

Rethinking Religious Rules
September 4, 2011
Romans 13:8-10 – NRSV

Scripture: Romans 13:8-10 (NRSV)

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Let us pray. Remind us anew this day that you are a Still Speaking God and help us to be your still listening people. Take and use my words to focus our minds and encourage us on the journey of faith. Amen.

A few weeks ago, I had a lengthy conversation with a friend about confirmation. His congregation is rethinking what that ministry should look like. They don't have all the answers, but are committed to considering the possibilities.

As I reflected on that chat, I remembered many of my own experiences. I would like to share some of them with you.

Before I started confirmation class, religion made complete sense to me. I knew who God was, loved being around God's people in God's house, and believed the stories I was told and had read in the Bible.

Confirmation changed everything. It shattered my naïve view that the Bible was all I needed to read or understand to be a follower of Jesus. And it started a life of never ending theological inquiry.

Within a few short weeks of starting my Presbyterian confirmation class, I went from one book to three, adding the Book of Order and the Book of Confessions. No longer was I to view the Bible as my only religious text. Its role was to work alongside the Book of Confessions

– what to believe – and the Book of Order – how the church was to act -- and what happens when people misbehave.

And, of course, I had as my teacher a pastor who was also a professor. She taught college students about religion, so I assumed she knew what she was talking about.

It wasn't just my first experience of confirmation that changed my perspective on religion. Confirmation led me to rethink my theology again – and again – and again.

Confirmation reappeared 10 years later. By then I was married and a seminary student. This time I was the teacher rather than the student, but I was still stuck in the same Presbyterian box. I received a new set of rules from the Senior Pastor about what I could and could not do as well as what material I had to cover.

Then, just when I thought I was starting to figure things out, I spent my early post-seminary years serving as an Associate Pastor in congregations that did not offer confirmation. These sisters and brothers in the faith were part of the Disciples of Christ tradition – a denomination that, interestingly enough never would have come in to being had it not been for a few dissenting Presbyterian pastors.

After that break, confirmation reappeared. Instead of the familiar semester long Presbyterian confirmation experiences based on three textbooks, I had a 3 year long Lutheran education process. Now I had entire semesters devoted to studying each Testament of the Bible and other topics including the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the 10 Commandments. And, in proper Lutheran fashion, this was done under the guidance of Luther's Small Catechism.

By this point, I had spent over a decade pursuing my formal theological education and had participated in all of these confirmation experiences. If I tried to put it all together, then I suspect I was supposed to believe in

- The Bible – but only the 66 books of the Protestant Bible;
- The right list of confessions, creeds, and catechisms, which depending on the tradition varied considerably; and
- The religious rules of the day as constructed by the various local congregations I served and the various denominations with which they were affiliated.

I had learned that confirmation was an important introductory course in religious rules and I was well on my way to becoming an expert in religious rules about Christian belief.

My story isn't unique . . . Consider Scot's story . . . At the age of 17, he encountered Jesus in a new and meaningful way and wanted to learn more. Since he was in a congregation that didn't offer confirmation, he was mentored by his youth pastor who taught him all about religious rules – rules that focused on behavior.

Being a Christian meant doing certain things, including:

- read the Bible: every day;
- pray: longer prayers displayed greater devotion;
- witness: telling others they needed to be saved from their sins; and
- go to church: any and every time the doors were open.

And, of course, being a Christian meant not doing certain other things, including: dancing, going to the movies, drinking alcohol, smoking, and having premarital sex.¹

Perhaps these stories are quite familiar. Perhaps your earliest years of religious experience were shaped by a specific list of rules – maybe a behaviorally oriented list like Scot experienced or a belief directed list like I experienced.

Perhaps you think that these rules driven religious experiences are a modern invention or the result of the Enlightenment and the product of the Protestant Reformation. Jesus would likely disagree, since he grew up in a culture that ensured he received a considerable amount of religious education.

Rather than considering all of the many rules he would have learned, I want to focus on one practice: reciting the Shema (which is so named since its first word is shema or hear).

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul
and with all your strength.

Those words, found in Deuteronomy 6, are followed by an important set of instructions that explain how often they are to be recited. Since

¹ Scot McKnight, *One Life: Jesus Calls, We Follow* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 12-13.

Jesus grew up in a Jewish family, he dutifully repeated the Shema several times a day every day.

In short, the Shema was the creed of Jesus' childhood faith. The meaning of the Shema was simply to "Love God by living the Torah."²

It was the core of his religious identity, which sets the stage, later in life, for the question he is asked by a scribe in the twelfth chapter of Mark:

"What is the greatest commandment of them all?"³

To which, Jesus replied rather predictably:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.⁴

But, then he does the unthinkable; he adds something new: love your neighbor as yourself.

In other words, Jesus took the Shema that everyone knew and lived by and added a text from Leviticus 19:18 in order to create his version of the Shema, which most of us now call the Greatest Commandment.

I don't know when you first heard those words or how they have impacted your life since. I do know that I learned them at a young age, but had never really understood their background nor experienced their intended power until after all of the many confirmation experiences I shared with you when I read a book titled *The Jesus Creed*.

That book was written by Scot McKnight - the same Scot I mentioned earlier who grew up in a rules oriented religion. Today he is renowned New Testament scholar and prolific author.

The Jesus Creed changed how I understand my faith. In the seven years since its publication, it has changed many other lives - especially those who have accepted Scot's challenge to begin and end each day by saying the Jesus Creed, and to say it whenever it comes to mind. I can assure you that doing so for any length of time will

² Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2004), 7.

³ Mark 12:28b.

⁴ Mark 12:29-31.

change how you see others and how you understand any religious rules you may encounter.

The Jesus Creed reframes all religious rules – then and now.

Scot McKnight uses these words:

“Every religious culture multiplies rules (except Jesus’ kingdom community, which reduces them).”⁵

“Jesus did to the Shema what Jesus does to everything – turns it upside down: From a love of Torah to a Torah of love.”⁶

The longer I live the more certain I am that I want to follow the way of Jesus and the more aware I become of how that way is often distorted by religious types who create and multiply rules.

To help keep us focused on the path before us the first two Gospels offer helpful words at the conclusion of the accounts of Jesus giving us his creed:

In Matthew’s Gospel the reminder is
“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”⁷

In Mark’s Gospel the reminder is
“There is no commandment greater than these.”⁸

Scot McKnight offers incredible clarity with a single sentence:

“What God really wants is for you and me to love God and to love others, and if we do that everything else will fall in line.”⁹

Amen.

⁵ *One Life*, 51.

⁶ *One Life*, 53.

⁷ Matthew 22:40.

⁸ Mark 12:31b.

⁹ *One Life*, 52.