

The Answer to Bad
Religion Is Not
No Religion

LEADER'S GUIDE



*A Guide to Good Religion
for Seekers, Skeptics, and Believers*

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CONTENTS



| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction | vii |
| Week 1: The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion, but Good Religion | 1 |
| Week 2: The Answer to Judgment Is Love | 9 |
| Week 3: The Answer to Negativity Is Hope | 17 |
| Week 4: The Answer to Arrogance Is Openness | 25 |
| Week 5: The Answer to Division Is Community | 33 |
| Week 6: The Answer to Passivity Is Passion | 41 |

INTRODUCTION



The increasing cultural skepticism surrounding Christianity, with its reputation for closed-mindedness and judgment, has resulted in many people abandoning religion. They've been turned off by hypocritical leaders, hate-filled bigots, aggressive evangelists, and smug believers convinced they know everyone's eternal fate. Many Christians want to stand up and shout, "That's not what our faith is about!" or "They don't speak for us!" but love and grace don't make for good television the way angry protestors do. To use commercial terms, the mainline "brand" of Christianity has not been near so well marketed as the more fundamentalist strain, for which many people now have little use or tolerance.

While this news is disheartening, and frustrating for many of us in the mainline church, we have

a great opportunity to reach out to unchurched and dechurched people with a grace-filled, service-oriented, open-minded religion that can restore people's faith in, well, faith.

Many non-Christians today identify not as atheist or agnostic but as simply “unaffiliated,” indicating their religion as “none.” They've come to feel that religion is just not worth all the baggage it carries and that they are doing just fine without religion. Evangelism in this cultural climate is not so much about explaining beliefs to convince people intellectually but about demonstrating a faith that matters, showing people who are content without religion what “good religion” is all about.

This study inspires and equips mainline Christians to better articulate their Christian faith in a positive, passionate way, helping them to reach out to religiously unaffiliated neighbors, friends, and family members in a meaningful way.

Studying the Book Together

This leader's guide is intended to help your Sunday school class, Bible study, or small group explore and discuss *The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion*, by Martin Thielen, together.

The book discusses bad religion, no religion, and good religion in sequence over the course of the entire seventeen-chapter book—taking readers on a journey of spiritual consideration and development. To break the book's message down into manageable segments for group discussion and keep each session

proactive, this study is organized around negative-positive pairings—characteristics of bad religion and their respective “answers” in good religion.

Each session of this study corresponds with several chapters in the book. Participants may read the corresponding chapters each week, or read the book cover to cover and simply review each week’s chapters in advance of the group discussion.

Your church may also choose to explore these topics together in worship through a sermon series that will help members and visitors alike embrace a more positive, passionate faith. *The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion—Worship and Outreach Kit* equips leaders to craft sermons, plan worship, and promote the series to your community. The six weeks of worship and preaching outlined in the kit correspond to the six weekly themes discussed in this study.

WEEK 1

The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion, but Good Religion

This session introduces the overall message of the series, articulating in general terms the problem of bad religion in our culture, the common response of rejecting religion entirely, and the alternative response of embracing good religion, with the imperative for mainline Christians to boldly and visibly demonstrate this good religion to a skeptical world.

Corresponds To

Introductions to parts 1, 2, and 3
Chapter 6, “No Religion Is Not Helpful”
Chapter 7, “No Religion Is Not Necessary”

WEEK 2

The Answer to Judgment Is Love

This session juxtaposes judgment and condemnation with love of God and neighbor, practiced in compassion, tolerance, acceptance, and selfless service to others. While our judgments are selective and hypocritical, God’s judgment is righteous and based on the way we love, not on the things we condemn.

Corresponds To

Chapter 1, “Bad Religion Engages in Self-Righteous Judgment of Others”
Chapter 9, “Good Religion Prioritizes Love”
Chapter 10, “Good Religion Engages in Service”

WEEK 3

The Answer to Negativity Is Hope

This session emphasizes religion that is not simply against things, defining itself by what it is not

(a temptation for both conservative and mainline churches), but that is affirming and proactive about what is good. Rather than lamenting the state of the world or the behavior of others, good religion is hopeful about the future.

Corresponds To

Chapter 2, “Bad Religion Expresses a Chronic Spirit of Negativity”

Chapter 11, “Good Religion Provides a Prophetic Voice”

Chapter 13, “Good Religion Is Hope Filled”

Chapter 16, “Good Religion Promotes Gratitude”

WEEK 4

The Answer to Arrogance Is Openness

This session confronts the arrogant spirit that convinces some religious people that they have all the answers, that they can and must be dogmatically certain in matters of belief and behavior. Good religion celebrates faith without certainty, keeping an open mind about new information, ideas, and situations.

Corresponds To

Chapter 3, “Bad Religion Breeds Arrogance, Intolerance, and Absolutism”

Chapter 14, “Good Religion Keeps an Open Mind”

WEEK 5

The Answer to Division Is Community

This session addresses the temptation to conflate partisan politics or patriotism with one's religion, creating divisions between Americans of different parties and between all nations. Good religion promotes community—the interaction and mutual support of people within a congregation and across cultures.

Corresponds To

Chapter 4, “Bad Religion Participates in Partisan Politics and Excessive Nationalism”

Chapter 12, “Good Religion Builds Community”

Chapter 15, “Good Religion Practices Forgiveness”

WEEK 6

The Answer to Passivity Is Passion

This session juxtaposes nominal, lazy religion that may attend church or assent to certain beliefs without affecting the whole of one's heart and life. Good religion impacts our behavior and priorities seven days a week and shines forth in passionate faith that shares the gospel without even using words.

Corresponds To

Chapter 5, “Bad Religion Fosters Nominal Commitment to Christ and Church”

Chapter 8, “Good Religion Impacts the Way We Live”

Chapter 17, “Good Religion Practices Evangelism with Integrity”

Session Overview

Each session has three main sections, designed to draw participants in for deep discussion and send them out equipped for living and sharing a positive, confident faith.

- **Getting Started.** Begin each session with a brief summary of the week’s topic and the chapters covered. This section includes an icebreaker to introduce the subject and get conversation rolling.
- **Reading and Responding.** The bulk of each session is spent discussing Scriptures and ideas presented in the book, examining beliefs and behaviors that contribute to bad religion and how we can better practice the good religion of Jesus.
- **Telling the Good Religion Story.** Each session closes with a discussion of how we can more effectively share good religion, both as individuals and as a church community, with those who have been turned off by bad religion.

Depending on the length of your group’s time together, you can spend more or less time on each section. You may choose to read Scriptures and

sections of the book aloud together or to let participants refer to them silently as needed to inform the conversation. The following time allotments are only a guide for planning and leading your study and can easily be adapted or ignored based on the flow and fruitfulness of your group's discussions. Always feel free to linger or move on to the next question as you sense topics resonating or not with your group.

| | 45-min. session | 60-min. session | 90-min. session |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Getting Started | 10 min. | 15 min. | 20 min. |
| Reading and Responding | 25 min. | 30 min. | 45 min. |
| Telling the Good Religion Story | 10 min. | 15 min. | 25 min. |

Tips for the Group Leader

- Be aware of group dynamics and how much time is actually available for the study. Does your group tend to trickle in over the first fifteen minutes of class? Is it customary to end early to allow time for prayer concerns or socializing? If your group is being newly formed for this study, set a schedule and tone to enable a fruitful discussion and experience for all.
- Distribute copies of *The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion but Good Religion* at least a week before the first session, along with a list

of the corresponding chapters to read prior to each session.

- As you prepare to lead each session, read the leader's guide for the week, the corresponding book chapters, and the Bible passages referenced. Make note of any additional sections or issues that you'd like to incorporate into the discussion.
- As each session begins, try to get a sense of how many people have read the chapters for the week. Do not shame those who have not read, but it is helpful to know how much background information you need to supply for the discussion to go smoothly.
- If any examples of bad (or good) religion have made headlines in your area recently, be prepared to discuss them in the context of the week's topic and readings, but do not let the discussion be derailed to focus solely on current events or solely on the negative.
- If a few group members seem to dominate the discussion, particularly with their own personal stories, be intentional about redirecting the conversation and specifically encouraging quieter persons to speak. Do not push anyone to speak who is not comfortable, but sometimes people have trouble breaking into a discussion with more assertive voices.
- Allow a few moments for participants to reflect and respond to questions before offering your perspective or pointing them to a particular verse of Scripture or page of the book.

WEEK 1



THE ANSWER TO BAD RELIGION IS NOT NO RELIGION, BUT GOOD RELIGION

This session introduces the overall message of the series, articulating in general terms the problem of bad religion in our culture, the common response of rejecting religion entirely, and the alternative response of embracing good religion, with the imperative for mainline Christians to boldly and visibly demonstrate this good religion to a skeptical world.

Examples of bad religion are all around us, from news of religiously motivated violence and bigotry to signs along the interstate claiming to know the status of everyone's soul. Bad religion like this turns many people away from Christian faith. A growing number of "new atheists" argue that since religion can be so toxic, we need to get rid of faith altogether. However, even if we wanted to, we are not going to get rid of religion, nor is it necessary to do so. The objections many people have to religion—reactions against toxic behavior, doctrines that insult their intelligence, and insufficient answers to life's problems—do not need to create the barrier they do between people and faith. Authentic Christianity does not arrogantly belittle others or require people to abandon either their brains or their questions.

When people reject Christianity based on bad examples and stereotypes, it is natural for us in the church to feel frustrated, misunderstood, maybe embarrassed. It is easy to get defensive, distancing ourselves from fellow believers who embrace beliefs or engage in behaviors we disavow, agreeing with critics of faith so completely that we forget to tell our own story.

This week, we assess the roots of bad religion and the temptation people feel to abandon faith together because of it. More importantly, we begin to think about how we can tell our story and show the world what good religion looks like: a religion of grace, not judgment; a religion of love, not hatred; a religion of open-mindedness, not intolerance; a religion of compassion, not legalism; a religion of

humility, not arrogance. Just because some people practice bad religion doesn't mean we have to ditch religion altogether. The answer to bad religion is not no religion. Instead, the answer to bad religion is good religion.

Corresponds To

Introductions to parts 1, 2, and 3

Chapter 6, "No Religion Is Not Helpful"

Chapter 7, "No Religion Is Not Necessary"

Getting Started

Welcome participants to the first session of the study and introduce the overall concept. Make introductions if not all group members know one another, and make sure everyone has received a book. Begin the discussion with the following ice-breaker questions:

What examples of bad religion have you seen lately? How do they make you feel about your faith and religion in general?

Reading and Responding

1. Read Luke 6:1–11, about when Jesus plucked grain and healed a man on the Sabbath.

- a. What priorities do you see expressed by the characters in these stories? What do the Pharisees value? What do the disciples and the man with the withered hand value? What does Jesus value?
 - b. What similar interactions occur today, when people are more concerned with rules than with people's needs? Are you ever like the Pharisee in the story?
2. Read the Introduction to part 2 (pages 41–43). Do you agree that people seem “hardwired” to be religious? Is this evidence of the value of religion or, as some atheists say, a primitive response to fear and the unknown?
3. Read Psalm 10. What responses to human struggle are evident in this prayer? How does faith help the writer respond positively?
4. Reference, if necessary, the section “Benefits of Religion,” from chapter 6 (pp. 47–49).
 - a. How would your life be different if you were not a religious person?
 - b. How would your community be different if there were no churches in it?
5. In chapter 7, Thielen identifies three major issues that turned his young friend off to Christianity: toxic attitudes and behaviors

from religious people, a literal reading of the Bible, and the problem of suffering.

- a. Which of those factors are the most problematic, in your opinion? Do they ever make you consider abandoning religion altogether?
 - b. Why do you think stereotypes of arrogance, sexism, and ignorance persist, if the vast majority of Christians are not like that?
 - c. The problem of suffering can turn people not just away from Christianity but from God altogether. How can Christians play a role in shaping people's understanding of God when it comes to such complex and unanswerable questions?
6. What issues are most problematic for nonreligious people you know? Are they simply indifferent to religion or are they reacting against bad religion they've witnessed? Are their concerns mainly intellectual or emotional?
7. At the end of chapter 7, Thielen's skeptical young friend comes forward for Communion. If skeptical people do come to church for worship, how can the leaders and practices of the church help change their perceptions of religion?

Telling the Good Religion Story

Counteracting stereotypes (and real examples) of bad religion is a daunting task, one best handled positively and proactively. Discuss together how you can respond to nonreligious family and friends who raise the following objections and concerns about Christianity. If your group is comfortable with role-play, try to practice dialogue around the following topics:

Christians are all antigay, misogynistic, and superconservative. That's not me.

Scientific evidence proves that the world is billions of years old. Why should I think differently just because a really old book tells me to?

I can't believe in a God who would let little children be killed by a tornado.

My Muslim friend is the kindest, most honest, and most compassionate person I know. There's no way he's going to hell just because he isn't a Christian.

The Bible is full of errors and contradictions.