

The Gospel in a Pluralistic World

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday of Easter, April 28, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14.

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

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." What should we Christians, living in a religiously pluralistic world, do with this aspect of the Christian message? We do live in a religiously pluralistic world. All of us know good people who aren't Christians. Some of us have Jewish friends. Some of us may have a Hindu or Muslim doctor. We all have friends who claim no religious allegiance. When we get to know people of other faiths we discover, for example, that very few Muslims are fundamentalist terrorists. We discover that Christians have no monopoly on feeding the hungry or clothing the naked or healing the sick. We discover that many of our non-Christian friends ~~take their faith far more seriously than we do.~~ As we Christians learn more about what Jews, Hindus and Buddhists believe, we often struggle to make sense of what Jesus says about being the way, the truth, and the life apart from whom no one comes to God. How should Christians living in a religiously pluralistic world deal with this claim Jesus makes - that only through him can a person come to God? Christians are faced with three alternatives in dealing with non-Christians.

1. The first alternative is called, *exclusivism*. When I say *exclusivism* think of an exclusive, elitist, country club called *salvation* with barbed wire fences around it. Signs posted declare, "For members only. All others keep out." Membership is free, but you've got to know the secret password and the password is *Jesus*.

Exclusivists say that everybody is excluded from salvation except those who consciously trust in Jesus Christ as their personal savior. The Christian religion is the one true religion and all other religions are false. We worship the only true God, you worship idols and false gods. We live in the light, you live in darkness. God is for us. God is against you. God loves and saves us. God hates and damns you, unless you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior. This is the view expressed by a past president of the largest protestant denomination in America when he said, "God doesn't hear the prayers of Jews."

I have a serious problem with exclusivism. I have a hard time squaring it with all that Jesus said and did. People who hold this view often present the Gospel as a threat. They remind me of a scene in Lewis Carroll's, *Alice in Wonderland*. The Queen of Hearts goes around threatening to chop off peoples' heads. Alice is frightened. The Queen of Hearts sees Alice trembling and says to her, "Don't be nervous or I'll chop off your head." That's how I hear the exclusivist Gospel being preached. "Trust in Jesus or you'll burn in hell." How can anybody really trust Jesus who's threatened by the fires of hell for not doing so? How can anybody truly hear the Gospel as Good News when it's presented that way?

The exclusivist view is dangerous, especially when it's held by powerful, well educated, relatively rich men and women who take this message to weak, illiterate, and poor men and women in undeveloped countries. ^{At it's best This view has led ...} ^{But at it's worst it has led} A straight line runs from this view to the Crusades, and to the Spanish Inquisition, and to the pogroms that Jews have suffered for two thousand years at the hands of Christians. ^{It's} ~~This~~ ^{hard, on the basis of This view, not to picture} ~~view, at it's worst, pictures~~ God as a cosmic Hitler who saves the

super-race and consigns to an eternal Auschwitz Jews, and Hindus, and Buddhists, and Muslims - all who do not consciously trust in Jesus Christ.

2. *Pluralism* is an alterative way of dealing with the words of Jesus. The pluralist says that Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life for us Christians, but there are other paths to God for non-Christians. When you hear the word "pluralist", picture a high mountain. On the top of the mountain, hidden by clouds, sits God. God has many names and there are many ways to climb the mountain and come to God. Jesus is the way for Christians. But Jews and Hindus and Muslims have other ways.

The pluralist view has a powerful attraction for Americans reacting against arrogant exclusivism, but I simply don't believe that all paths lead to God. Some paths lead over a precipice - such as the Jonestown Cult. The pluralist view also undermines Christian evangelism. Why should we ^{obey The Great Commission of Jesus to} tell people the story of the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ if everybody worships the same God by different names? The pluralist way of dealing with people of other faiths avoids the pitfalls of exclusivism, but I don't believe it does justice to the good news of what God has done for the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

3. There's another way of dealing with what Jesus says about being the way and the truth and the life apart from whom no one comes to God. It's called *inclusivism*. When you hear the word *in*clusivism picture the scene from the Gospels where Jesus is asleep in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. His disciples are with him. A storm suddenly arises. The boat begins to sink. The frightened disciples wake up Jesus. "Don't you care that we're perishing?" they

cry out. Jesus rebukes the wind and says to the sea, "Peace! Be Still!" And the storm ceases. Jesus saves the boat from sinking and they arrive safely at their destination. When St. Mark tells this story he adds an easily overlooked detail. He tells us that "other boats were with him". All the boats experienced the storm. All the boats were perishing. But only one boat had Jesus in it. Only one boat knew that Jesus had saved them. But all the boats were saved and arrived safely at their destination.

I believe that's a parable of how God saves the world through the Lord Jesus Christ. We're in the Christian boat. There are Hindu boats and Muslim boats and Jewish boats on the sea of life. And all of us are sinking. All of us are perishing. ^{The Yn boat is sinking too} The Christian boat never saved anybody, nor has the Islam~~ist~~ boat or the Hindu boat. Religions don't save us. Religions can't bring us to God. The Lord Jesus Christ saves us. We've heard Jesus Christ rebuke the wind and calm the seas. We know Christ has saved us. Some people don't know that he's saved them, like the people in the other boats on the Sea of Galilee. ^{or like the ~~disciple~~ ^{servant} of the Roman Centurion} But Christians claim that salvation, whenever it comes, comes only through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Over and over we see in the Gospels how Jesus recognized saving faith in men and women outside the covenant community. For example, the syro-phoenician woman, the Roman centurion, ^{"I have not seen such great faith among God's own people."} the Roman soldier at the cross, the Samaritan lepers. And Jesus lovingly welcomed and included among his friends, men and women who had been excluded and cast out of the synagogue. Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son to emphasize that the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ is a seeking God. God comes into the world in Jesus Christ to seek and to save the lost - lost Christians,

lost Jews, lost Hindus, lost Muslims, lost atheists and agnostics. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, will not give up his search mission until he finds all his lost sheep brings them home to the Father.

I believe that Jesus Christ is the only Savior but I affirm that his saving work leads people to God who *do not or have not or who are unable* to accept him as Lord and Savior. For example, I think of Jews who, for the most part, simply can't hear the good news of Jesus Christ after two thousand years of being persecuted and killed by Christians. How *can they hear* when they've been so victimized by Christians through the centuries. I acknowledge the gracious work of God in Jesus Christ in the lives of all human beings, but I reject a pluralism which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done, is doing, and will do for the world in Jesus Christ.

If the third position I've outlined is true, it will have consequences in the way we Christians relate to our non-Christian neighbors. First, we'll welcome every sign of God's grace at work in the lives of those who don't know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We won't look at Jews and Muslims and Hindus as our enemies. We'll recognize them as fellow human beings who, like us, are caught up in the storms of life and perishing. Secondly, we'll be eager to cooperate with people of other faiths in projects which are in line with what Christ has taught us, like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, educating the illiterate, and working for peace and justice in the world. Thirdly, we'll listen respectfully to the stories of non-Christians. We'll ask our Hindu, Jewish and Muslim friends to tell us about their religious faith. We'll listen respectfully and sympathetically to their stories of the world and the meaning of

human existence. And fourthly, we won't be embarrassed to tell the Christian story of how the Triune God created the universe by his Word. We'll tell the story of how, through human arrogance and pride, we've destroyed this good earth and one another. We'll tell the story of how, out of love for a lost world, the second person of the Holy Trinity became a human being to rescue the perishing world and bring it home to the Father.

I have confidence in that story of God's grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ. I realize that I can't convert anybody. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. But I will long and pray that my non-Christian friends come to know that God has come to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ to save our perishing world. I'll pray that my lifestyle will be so Christlike that nothing I say or do contradicts the message of Jesus Christ or drives away non-Christians from the Gospel. Yes, I do believe that Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father but by him.

Let us pray: Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.