

More Than a Motto

Faith Works!—Part 2

James 2:19-20

Introduction

The first reference to the United States having a catch phrase or a national motto came from the pen of Francis Scott Key in 1814 as he penned the words to what would become our national anthem.

In the fourth stanza, he wrote, “And this be our motto: in God is our trust; and the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave, o’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Fifty-nine years later—through the efforts of numerous people and several acts of Congress—in 1873, the Secretary of Treasury Department announced that the words, “In God We Trust” would be printed on the coins—beginning with the penny.

That really wasn’t an original idea—I actually found in my study as I tracked this issue back through history that 300 years ago when the Carolinas were being established, the Carolina penny was minted in 1694. And that penny bore the inscription—“God preserve Carolina” . . . God preserve Carolina, which is an unfortunate discovery for State fans.

Then, around 52 years ago, the president and Congress agreed to print “In God We Trust” on our paper currency as well.

The Pew Forum published an article detailing many of the battles, especially in the last 15 years, to have those words removed, along with the words, “one nation under God,” erased—or the “under God” part.

In fact, there has been a recent battle in Indiana over the fact that they released a license

plate design—actually made by the state of Indiana which included the words, “In God We Trust.”

The American Civil Liberties Union immediately filed suit and just a year ago, the Court of Appeals upheld the right of Indiana to make that license plate and offer it, among other designs to their citizens. Within four months, more than 500,000 people had chosen to use that license plate.

The trouble is—in all these recent battles—what seems to be a victory for believers is actually a troubling indictment on our culture, if you care to read between the lines.

The Indiana State Court of Appeals—and the Supreme Court too, by the way, have argued for the constitutionality of saying or printing things like “In God We Trust”; or the reference to “one nation under God” in the pledge of allegiance—as something that Americans should be allowed to continue expressing.

And their argument is based on a phrase called *ceremonial deism*.

Ceremonial deism was coined in 1960 by the former dean of the Law School at Yale University to defend public declarations of God’s existence. And the way he did it was to coin this phrase and successfully prove that in the American conscience and culture these phrases have simply become ceremonial. He argued that they are nothing more than words, they are mottos without meaning. That coined phrase caught on.

It has been used to defend the opening of the Supreme Court where the Marshal steps up and says, “God save the United States and this honorable court,” and it has been used to defend our national anthem and the motto on our currency.

In one Supreme Court case, a few years ago, one of our Supreme Court Justices defended religious expressions in the public square because these expressions—and I quote—“as a form of ceremonial deism, have lost through rote repetition any significant religious content.” (end quote)ⁱ

So we can say in public schools “one nation *under God*”; we can carry around money in our pockets that have the motto on them “In God We Trust.” But don’t worry about it . . . don’t lose your shirt over it—those mottos really don’t really mean what they sound like they mean.

“God bless America” can mean nothing more than you hope we win a lot of gold medals at the Olympics.

“In God We Trust” is just a creed that means we’re not Neanderthals . . . so don’t get all lathered up over it . . . why?

Because not only have the mottos lost their meaning—through rote repetition—but you are free to say them without being obligated to live by them.

In other words, you can say “In God We Trust,” but you don’t have to trust in God.

I can’t think of a better, more descriptive phrase for the average guy on the street than this one—just read the polls.

Eighty per cent of the people in this country believe in the existence of a supreme being. Just don’t obligate them . . . they want to be able to mention God, but they don’t really want to buy into Him. They prefer to remain ceremonial deists.

Now, do you think this is a new strategy by the Enemy of Christ? Do you think this is a clever new tactic by the Enemy of the gospel?

Do you think that a religion of spiritual words apart from the reality of spiritual life is all that new?

Have you read the Book of James lately? He reveals that this is not anything new after all. In chapter two of James’ epistle, he has introduced us to three different kinds of faith. Two of them are useless; one of them is genuine.

He began in verse 14 of chapter two by describing what he called “**dead faith**.” In our last study, we defined this kind of faith—dead faith was ‘words without works.’

James took us into the worship service in verse 15 and showed us super-spiritual reaction to a Christian brother and a Christian sister in the congregation. They were both terribly destitute—they were hungry and their clothing was so thin and tattered, it was as if they were unclothed.

And at the end of the service, the believers said to them, “God bless you—go in peace—now go get some warm clothes on and get yourself something good to eat—you look hungry!”

James said that that kind of faith was useless—without fruit. Christianity is supposed to be a show and tell proposition, remember?

But for this assembly, it was all ‘tell’—and I’m not talking about the telephone company—it was all tell—it was just talking—but it was no ‘show.’

So James comes to the end of his description of dead faith and basically says, “Don’t kid yourself—Faith that does not work is a faith that doesn’t work!”ⁱⁱ

Dead faith then is nothing more than words without works; at first glance it looks pious; but on closer inspection, there is no personal participation.

Now James moves on to show us another kind of faith which we will call, **demonic faith**. And you could categorically define demonic faith as ceremonial deism—it’s all words . . . without any meaning.

As we examine this particular type of faith, James gives us at least three specific characteristics:

Demonic faith is recognition without relationship

Notice verse 19. *You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and shudder.*

In other words, believing that God is one—or that there is only one true and living God—James effectively writes, “So what! The demons believe that too.

Now what might be easy to miss is James’ expression here at the beginning of verse 19 that would have been immediately recognized by his Jewish audience.

Remember, James is writing to the Jews of the *Diaspora*—the dispersion. The Roman emperor had exiled them from Rome—they were literally scattered to the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire.

Here James is primarily writing to Jewish believers, and he writes something here that would have immediately grabbed every Jew by the collar of their tunic. You see, every God-fearing Jew quoted in the morning, and then every evening, a prayer known as the *Shema*; taken from Deuteronomy chapter 6 beginning at verse four.

The words of that text begin with the Hebrew verb, Sh'ma—from which the prayer gets its name. The verb means “to hear.”

The opening six words of verse four are most often the very first words a Jewish child learns to quote. It has become the central motto of the Jewish faith.

Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.

Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Every morning and every evening, the faithful Jew prayed that prayer.

You see, this was the monotheism that separated Judaism from polytheism and pluralism of the pagan idolaters around them. This prayer was their creed—it separated them from the pagans—and they believed it guaranteed for them Paradise.

You could understand this statement to mean, “There aren't any other gods out there—there is only one true and living God.”

And it's a great statement of faith—it would become a wonderful national anthem. It was a motto worth believing in, but what James does here, with inspired precision, is leave out the rest of the prayer.

You see the rest of the *Shema*—that national creedal prayer goes on to include the very next verse in Deuteronomy chapter four and that verse through verse five says, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*”

What James is saying is **that there is a difference between recognizing the truth about God's existence and loving Him.**

You can recognize Him without having a relationship with Him. You can say He exists without giving your heart to Him.

What James is saying here is that the Jews' repetition of the *Shema* was nothing less than ceremonial deism . . . words without meaning . . . recognition without a relationship.

Their world, like our world is filled with people who recognize the existence of God—they can say the creeds, but it hasn't become a part of their lives.

James says, “That happens to be nothing more than demonic faith.”

Demonic faith is not only recognition without a relationship; but secondly,

Demonic faith is acknowledgment without acceptance

Listen to James' shocking words again—*“You believe that God is one—you do well—the demons also believe.”*

James is effectively saying, “You believe in the existence of one true and living God—you're off to a great start—just keep in mind the devil and his demons are monotheists as well.

If monotheism was all that mattered—mono-one and theo-God = one God. If that's all that mattered, James would be writing here, “You believe in one true and living God—you are monotheists—fantastic!”

Instead he stuns them with the news that the devil himself is a monotheist. He can repeat parts of the *Shema*, too.

Think about it—how many billions of monotheists are living on planet earth—from Islam to Catholicism to Protestantism, even 7th Day Adventism and the Jehovah's Witnesses—all these millions could all raise their right hand and repeat the motto—they could say the creed—there is only one true and living God.

But not all of them will go further and say:

- **God became flesh (John 1)**
- **God the Son was given (John 3)**
- **Not all of them can say we happen to love Him because He first loved us (I John 4)**
- **To as many as received Him—Jesus Christ—to them He gave the right to become children of God (John 1).**

Let me ask you—Do you believe in the existence of one true God? That alone does not mean you belong to Him.

Do you believe in the existence of the moon? That doesn't make you an astronaut—and more than likely you will never go there to live or even to visit.

James is effectively asking, “Do you believe in heaven? So what! The demons do too—in fact, they used to live there.”

My friend, has it ever occurred to you that Hell will one day be filled with monotheists?—Ceremonial deists who had the religious ducks all lined up. James wants us to understand that the demons have their religious facts straight.ⁱⁱⁱ

Doesn't it shock you as much as it probably shocked this original Jewish audience, dispersed throughout the empire, to discover that demons have faith?^{iv}

Does it shock you to come face to face with the truth that demons are not atheists or agnostics?

The demons don't sit around and debate who created the universe—they were there, yet un-fallen—created first and then they sang praises to God with the entire angelic host together as the universe was created by God the Son (Job 38 & Colossians 1).

The demons don't debate the crucifixion and death of Christ on the cross—they howled in delight on that hill; they don't argue over a literal resurrection of Christ—they fled in utter dismay and defeat from that scene.

A demon never wonders if the Bible is telling the truth—in fact, they are evidently aware of the judgment described in the last book of the Bible at Revelation chapter 20.

We can honestly understand it to be true that the devil and the demons are astute theologians.

In Mark's Gospel account at chapter five, Jesus encountered a demon possessed man who cried out, *"What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time . . . and they begged Christ to cast them into the herd of swine."*

Earlier in Mark's Gospel at chapter three, we're told that whenever a demon possessed individual came into the presence of Christ, Mark writes, *"They would fall down before Him and shout, 'You are the Son of God!'"*

In those brief statements, we discover that these demons believed:

- **in the deity of Christ—He was the Son of God;**
- **they believed He had the power to control them—to send them wherever He wanted;**
- **they believed He was their coming judge;**
- **and they believed their future judgment would involve torment**

They acknowledge the person and power and primacy of God the Son. They can check off all the theological boxes with perfect precision—they would win at every game of Bible Trivia. They know the words!

But it's nothing more than the repetition of words—like some motto printed on paper money, *In God We Trust*. There is acknowledgment without personal acceptance.

Demonic faith is that kind in the heart of a person you meet on the street that can quote the words—if they were truthful they would tell you that they believe in heaven and they want to go to

heaven, but they want heaven with or without Christ; in fact, they'd rather have heaven without Him because He'd probably get in the way, and since they've really had nothing to do with Him on earth, they're not really sure what they'd do with Him in heaven.

Marsha and I went to a wedding yesterday, held in the Chapel here, presided over by our Student Ministries Pastor who gave a wonderful challenge to the couple. Standing there at one point in the ceremony were both sets of parents, encircling this couple in prayer. To look up there and see that Dad who came to genuine faith here years ago, now having raised with his believing wife four sons in the faith—what a thrill that was to see!

The ceremony was going along really nicely up until the bride got her ring placed on her finger by her groom and she suddenly said, "Stop the ceremony. This is the most beautiful wedding ring I have ever seen—hold everything—I just wanna look at my ring!"

Pastor Aaron coughed a few times, not sure what to do and then he said to the bride, "Okay, where were we? Oh yea, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?" And she said, "No, but I'll take this ring." "Um, do you promise to love and cherish him?" "No, but I promise to love this ring!"

Okay, that really didn't happen.

I wonder how many people acknowledge the basic tenets of Christianity without accepting the person of Jesus Christ.

They want a good life and a peaceful death and an eternity of bliss, but they really don't want the bridegroom.

Demonic faith is recognition without a relationship; it is acknowledgment without acceptance and thirdly,

Demonic faith is reverence without repentance

Notice again what James reveals in verse 19b: *the demons also believe and they tremble*.

It's almost as if James is saying, "You say that you believe? Then why aren't you doing anything about it! The demons believe and at least they have some kind of reaction." They tremble!

It's the word *phrisso* (φρίσσω) and it appears for the first and last time in the New Testament here in this verse. It means to have one's hair stand on end.^{vi}

It gives us our transliterated word, frizzy!
You could translate the word, to shudder or to
bristle.

You won't believe this, but one
commentator actually said that this verb literally
means to bristle like a cat.^{vii}

*I was visiting a guy in the hospital this past
week and he told me about one night late—a cat
appeared outside his deck by the patio door. It was
getting ready to storm. It was late. It was cold. He
assumed it was his neighbor's cat so he called next
door and the lady said it wasn't theirs so it must be
the other neighbor's cat on the other side. He
didn't have their number and so she said, "Well just
let the cat in until morning." He said, I don't think
I want to do that. The neighbor said, "But it is cold
out and you can't leave the cat outside . . . he
wasn't convinced. So she said, "Listen, just bring it
over here and I'll take care of it until morning."*

*So he got on his coat and his gloves,
opened the patio door, reached down and scratched
the cat's head. The cat seemed to like that, so he
picked up the cat and it just purred away. But as
soon as he started down the deck stairs he said he
could feel the cat beginning to bristle and sure
enough it lunged to bite his hand. He went to get a
better hold on the cat and it lunged again and bit
down on his hand through his glove. He dropped
the cat and it ran off.*

*He went inside to take a look. It was just a
tiny pinprick on his knuckle . . . he cleaned it up, but
within an hour it was red all around his knuckle.
He thought, I'd better get some antibiotics
tomorrow, so he called his doctor who ordered
some for him to pick up. By now it was 11:00
o'clock or so. He went to bed, woke up a couple
hours later in pain and the top of his hand was
swollen and red. He called his doctor who told him
to go to the emergency room. That's almost worse
than being sick.*

*Even though the emergency room was full,
the nurse found out what had happened and
immediately took him back and hooked him up to an
IV. The doctor came in and told him that it was
very serious and if that infection moved around to
the other side of his hand, he would very likely have
to lose his hand. Come to find out, he told me it
was a feral cat. I didn't know what that meant, but
it didn't sound good. He ended up having to be
treated for rabies. He would spend more than a
week in there before he could be released from the
hospital and come home.*

Now I don't know why I told you that story
. . . in fact when I read that Greek scholar saying
this Greek word was like a cat bristling up, I said to
myself, "Don't say anything about cats."

I'm already getting email—from around the
country, by the way, so I wasn't going to say
anything . . . but just couldn't pass up the
opportunity!

I actually think the word picture is helpful.
You mention the person of God and the demon
bristles. Listen, you walk with God and are asking
for a fight!

But the word also carries the idea of being
filled with fright—like the way you tense up during
a scary movie or something you might happen to
see that scares you.

In fact, this verb in the noun form is the
word *frike* (φρικη) which gives us our transliterated
word, freaky. To this day we say that something
that is strangely frightening is freaky.

Listen, the thought of God literally freaks
the demons out!

Now get this . . . the tense of the verb
indicates that they are constantly shuddering in fear
at the truth about God and their own future makes
them bristle with continual horror; the truth of
Christ's sovereignty and power not only makes
them bristle up and ready to strike—it makes them
afraid however at their determined end and they
tremble at the thought of Him.

They are afraid of Him but listen—they
will not surrender to Him! Those individuals today
who are filled with demonic faith are likewise in
awe and fearful reverence of Him, but they will not
submit to Him . . . they will choose their own sin
and refuse to repent . . . they might be afraid of
standing before God, but they will not surrender to
God.

They believe in God like I believe in Julius
Caesar. I believe in the existence of this emperor
who at one point ruled the western world.

I have stood at the coast of France and
stared in amazement at a massive stone memorial,
with words carved into the stone face of this
monument, still supported to this day on massive
marble pillars. The etching declared the glory and
might of Caesar. And I believe he indeed
conquered that world and that he was the emperor.

But I have never—and these converted
Jews have never—bowed our knee to his memory
or his might and said, "Caesar is Lord." Those with
demonic faith will not do that to Christ either.

Those who worship with the demonic faith will acknowledge historical facts about God, Christ, the Bible, and the church—they will get their facts straight, but they have not bend their knee, their heart, and their will and say, “Christ is my Lord.” They may reverence Jesus Christ to a certain point, but they will not repent and desire to please Him as their Lord.

You see, people with demonic faith want to be spiritual without surrender.

Demonic faith—which is, I believe, the foundation of most of the religious systems in the world in any and every generation wants a god without any obligation; they want God without the demands of godliness.

They want to live a life without limits and they want to live in heaven without Him.

Demonic faith is recognition without a relationship; it is acknowledgment without acceptance; it is reverence without repentance.

It’s the repetition of words, without any personal meaning attached to them. It is the rote recitation of a pledge—it is the meaningless platitudes on currency—it is ceremonial deism—words, the Supreme Court justice rightly observed, that no longer have any meaning.

I’ve received two emails in the last 48 hours that have been thrilling. One came from a listener who said that she was driving down the road, and happened to tune in and hear our message on the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. She said, “I was blown away and something inside me just clicked!” She was obviously a new believer, struggling to find the words to explain what exactly happened to her.

Another email came from a gentleman who made an appointment with me to talk about my conviction about God, as he put it. He said, “I wish I had the same conviction as you did.” This successful businessman knew he didn’t have spiritual life. When I finished explaining the gospel he said, “I know now what I need to do with God—but I’m not ready yet.” I prayed before he left my office that the Spirit of God would bring light to his eyes and life to his soul. He’s out of town for several weeks, but he wrote me and said, “I’ll be back in town in a few weeks . . . I am ready to receive the Lord.” I wrote him back, “Don’t wait for me!”

You know what I love about both of these individuals? They really didn’t know the language .

. . . they don’t yet know their way around the New Testament. They don’t know the vocabulary of the church. Truth be told, they really can’t explain what happened—but my friend, they happen to have come to life spiritually . . . they are verbalizing genuine faith.

I wonder . . . do you know how to repeat the Lord’s Prayer—but you really don’t belong to the Lord?

Can you cite a few of the 10 Commandments, but you haven’t repented of your sin?

Can you check off the boxes and say, “I believe God exists and Jesus is the Son of God and heaven is a real place and the Bible is God’s Word.” You can say all of that and go to hell forever.

So, what should you do to leave demonic faith for genuine faith?

When Paul and Silas were in jail and that earthquake occurred and their chains fell off, the other prisoners and the jailor himself had heard Paul and Silas no doubt preaching the gospel to the other inmates as well as singing at midnight, we’re told in Acts 16.

The jailor rushed into the jail, assuming all the prisoners had fled, but Paul told him they were all still there—and that jailor came in and cried, “Men, what must I do to be saved?” And Paul said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

Believe in the Lord Jesus. That preposition “in” “believe in” means to move toward and rest upon. It does not just believe that Jesus exists—the devil believes that. But move toward Him in faith and rest upon Him alone for your salvation—and you will be saved.

You don’t have to join the church—get baptized—do good works—give away money . . . just move toward and rest upon Christ.

That’s something a demon will never do! That’s an invitation he will never accept. But it’s an invitation you can accept . . . it’s an invitation to rest entirely upon Christ for your salvation.

It’s a faith that moves you past recognition and into a relationship; it moves you beyond reverence to repentance; it doesn’t just acknowledge Him, it accepts Him for who He is and the rightful claims He has over our lives.

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- i Ceremonial deism from Wikipedia.com
- ii Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James (Zondervan, 2008), p. 136
- iii Charles R. Swindoll, James: Practical and Authentic Living (Insight for Living, 1991), p. 87
- iv Warren W. Wiersbe, James: Be Mature (Victor Books, 1979), p. 78
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- vi Dan G. McCartney, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James (Baker Academic, 2009), p. 173
- vii R. Kent Hughes, James: Faith that Works (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 111