

No Other Name

There are three verses I want to call your attention to. The first is Acts 4:12. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Unfortunately, these words of Peter sometimes have prompted in Christians inordinate pride, which has led to condescension. This verse has sometimes been rendered in such a way so as to portray the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ as less than an attractive shepherd. But we should not fault the truth of Peter's words simply because some Christians made them an occasion of sin. There is an inescapable exclusiveness in this claim by the apostle Peter.

That ~~does not~~^{doesn't} mean that we belittle or look down upon those of other faiths. I have the greatest respect for the devout Buddhist who believes that what is known as Nirvana in his religion represents the truth about the ultimate destiny of the human pilgrim. I happen to be convinced that the Christian doctrine of eternal life is true. But no juggling with words and ideas could make both true. Similarly, there are many common beliefs between Christians and Moslems about the nature of God, but there are points at which a clear choice must be made. "God is love." Is that true or false? A very liberal Jew and a very unorthodox Christian could agree that their religions were almost identical, but an orthodox Christian and an orthodox Jew both recognize that, with all the common bonds that exist, a real matter of truth is at stake: is the salvation of the world dependent upon a crucified Palestinian Jew.

The Christian in the NT sense of the word, is one who places his confidence in One whose claim is: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." The supremacy of Christ as the revealer of God and the Savior of

humankind is not a dogma dreamed up by an aggressive and intolerant church. It is simply the response to his claim. You ~~cannot~~^{can't} read the NT in such a way as to eliminate the news that in Jesus is both the unique revealer of God and, by his death and resurrection, the bearer of a unique message of liberation for the whole human race.

In the last hundred years there have been repeated efforts to edit out of the Gospels any such claims and references, but these efforts are now generally admitted to have failed. Whether you believe them or not, this is what the eyewitnesses to this momentous event had to say about Jesus and his mission on earth. They recorded him as the revealer of God making such stupendous claims as "He who has seen me has seen the Father." "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost, and to give his life a ransom for many," "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto myself".

Those disciples who recorded these sayings were not philosophers arguing a case. They had nothing at all to say about how these claims were to be reconciled with the existence of other religions. As two of them told the authorities in Jerusalem after Pentecost when they had been told to stop talking and teaching in the name of Jesus, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." That is the continuing motive of Christian evangelism-- the compulsion upon those who have met the Risen Christ to pass on the news. To remove this element from Scriptural teachings produces a weak compromise that is not the authentic Biblical faith.

Peter says that if a person is to be saved they will be saved only through Christ. No one is saved by their own religion, their piety, their good works, or by strictly keeping the laws of their own religion, even if its the Christian religion.

What I have said up to this point, doubtless, has met with agreement with most members of this church. I feel I have been preaching to the converted and to the convinced. But now I want to address the unconvinced and those, perhaps, who are unconverted.¹ I want to talk to those of you

for whom this verse presents a stumbling stone. Because ~~I'm~~^{I'm} concerned *That the message of G is presented as Good News, not bad news, and I am also concerned* about your salvation I want to try to explain to you what this verse

doesn't mean. At issue is the very goodness of the good news. Unless the message of Christ and his apostles is presented as good news, men and women will be driven away from the only one in whom salvation is found.

When people hear this exclusive claim, that salvation is to be found in Christ alone, the issue of fairness on the part of God is raised. The very goodness of God is jeopardised. How can God be good or loving or fair if salvation is found only in Jesus, a palestinian Jew who lived nearly 2000 years ago?—Are all people consigned to hell because they did not have the good fortune to be born in the time of Jesus or within hearing of the gospel? Does this verse consign to hell all those who lived before the name of Jesus was known? Does it consign to hell all those who today live in places where the name of Jesus has not been made known? What about the "pious heathen"; the person who lives according to the best light they have though never having heard about Christ? What about the infant and the mentally retarded who are unable to make a conscious decision for Christ or ask him into their hearts? Must we say that only those who make a conscious decision for Christ and believe in Jesus as he is revealed in the Scripture are saved?

How we evangelical Christians answer those questions will determine to a large degree whether some people will be drawn closer to Christ and embrace him as Lord and Savior; or drive them away, confirmed that the message of the church is not at all good news. What is at stake here is not

the sort of technical question of doctrine that is important only for theologians. At issue, in Professor Berkouwer's words, "is the eternal lot of mankind... a topic laden with the serious urgency of the grace and judgment of God." Such a discussion requires not only our close attention, but also a deep sense of reverence. The message of salvation is at the very heart of the gospel; and what one believes about it will have far-reaching implications.

That leads me to a verse from our Gospel lesson. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd." The word "good" originally meant "attractive" or "beautiful". Jesus says that he is the 'attractive' shepherd; he is the 'beautiful shepherd'. It's the purpose of the preacher to present the attractiveness of Jesus to the congregation, to both believers and unbelievers. It's the purpose of the preacher to remove anything that gets ~~in-the-way, which prevents a person from seeing the attractiveness of~~ Jesus.

But there is something very unattractive about a shepherd who lets the vast majority (or even some) of his sheep get lost. Yet that is what I hear so many in the evangelical church saying. And if Jesus is none other than God in the flesh there is something unattractive and ugly about a God who creates billions of people only to let the vast majority of them be lost. But that is not something that I can very well believe if indeed Jesus is God in the flesh and the Good Shepherd. In Jesus I see that God's love for others is at least as great as my love for them. God's love for those outside the flock of Jesus is at least as great as mine. He is the Good Shepherd who goes looking, even for the one lost sheep who has strayed away. He does not stop until all his sheep are safe within the fold. There is no sheep that is lost that the shepherd is not seeking, no son or daughter who is in the far country in search of whom the elder brother will not go.

Jesus comes to us as we sit among the pigs, assures us of our Father's welcome, and persuades us to put our hands into his hand as he leads us home. He says, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

And that brings me to our third text from the Epistle. "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him." The apostle John promises, on the authority of God, that we receive of him anything we ask because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. What better thing can we ask for than that all those we know, and all those we don't know come to see the attractiveness of Jesus and be led into the sheepfold where there is safety and salvation? We can

~~have confidence that this prayer is the will of God. We can have~~
 confidence because the Word of God says, "He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."

If we obey. That is my greatest desire; that we obey. My greatest desire in the ministry is to see those outside of Christ saved and, secondly, to shepherd those inside. Our church would be more likely to take in new members more often if all of us had this fixed conviction: In Jesus Christ alone is salvation. The church is that institution that Jesus has ordained to preach, teach, discipline and celebrate the sacraments to the end that all would come home to the Father. As I said last week, outside the church there is no salvation, because the church is the Body of

Christ, the extension of the Incarnation in the world.

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of Knox Presbyterian Church, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 28, 1985.