthew means "gift of God." Perhaps that is how Jesus thought of him. He doesn't just call this tax collector to be his follower, but Matthew becomes one of the 12 "inside circle" disciples and he is an author of one of the Gospel accounts which we know as The Book of Matthew.

5. It is helpful to consider the difference between Cultural Christianity versus Christ-Centered Life. Cultural Christianity is defined by "being or becoming a Christian"... while the a Christ-centered life is about learning to know and follow Jesus.

Cultural Christianity is defined by external identity (whose "in and out") while the a Christ-centered life is about relationship to Jesus as the center of life. internal relationship.

6. More about the distinction of focus and reliance on Jesus:

John 14:6 (NLT)

Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.

Paul's explanation of Christian behavior is that of "the manifestation of the life of Jesus in our mortal bodies" - II Cor. 4:10

"It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me, and the life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" - Gal. 2:20

C.S. Lewis

"I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads you on, out of all that, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of these things, except perhaps as a joke. Everyone there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes." - C.S. Lewis (Mere Christianity). pg. 130

> We need to shift the emphasis from conformity to external religious prescriptions to that of spiritual formation centered in relationship to Christ... out of which moral and behavioral formation flows.