

I. Introduction

A. Back in the late 80s, Jeff Foxworthy, a comedian from the South, broke onto the national scene with a comedy bit that pivoted around the line, “You just might be a Red Neck if...”. I’m guessing you are familiar with the line because he not only made this a staple of his standup gigs, he came out with books, TV specials, coffee mugs, calendars and more, all focused on the same thing.

1. You just might be a red neck if... you walk your kid to school because you are both in the same grade; You just might be a red neck if you spent more money on fireworks than on your education; You just might be a red neck if you ever cut your grass and found your car.

B. I’m not sure how much trouble I am getting in for saying “red neck” today. It feels like the last identity groups you can make fun of. But maybe not, so let me quickly move on. I cited Foxworthy because I want to spin his line just a bit. “You just might be religious if....”

1. You think God loves you... because you showed up at church. You just might be religious if you think God is going to bless you, because you showed up at church, or you think you are better than the people who are not at church. You just might be religious if you think you have a deal with God based on how you act.

C. Now there are problems with my “you just might be religious” line. For starters, it’s not very funny. I’ll work on that. But, secondly, it’s confusing. Some of you are thinking, “Wait? You mean I am not getting credit for being here? Wait? Do I want to be religious or not? Am I supposed to be religious? How is he defining religion?”

D. Ah, there’s the rub. How do we define religion? That turns out to be a really big question – one around which there is not a lot of agreement.

1. If we go to the dictionaries we hear things like: *Man’s response to God or Human beings’ relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual or divine.*

2. In his book, *Life is Too Short to Pretend You Are Not Religious*, David Dark says religion is: the best word we have for seeing, naming, confessing and really waking up to what we’re ultimately after in all we do.¹

3. In his book, *Desiring the Kingdom*, philosopher James K.A. Smith, describes religion as: what happens when we get pulled in, moved, called out or compelled by something outside ourselves.

4. Skye Jethani, who starts his book, *What’s Wrong with Religion*, by saying, “we are not supposed to talk about religion, so let’s talk about sports, which is the other thing you give part of your weekends to when you are a kid, but generally outgrow, only showing up for the big games after that,” notes that Jesus refused to do religion – in fact he drove religious people crazy. He then suggests that at its core *religion is our effort to control an uncontrollable world by bribing God with sacrifices and lots of genuflecting.*

a) He highlights NFL receiver Stevie Johnson as the posterchild for religion. As you may remember, in a game against Pittsburgh, Johnson dropped a game winning pass: [youtube.com/watch?v=emie9CR7Up4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emie9CR7Up4). And then *following the game, Johnson tweets this: "I PRAISE YOU 24/7!!!! AND THIS HOW YOU DO ME!!!! YOU EXPECT ME TO LEARN FROM THIS??? HOW????!! ILL NEVER FORGET THIS!! EVER!! THX THO..."*

b) Jethani defines religion as *efforts to control God* – or “cosmic bribery,” and notes – ala Stevie Johnson’s tweet – that they do not always work.

5. A few years ago, Jefferson Betheke gave a spoken word piece in which he went after religion pretty hard, arguing that Jesus came to abolish religion. The video went viral because lots of people find religious people to be smug and self-righteous³ - which Jesus was certainly against. But others responded noting that rules and rituals – that religious activities, patterns and guidelines – can help us be more thoughtful and loving. One writer sent an open letter to Betheke noting that Jesus was a Jew. He went to the synagogue. He observed Jewish holy days, he said that He didn't come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them.³ He said, Jesus founded the church, he launched both a ritual meal and a ceremonial washing. If religion is characterized by doctrine, commands, rituals and structure, it's not exactly accurate to say he hated religion.

6. We could spend the next few hours looking at people's efforts to define religion.⁴ Years ago, I heard Professor Martin Marty speak on this. Marty is a towering figure in academic circles – he has more honorary PhDs than anyone living today, he was president of the American Academy of Religion, he was on a Presidential Commission on Public Religion; Illinois gave him the Order of Lincoln Medallion for his contribution on religion; the University of Chicago has a Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion, he won the national book award for his five volume Encyclopedia on Religion. If there is an authority on religion today, you could argue that he is it. I was at a lecture he gave years ago where he was asked for his definition of religion. And he smiled and paused and then he said, "religion is the kind of thing I write about." The place burst out in laughter. What Marty was saying is, "I can't define it either."

7. Understand this: In the Bible, the word religion⁵ occurs five times – and it is neutral. It can refer to Judaism (Acts 26:5) or the Jewish-Christian faith (Acts 25:19). It can be bad when it is self-made (Col. 2:23) or when it fails to tame the tongue (James 1:26). But it can be good, such as when it cares for widows and orphans and practices moral purity (James 1:27). We can build a case that religion is our appropriate response to God – that it starts with repentance and seeks to follow God, bring his love to others, especially the poor. But it can also describe external activity that is shallow, selfish, harsh and bad.

8. For the most part, the term today has a pretty negative feel. It's not a good thing to be told that you are religious. And it has a negative feel in Galatians. So, for our purposes, *I am going to define religion as believing that following rules and rituals makes us good – better than others – and qualifies us for God's love.*

II. And I am going to also note three related things:

A. First: you are religious. We are all. You are. I am. And so is Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and all of the others who rail against religion.

1. We are religious and cannot help it. We are meaning-seeking creatures because we were created that way.

2. This is a bit of a surprise, scholars did not think religion would hold. According to the secularization theory, by this time in history, we would have all set silly superstitions aside. But that hasn't happened and most everyone is now acknowledging as much. A few years ago there was an important article written by a Princeton scholar in the *Atlantic Monthly*. And it had this quote from the *Foreign Policy Journal* – neither are Christian magazines:

a) The new atheist writers are wrong – not only about religion, but also about politics – because they are wrong about human nature. *Homo sapiens* is also *Homo religious*. [Humans create religions]. We are meaning-seeking creatures. While dogs, as far as we know, do not worry about the canine condition or agonize about their mortality, humans fall very easily into despair if we don't find some significance in our lives. Theological ideas come and go, but the quest for meaning continues. So God isn't going anywhere. And when we treat religion as something to be derided, dismissed, or destroyed, we risk amplifying its worst faults. Whether we like it or not, God is here to stay, and it's time we found a way to live with him in a balanced and compassionate manner.⁶

3. If we had more time: 1) I'd take you to Romans 1 and note that Paul explains this point, noting that God made us to have a relationship with him, and though we can suppress that thought, it's always there. We all know there is more. Or I would show you pictures of people worshipping – some at church and some at sporting events.

4. My point being, we are wired to seek meaning and transcendence and we are inclined to worship.

B. Two: There can be some upsides to this, because most religions call on people to be kind to others. (Religions are not the same. Not even close. But there is a fair bit of overlap when it comes to ethics – and this can be helpful).⁷

C. But three: Religion does not work and Christianity is not a religion. It is based on a radically unreligious premise. Christianity is based on the idea that we cannot reach up to God. We cannot please him by what we do. We cannot earn his love or goodwill. God has to reach down,⁸ and he does this because of who He is. He is loving.

1. And we are going to see this in the Book of Galatians. The big point in Galatians is that religion as I am defining it – reaching up, believing that following rules and rituals makes us better than others and qualifies us for God's love - is bad. Doing good things is OK, if we are doing them out of thanks for who God is and what He has done. But if we think we are earning God's favor – then doing good is bad.

2. Let me say that again, because it is a big point: doing good – being religious, attending Church, serving others, fasting, worshipping, any of the religious rituals and patterns that we do – is good, if we are doing them in response to who God is and what he has done. But if we are doing good thinking we are earning God's favor, then doing good is bad.

3. And Paul is going to make that point in capital letters with lots of exclamation marks behind them. In fact, I think we could argue that in some very important ways, Paul's letter to the Galatians is the most anti-religious book you are ever going to read. It is more anti-religious than: *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx, *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler, *Mao's Little Red Book*. Or anything written by Dawkins, Hitchens or Freud.

III. So what exactly is the Book of Galatians? Well, let me back up and get a running start.

A. The Bible has two sections - 39 books that make up the Old Testament, which is also called the Hebrew Scriptures. These are the books that make up the Bible Jesus read. These books were completed and compiled by 400 BC – or roughly 400 years before Jesus shows up. And – as I argued at Easter – they set things up and give us a lot of context, but in one sense, what they really do is point ahead to the New Testament and Jesus.

B. The New Testament contains 27 books which focus on Jesus. The first four – called Gospels – tell the story of his life, death and resurrection – as well as what he taught. After the Gospels we have the Book of Acts, which tells us what happened in the first thirty years after Christ rose from the dead. Between the Book of Acts and the Book of Revelation – at the end, which is unique in its own way - we have a bunch of letters. Some were written by Peter, some by John, one by James. We are not sure who wrote Hebrews. Most were written by Paul, including the Book of Galatians.

C. Paul – sometimes called the Apostle Paul or Saint Paul - was quite a guy:

1. He was a brilliant student who attended all the right schools and excelled in all the ways that mattered. He was also a Pharisee, which was one of the four groups around in the first century, and by far the most religious.

2. But all of this changed when he was dramatically converted to become a Christ follower – an event that is told in Acts 9. It is perhaps the most famous conversion story of all time. And it has a dramatic effect on everything. And it puts him on a very different path. He moves from trying to stop Christianity to being its biggest advocate.

3. There are a number of years in between – perhaps as many as 17 – during which time he grows as a Christ follower. But after he emerges, he does so as a leader – and as we will see, as an apostle. And not just as “an apostle,” but as a Big-Dog, capital “A” Apostle. In fact, though Peter is the main character in the first part of Acts – which covers the first few years of the church growing. After Paul comes on the scene, he becomes the main player in the book. And from Acts 9 to the end, it’s mostly about Paul and what he does.

4. And part of the reason for this is because Paul makes things happen. He is the one who takes the show on the road. Jesus had told his followers that they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the utter most parts of the world. But the Christian leaders in Jerusalem were not getting around to doing that. So Paul does. He makes at least three big trips – each several years in length. The first is covered in Acts 13 and 14. He was traveling with Barnabas, and their m.o. was to go into a town, head to the synagogue where Paul would preach – explaining to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. Some would sign up. Others would not. At which point Paul would extend the offer to Gentiles. Three things generally followed:

5. This would go on until he started a riot and got thrown in jail. After a while he’d get out, turn to those who believed and start a church. He would then invest in them for a while, before tapping leaders to take over.

6. He and Barnabas would do it again in the next town. And the next time, when he ended up in prison he started writing letters back to church he had just established (which is what we have with the letters to the Corinthians, the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians), or he wrote to the leaders he had left in charge (I and II Timothy, Titus).

D. Every letter was unique because it was addressing specific issues.

IV. Galatians is the letter he wrote back to the church he started there – not long after the Jerusalem Council.

A. So, on his first mission trip he started several churches in the Roman province of Galatia – think Northern Turkey. Not long after he got these up and running (around 48^o AD) he went to Jerusalem to check in with the Apostles, because he wanted to be sure everyone was in agreement that sharing the Gospel with Gentiles was what Jesus had told them to do, and to talk through some of the specifics of what that looked like.

B. The apostles ended up holding the first church council – which is reported in Acts 15. Peter had already had his own Holy Spirit led experience – reported in Acts 10 – where God was persuading him to reach out to the Gentiles. They all agreed that God’s offer was open to everyone. They said, God has made this very clear by sending his Holy Spirit.¹¹ After the council, Paul headed back out. He and Barnabas have a falling out, but he grabs Timothy – and some others (Luke will join them) - and they had back out.

C. However, before long he hears about two things that make him mad and lead him to write Galatians:

1. First, a group of Judaizers – think Jewish Christians, i.e., people who believe in Jesus but who believe that in addition to placing your faith in Jesus that you also had to embrace a lot of Jewish religious practices. And who felt that Gentiles who wanted to become Christians first had to become Jews – get circumcised, eat Kosher food, keep Jewish holidays and the like. This group goes into the church in Galatia and starts telling the Gentile Christians that there is a bunch of additional religious stuff that they need to do to be right with God.¹² And when these new Christians say that Paul didn’t tell them any of this, they tell them that Paul was wrong and not qualified to tell them anything.

2. Second, the Judaizers start to persuade Peter. Peter had been hanging out with Gentile Christians who were not acting like Jews – they had not been circumcised and they did eat non-Kosher food – and Peter was OK with that. But after the Judaizers got to Peter, Peter stopped hanging out with the Gentiles. It wasn’t that he changed his mind, he just wanted to avoid the hassle of the Judaizers pestering him.

D. When Paul hears this, he looks up Peter and reads him the riot act. Tells him to man up. And his writes to the Christians in the church in Galatia. This is the letter we are going to be studying.

V. Before we start with chapter 1:1, let me prepare you:

A. Paul is mad when he writes, which you will not have any problem recognizing. The big thing is that they get the Gospel wrong, but just to pour salt in the wounds, they attack him as well.¹³ So, he comes out swinging. Paul was “appalled” with: 1) the Judaizers; 2) with Peter; and 3) with the Christians at the church in Galatia. As a result, he goes postal.

B. The specific arguments are all first century, so we get a lot about circumcision – which, for 1,500 years had been a primary distinguishing mark for the Jews. It was one of the ways they were set apart. All of which makes this an awkward book to preach on. What exactly is circumcision? Oh look at the time.... I am going to have to defer this to the campus pastors, who have all the charts and diagrams to explain this fully.

C. In addition to being first century, the writing is dense. Vintage Paul. I think most people would say that Galatians is the densest thing Paul wrote after Romans. And many of us don’t do dense. Give me my news in 140 characters or less please. Understanding Galatians requires some effort. I expect some of you will complain. So let me pre-empt your frustration and say, “if you think Galatians is too dense, go ahead and complain, to your campus pastor.

D. But! Even though it is first century and dense, this is for us. We need this book. We need to be reminded of exactly how we are right with God. We need to keep hearing the Gospel. And we need to keep having our religious instincts challenged.

E. We are religious in a bad sense. Galatians is the medicine we need to take.

F. Luther loved this book. It was his favorite. In fact, he said if it were a woman he’d marry it. Which is a reminder that Luther could be pretty odd.

G. But the last thing I will say to set it up is: the book covers a lot of very big, important topics – not only, how to be right with God, but: what it means to be free; how we are to think about the rules we find in the Bible; how we actually change.

VI. Let's start at the beginning. Let me read the salutation – Galatians 1:1-5

A. Paul, an apostle

1. The term *apostle* has several meanings: 1) the main one is “a delegate sent out” on a mission, who has the authority of the one who is sending them;¹⁴ 2) it also refers to missionaries who open up a new area;¹⁵ and finally 3) in a narrow sense, it refers to someone who saw the risen Christ and who has special, high-level authority bestowed upon them by Christ. This is what Paul was.

2. Paul spends much of the first two chapters countering the charges that he is not a true apostle or that he is teaching something different from Peter, John and James

3. The people who followed Paul and undermined his message, seem to have argued that he was not an apostle. Or not equal to Peter and John. Since Paul is in a fight, he leads by saying: I outrank you and I outrank the idiots who mislead you.

B. sent not from men nor by a man,

1. He is not just an apostle. He is a Big A apostle who was called directly by Jesus. He was not commissioned by Peter or James. To the extent that what you get from me is from God and not my opinion, I can say that what I am giving you is from God. But I cannot say what Paul was saying here. The way the Greek is formatted here makes it clear that Paul is emphasizing that he got everything he got from Jesus not mediated through other men.

2. Paul is saying, I am the one qualified to give you the truth.

C. So, Paul (who is an apostle) and all the brothers and sisters with me (everyone I am traveling with). To the churches in Galatia. V3: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ‘who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ‘to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

VII. Paul is so concerned that they have got the main thing wrong, that he does three things:

A. First, he skips the part where he says how thankful he is for them. Which was his normal opening.¹⁶ In every other letter he talks about how thankful he is for the people. Even with the Corinthians – who were slimy. But here, even though the Galatians took care of him when he was sick, he skips this.

B. Second, he crams the Gospel into the greeting. We see it in verses 3 – 5. This ends up making his introduction the longest of any of his letters and it makes today a bit awkward because he introduces a lot of things that he will develop in greater detail later.

C. And then he scolds them.¹⁷ We get dialed into his Paul's mood in verse 6:

VIII. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel

A. “I can't believe you did the very thing I told you not to do! And you did it so quickly!”

B. Trust me, a dog would understand the tone of voice Paul is using here. The veins in his neck are bulging.

IX. Men and women, get ready. This is an important series.

- A. Paul is writing to people who think they are Christians but who do not get the central point. He is explaining to people who are professing Christians – who have been baptized, who claim to know Christ – that they are mistaken at the deepest level. That they do not get the Gospel. This is point of Galatians – you think you get it, but you don't. Could this be you? We need to hear Paul pound this over and over
- B. Over the course of what Paul says in this letter, we are going to learn about many very important topics.
- C. The arguments will build on each other.
1. I try to preach messages that are self-contained because lots of people miss. They travel. And I will do that with this. But this book builds and it's pretty heavy, deep, heady.
 2. You need to show up and you need to unpack this at greater length in your small groups.
- D. Of course the big reason you do not want to miss this series is because Paul focuses on the Gospel – which is the best news we will ever hear and which we need to keep hearing. The Gospel is not just news you need to hear to come to faith. It is what we need to hear over and over and over, or we start to become religious. Next week we are going to take a deep dive into the Gospel. You need to be here.
- E. And let me encourage you to read Galatians a couple times this week. It's very short. And to invite your friends.

X. Camus Pastors Wrap up

- A. The Christians in Galatia were very young. But Paul expected them to get this. He was mad that they had been lead astray. Let's be sure we get this.

XI. Questions

- A. In what ways are you religious?

¹ Dark writes: Your religion is the story you tell yourself about yourself to others. Show me your online history, your gas mileage, your receipts, a transcript of all you've done and said on a given day and we might begin to assemble a rough picture of your religious identity or, more generally, the witness that is and will have been your one wild and precious life. We're never not broadcasting, testifying, worshipping, and making plain our core commitments. Did we somehow think there was an off-switch to our beliefs, our values, the expenditure of soul? There isn't.

² I recommend Kevin DeYoung's response: *Did Jesus Hate Religion? Kinda, Sorta, Not Really.*

³ Matt. 5:17.

⁴ Bill Maher – who has made a movie attacking religion – defines it as “made up stories to explain things we do not know.” In a *Wall Street Journal* article a few weeks ago, in a piece Peggy Noonan wrote entitled, “The Wisdom of Oscar Hammerstein,” she tells a story in which he was stopped by a police officer for jaywalking. But once the officer recognized Hammerstein he let him go because he knew Hammerstein was a religious man. And Hammerstein said, “well I don't actually go to any church.” The officer said, “But I can tell from your songs that you are religious.” Which Hammerstein said, he had found me out because the words in our songs revealed that I had faith in mankind, and faith that in the long run good triumphs over evil.” Which suggests that his definition of religion is faith in something, in his case, the goodness of humanity and a belief that good is going to win.

⁵ The Latin root of the word religion – *religio* – suggests that it refers to binding things together; the Greek term – *threskeia* – is limited to ceremonial observance or worshipping.

⁹ Karen Armstrong, “Homo Religiosus,” *The Atlantic*, Oct. 2009.

⁷ The idea that all religions are the same is nonsense to anyone who looks at them for more than a few minutes. Our pluralist culture likes to suggest that all faiths are more or less the same, and often point to the Golden Rule as a universal ethic taught by all religions. Such messages are partly correct. The Golden Rule taught by Jesus is a call to actively seek what is good for others. “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them” (Matthew 7:12). The parallel teachings in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are passive by comparison saying we should do “no harm” to others. Of course, the Golden Rule is not where we are to look. On a number of occasions Jesus called us to what we might call the Platinum Rule - to love one another “as I have loved you.” Here the standard is not human kindness but divine love. Likewise, Jesus commands us to “love your enemies” because God also loves his enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). If left to the Golden Rule alone I might conclude that ignoring or avoiding my enemies is sufficient, but the Platinum Rule requires me to actively love them.

⁸ Professor Bruce Shelley's opening sentence in *Church History in Plain Language* (1996) is: Christianity is the only major religion whose central event is the humiliation of its God.

⁹ When I went to Turkey four years ago to visit the Seven Churches found in the Book of Revelation, we had a chance to go to Galatia and see the ruins. They look like this: [picture](#). And it was several hours in a car to get there. And once you've seen a half dozen ruin sites, there isn't a lot of reason to see more. BTW, there are two main views about when Galatians was written and exactly who it was written to. At this moment, scholarship seems to be galvanizing around the “Southern” Galatian theory, which suggests that he planted the churches in Galatia on his first mission journey and that the letters were written in 48 or 49 AD – and before the Jerusalem Council.

¹⁰ For insight on dating, see D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, an *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 289-303

¹¹ The idea that the Jewish Messiah would be for everyone was in place all the way back in Genesis 3 and Genesis 12 – Abraham (the Jews) were the channel through which God would provide a savior for the entire world. The Jews had been told to stick to themselves throughout the Old Testament because the world around them was so broken (so full of idolatry and bad thinking that they needed to keep to themselves) so they survived long enough to provide the Savior. They were to stick to themselves. But now that Christ had come the message was to go out to everyone with the news.

¹² Remember the context. The people living in Galatia are gentiles. They have not been reading the Old Testament. They do not know who Moses is or what foods are unclean or any of that. And so, they come to faith in Christ and start to attend church – which is full of Jews. Initially, all Christians are Jews. So they are being exposed to all kinds of laws about circumcision and kosher dietary laws and references to Mount Sinai and more. And when Paul was starting the church he had said, “don't worry about any of that. We are reconciled to God through the work of Jesus, period. It's all about Christ's death on the cross.” But these new people are saying, “Paul was wrong. You need to worry about a lot of this stuff. If you want to be right with God, you need to be religious.”

¹³ Because they attack Paul, and because he was a perfect example of a person who was religious – i.e., who thought God loved him because of what he was doing - we get a lot about Paul's life. We also get a lot of Paul defending his qualifications, because the Judaizers say he is not qualified to teach them anything. They say he's a second-class apostle.

¹⁴ Jesus is the first apostle.

¹⁵ Acts 14:14

¹⁶ We see this in Romans 1:8, I Cor. 1:5, Eph. 1:15, Phil 1:?

¹⁷ It is worth noting that friends who are truly friends do occasionally rebuke you. When we are out of line that is often what we need. Given the way Paul refers to the Galatians (1:1; 3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13) it is clear that he loves them.