Sunday, April 14, 1985
GOOD RELIGION OR BAD RELIGION
Galatians 3:26-29

A popular assumption held by many people is that any religion is better than none. I´ve heard people say, “It doesn’t matter what kind of religion you have as long as you are sincere.”

Not true! Not all religions are good, and some religions are very bad. One´s religion can be lyrical, lovely, and humane. Religion can also be wicked and damaging to the human spirit.

We often try to divide human beings into two groups — the religion and the irreligious and then we can come to believe that being religious confers a certain superior quality upon us. But a study of history reveals the evil that religion can do — the crusades, the ritual sacrifice of human beings, witch hunts, the inquisition, ugly superstitions and more. Religion has been used to justify slavery, declare one race superior to another, and one sex superior to another.

On the other hand, it was religious groups who started some of the first schools, colleges and universities. Religious groups organized the first hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly and more. Religious belief has inspired great art, magnificent music, given meaning to life, comforted the suffering and offered courage for living and dignity in dying.

The question we all face is how to distinguish good religion from bad? Jesus Christ faced the same issue. He never worried very much about those who had no religion — his problem was one kind of religion against another kind.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once wrote, “What disastrous results religion can produce in human character — bigots, fanatics, hypocrites, narrow minded, self-opinionated, intolerant! The very word ‘bigot, he goes on to say is a condensation of “by God!”

Here then are some guidelines to help you tell the difference between good religion and bad.

1. Good religion enlarges the human spirit. Bad religion shrinks the human spirit. A friend of mine told me about going to his minister when he was in his late adolescence. As is the case with many young people, my friend was inquisitive, had lots of questions and also many doubts. When he began to tell his minister about his questions and doubts, his minister replied, “You think too much! You need to suppress your doubts, forget your questions, and simply have faith.”

The young man was shaken by this advice. He wondered to himself — “For what did God give us our minds if not to ask questions and to seek new knowledge?”

Good religion is not afraid of questions — is not afraid of doubt. Good religion knows that it does not have all the answers. Good religion does not suppress human curiosity. Good religion knows, as Huxley put it, that “All great truths begin as heresy.”

2. Good religion always points beyond itself. In other words, it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The purpose of the church is to increase among people the love of God and neighbor, not to increase among people the love of religion itself. Good religion seeks to be open to people to serve, not to be served.

Bad religion calls attention to itself, it makes religiousness the goal of its endeavors and it always ends up “trivializing” religious faith. It always ends up with a lot of silly little rules and regulations. It seeks power over people.

3. Good religion is inclusive, bad religion tends to be exclusive. Good religion therefore leads its followers to become humble, forgiving, accepting, loving individuals. Bad religion, on the other hand, leads its followers to become self-righteous, judgmental, dogmatic, know-it-all people. Followers of bad religion are convinced that they have all the right answers.

In speaking about good religion, St. Paul wrote, “The fruit (or the effect) of true or good religion is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” “By their fruits, you will know them,” said Jesus.

Good religion is inclusive in that it proclaims that God’s love is continually and freely given to all who accept it. God’s love cannot be bought or earned. This means that God loves you and God loves me. Each human being is equally loved by God. The criminal on death row, the patient in the mental hospital, the starving beggar on the street, the rich, the poor, all are loved by God.

Church congregations therefore need to be places that are inclusive, not exclusive, where sinners are welcome and forgiven, where mistakes are forgiven where, where mistakes are not condemned and rejected. There is a simple basic test which can be applied to a religious group or movement to help determine whether it is good or bad — those in trouble, those in need, the minorities, the poor, the rejected, those who are different from the majority. Jesus taught that the way we treat people is the way we treat God.

Good religion knows that God created us as interdependent creatures and we are meant to live in peace and harmony with one another. God’s creation is one. „God so loved the world (the whole world, not just the church) that God gave Jesus Christ, “therefore, good religion tends to be hopeful and radiant with confidence in the goodness of God, whereas bad religion tends to be negative and sour. Good religion is health giving and worlds and the creation whole. It draws us out of ourselves into openness, love and acceptance. Amen.