

JESUS, THE WAY TO THE FATHER

Acts 4:5-12; John 14:1-14

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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." How shall we Christians, living in a religiously pluralistic world, interpret what Jesus said? Some of us have Jewish friends, a Hindu or Muslim doctor, a Buddhist neighbor. When we get to know people of other faiths we discover, for example, that few Muslims are terrorists. We discover that Christians have no monopoly on feeding the hungry, clothing the naked or healing the sick. Many of our non-Christian friends take their faith more seriously than we do. As we learn more about what Jews, Hindus and Buddhists believe we're tempted to reject what Jesus says about being the only way to God. How should Christians living in a religiously pluralistic world ~~can~~ interpret Christ's claim? Christians have interpreted Christ's words in three ways.

One interpretation is *exclusivism*. When I say *exclusive* I want you to see an exclusive country club surrounded by barbed wire fences. Signs declare, "Stay out! For members only!" *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 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 as your Savior. The past president of the largest protestant denomination in America express this view when he said, "God doesn't hear the prayers of Jews."

I have a problem with *exclusivism*. I have a hard time squaring *exclusivism* with all that Jesus said and did. *Exclusivists* often present the Gospel as a threat. They remind me of a scene in Lewis Carroll's, *Alice in Wonderland*. The Queen of Hearts is a powerful, tyrannical, capricious dictator who goes around chopping off heads. The Queen says to Alice, "Don't be nervous or I'll chop off your head." That's how I hear *exclusivists* preaching the Gospel. "God loves you very much and will send you to hell if you don't trust in Jesus." How can anyone really trust Jesus under threat of hell? How can anybody truly hear the Gospel as Good News when it's presented as a threat?

I believe the *exclusivist* view is dangerous, especially when it's held by powerful, well educated, rich men and women who take this message to weak, illiterate, and poor people in undeveloped countries. At it's worst the *exclusivist* view has led to the Crusades against Moslems, the Spanish Inquisition, and the pogroms that Jews have suffered for two thousand years at the hands of Christians. I find it hard, on the basis of the *exclusivist* view not to picture God as a cosmic Hitler who saves the super-race and consigns Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims to an eternal Auschwitz.

A second interpretation of the words of Jesus is *pluralism*. *Pluralism* says that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life *for us Christians*, but there are other ways and truths for non-Christians. When you hear the word *pluralist* picture a mountain. On top of the mountain, hidden by clouds, sits God. God has many names and there are many ways to climb to God on top the mountain. Jesus is the way to God for Christians. But Jews, Hindus, Muslims and other religious people have their own ways to God.

The *pluralist* view has a powerful attraction for Americans reacting against narrow, arrogant *exclusivism*. But I simply can't believe that all paths lead to God. Some paths lead over a precipice – such as the Heaven's Gate cult and suicide bombers. Some paths lead to spouse and child abuse in the name of religion. The *pluralist* view undermines the desire to tell others the good news of what God has done for the world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Why should we go into all the world and preach the Gospel 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 Jesus Christ.

There's a third interpretation of what Jesus says about being the only way to God. Call it *inclusivism*. When you hear the word *inclusive* picture the scene from the Gospels where Jesus is asleep in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. A terrible storm arises and the boat begins to sink. The frightened disciples wake up Jesus. "Don't you care that we're perishing?" Jesus rebukes the wind and says to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" The storm ceases. Jesus saves the boat from sinking and the disciples arrive safely at their destination. When St. Mark tells the story he adds one detail. He says, "Other boats were with him". All the boats experienced the storm. All the boats were perishing. All the boats were saved. But only one boat had Jesus in it. Only one boat knew that Jesus had stilled the storm. Only one boat knew that Jesus had saved them.

That's how I see God saving the world he loves through the Lord Jesus Christ. We're in the Christian boat. Hindus, Muslims, Jews and other religions have their boat and we're all sailing on the sea of faith. But all of us are sinking. All of us are perishing. The Christian boat is sinking along with the Hindu, Muslim and Jewish boats. The Christian boat never saved anybody, nor has the Islam, the Hindu or the Jewish boat. In other words, religions don't save us. Religions can't bring us to God. Only the Lord Jesus Christ can save us and bring us home safely to God. We've heard Jesus rebuke the wind of doubt, unbelief and evil and calm the sea of faith. We know Christ has saved us. We hope and trust that He saves others as well. Some people *don't* know that Christ has saved them, like the people in the other boats on the Sea of Galilee. But Christians claim that salvation, whenever it comes, to whomever 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 church of Christ's day like a Syrophenician woman, a Roman centurion, a Roman soldier at the cross, and Samaritan lepers. Jesus said of them, "I have not seen such great faith among God's own people." Furthermore, 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, the lost coin, and the lost son to emphasize that God is a seeking God. God comes into the world in Jesus Christ to seek and save the lost -- lost Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, atheists and agnostics. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, will not give up his search until he finds all his lost sheep and brings them home.

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

If *inclusivism* is true it will affect the way we relate to non-Christian neighbors. First, we'll welcome every sign of God's grace in the lives of those who don't know Jesus. We won't look at Jews, 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 are perishing. Secondly, we'll be eager to cooperate with people of other faiths in 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 and Muslim friends to tell us about their religious faith and listen respectfully to their faith stories. And fourthly, we'll tell them at the appropriate time the story of how God the Father created the good universe by his Word and Spirit; how, through human arrogance and pride, we've destroyed this good earth and become alienated from one another as well as the source of all life; and 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 God's grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ. I realize I can't convert anybody. That's the job of the Holy Spirit. But I'll desire what's best for my non-Christian neighbors and myself. And I can't imagine anything better than a world united in faith, love and obedience to the One who 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 Christ like that nothing we say or do contradicts the message of Jesus Christ or drives away non-Christians from the Gospel. Yes, I believe that Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father but by him.

Almighty God, who 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.