

IS CHRISTIANITY THE ONLY TRUE RELIGION?

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

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"For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge." 1 Corinthians 8:6, 7

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

Writing to Christians in the ancient city of Corinth Paul says that for us Christians there is one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. "Yes," he says, "I know that there are many so called gods - Zeus and Apollo and thousands more. But for us there's only one God. All things were made by him. We live for him. Our whole existence is wrapped up with God the Father. And, yes, I know that the emperor claims to be Lord and I know that there are many so called lords but there's really only one Lord, Jesus. Without the Lord Jesus Christ nothing would exist. Without him we couldn't live." What Paul wrote took courage. He ended up dying for confessing Christ as Lord.

Now it's one thing for a Christian, like Paul, to refuse to sacrifice to the gods or to give divine honors to the emperor and to boldly confess Jesus as the Lord upon pain of death. It takes courage. It takes conviction. But it's quite another thing, when Christians have political power and social prestige, as we do today, to claim that Christianity is the only true religion. ^{It's one thing ... Jesus the way} ^{Trinity is the only true religion} Is Christianity the only true religion? Let's talk about that.

Before we say *yes* too quickly consider, *first*, how the Christian religion has been responsible for some of the worst atrocities in human history. We all know how difficult it was for Corinthian Christians to confess Christ as Lord in the midst of a pagan culture. We all know how Christians suffered persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire for three hundred years. But early in the fourth century the Emperor Constantine showed favor to the Christian religion as a means of uniting the crumbling Roman empire. Soon the Christian religion became powerful with the backing of the Roman government. Christians began to persecute non-Christians. We killed people who wouldn't confess Jesus as the only Lord. In the name of the Christian religion

pagan temples were destroyed, pagan altars thrown down, idols smashed, and sacrifices to pagan deities forbidden upon pain of death.

During the Middle Ages Jews were persecuted in the name of the Christian religion. Subject to punitive taxes. Made to wear a yellow *O*. Locked up at night within their ghettos. Periodically summoned to listen to sermons asserting that Christianity was the only true religion. Objects of ridicule. Often barred from owning land or practicing any trade except money lending, scrap metal and rag collecting.

In the 13th century the Inquisition was set up in the name of the one true religion to combat heresy. Suspected heretics were hunted down, invited to confess, and then, if they refused, brought to trial. Torture was permitted in order to get suspects to confess. Impenitent heretics were punished by excommunication, imprisonment, confiscation of goods, or handed over to the civil magistrate to be burned alive.

During the 17th century Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutherans and Anabaptists all claimed to have the one true religion. Christians tortured and killed one another in an effort to assert their claims to have the true religion. ^{Tolun, Kosovo, N-Ireland, South Africa, Yugoslavia in Name of ...} It's one thing to say, with Saint Paul, that there's only one God and only one Lord Jesus Christ when you're a despised and persecuted minority. But it's a dangerous thing, a demonic thing, to declare triumphantly that there's only one God and only one Lord Jesus Christ when Christians have majority status and have the backing of powerful governments. *To be terrible things*

Second, consider, not only the terrible things done in the name of the Christian religion, consider also how that when Christians come in contact with non-Christians we often recognize in them a deep hunger and longing for God that many Christians never experience. I think of an article I read in the paper last week. Om Dutta Sharma is a New York city cab driver. He's also a Hindu, originally from India. For twenty years Sharma has barreled through the streets of New York City driving his taxi-cab. He and his wife live, voluntarily, on a poverty level. They never go out to eat. They scrimp on new clothes and have saved their money for the last twenty years in order to buy something that has been their hearts' desire. He and his wife have given his

impoverished native village in India a school for girls and has named the school *Kali*, his mother's name as well as the name of a Hindu god. Sharma and his wife, Krishna (named after another Hindu god) contribute \$2,500 a year to run the school. They contribute another \$500 a year to hire a doctor to give the girls regular checkups. Without their school most of those girls would never learn to read or write. Sharma eventually wants to expand the school, after he retires, so that 500 girls can attend through high school. To pay for the expansion, he plans to retire and sell his New York City taxi license worth about \$220,000 and give half for the school. I read that and thought, "I wish he were a Christian." But he's a Hindu. When Christians come in contact with non-Christian religions we often see people who are more Christlike than most of us Christians.

Third, consider that Christ is greater than the Christian religion or any religion. No religion is good enough, pure enough, flexible enough to contain the Spirit of Christ. Our Christian worship through prayers, hymns, sermons, and sacraments is a means of communion with Christ, but Christ is greater than our worship. Christian worship is no better than offering food to idols unless Christ is the object of our worship, at the center of our worship, and the one who empowers us to follow him. St. James tells us in his letter, "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless" even if it's the Christian religion. Again James says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." The Christian religion is worthless unless it's a means through which the risen Christ changes us and makes us more like him. The *church* is called the body of Christ, but Christ himself is greater than the church. Jesus Christ is greater than the Christian religion. Christianity won't save us. Christianity might even damn us. But Christ will save us. Our job is not to assert that Christianity is the only true religion but to confess Jesus as Lord and point to him as the hope of the world.

O God, author and giver of all good things, plant in our hearts the love of your name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.