

Is There More Than One Way to Heaven?

John 4:19-26

Sunday, March 3, 2002

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Around the world of religion today, there are about 2 billion Christians, 1 billion Muslims, 750 million Hindus, 334 million Buddhists, 18 million Jews, and a growing number of people who declare no religious allegiance at all. Once upon a time, religious tolerance consisted of Baptists having a worship service with Methodists or a Protestant marrying a Roman Catholic. Now a Hindu may be your next door neighbor or a Baha'i may be dating your daughter. All of us down in our hearts are trying to decide whether we love or hate Muslims. The religious marketplace has become complex. At the crossroads of faith, Christians must now consider our relationships with people of other religions. It is on this question I want to land today. "Is there more than one way to heaven?"

As the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well becomes intimate, the woman creates distance by introducing a religious debate. "*Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain. You say Jerusalem is the right place to worship.*" Jesus replies, "*Yet a time is coming and has now come when true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth.*" What was Jesus trying to say? I want to answer that question by addressing three questions. Are all religions alike? What did Jesus claim? Who holds the final answer?

ARE ALL RELIGIONS ALIKE?

The answer to that is yes and no. In the name of tolerance, we would love to say yes. After all, in our day it is the politically correct thing to do. The mantra for our day is: "different strokes for different folks," "aren't we all headed for the same place?" "live and let live." Tolerance is the name of the game. In many ways that is the way it should be.

Tibetan leader, His Holiness Dalai Lama says, "All religions are essentially the same in their goal of developing a good human heart that we may become better human beings." There are common teachings among the varieties of religion. We all love the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.* Jesus spoke it in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:12. Nearly every religion under the sun has a similar statement. The Buddhists say, "Hurt not others in ways that you, yourself would find hurtful." Confucius said, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." The Hindus say, "The sum of duty is to do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you." And the Islam religion says, "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself."

So, we are wise in this pluralistic world to preserve, promote and affirm goodness in every form. There are many things we can proclaim together and many places we should be working together.

However, are all religions alike? The answer to that must be no. If religion were a matter of taste, then I could like pizza and you could like steak and we could all be fed. Religion has very little to do with taste and a lot to do with truth. Religion is a search for the truth. Sometimes the truth finds itself in conflict with another. You cannot have it both ways.

I went to the Vanderbilt and Kentucky basketball game last Wednesday night. I was really grateful that the Lord provided enough snow for us to cancel church so I could go to the game. I confess, it really was an answer to my prayers. So, there I was as a fifty-year fan of the University of Kentucky and now a resident of Nashville, Tennessee. It would be nice and politically correct to postulate the statements that Kentucky won the basketball game and Vanderbilt won the basketball game. Both cannot be right. Vanderbilt fans are quick to remind me of the truth. Truth asks us to make a choice. You cannot have it both ways. It does not work that way. Therefore, the dramatic differences in one religion from another include: how we understand life, how we interpret faith and the nature of God himself.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monotheistic religions. We believe God is one. Hinduism and Buddhism are pantheistic religions. They believe God is many. Now, is God one or is God many? You have to decide.

The same goes for immortality. Islam and Christianity would say it is appointed to a person once to die and after that the Judgment. Hindus, in the name of reincarnation, say we keep coming back again and again until we get it right. Which way is it? You have to have one or the other.

It is true in the issue of salvation. Christianity affirms that God in Christ comes down to us to save us by faith through his grace that he empowers within us. Every other religion on earth teaches that we are saved by works; that somehow we are in the business of climbing this monumental mountain and if we are successful at reaching the summit, at last we will reach the presence of God. To say all religions are the same is wishful thinking.

WHAT DID JESUS CLAIM?

We now come to the second question. Sooner or later, we must ask the question, "What did Jesus claim?" The conversation with the woman at the well deepens as they get into a discussion about worship. Jesus makes a pronouncement calling people to worship in spirit and in truth. The woman then says, "*I know the Messiah is coming.*" Jesus responds, "*I who speak to you am he.*" Why did Jesus say that? Isn't that a rather arrogant statement? Isn't that a rather exclusive proposition? *I AM the MESSIAH.* Jesus was rather persistent about it. "*You who have seen me have seen the Father. I and the Father are one.*" In the intimate conversation at the upper room on the night before Jesus dies Jesus says, "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" What is this exclusionary statement that Jesus makes about himself?

Of course, you and I who believe in Christ believe that he is God's only son, my *Lord. He*

was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. The third day he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father Almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead. What are you going to do with that claim of Jesus to be Christ?

In an interview between the Archbishop of Canterbury and Jane Fonda, the archbishop says, "Jesus Christ is the Son of God, you know." Jane Fonda responds, "Maybe he is for you, but he is not for me." The archbishop then says, "Well, either he is or he is not." Either he is or he is not. We should note that a couple years ago, thanks to the witness of her chauffeur, Jane Fonda herself converted to Christianity and became a follower of the faith.

So it is that Jesus offers no choice about his identity. You can crown him Lord, accept him as a Savior, fall at his knees and worship Him or cast Him off as a lunatic, a liar, a blasphemer, or babbling maniac. But you cannot affirm Him as a good man, a wise teacher, a great prophet and let Him say the things He said about Himself. He never gave us that choice. He never intended to in the first place.

So, what are you going to do with Jesus who claims to be God in human form? You see the question is forever before us. The real charge against Jesus was blasphemy. How dare you claim to be God on Earth? Pilate, washing his hands of the circumstances asks, "What shall I do then, with Jesus who is called the Christ?" More often than not, we join the crowd and say, "Crucify him!" After all, the other position seems to be exclusionary and particular. That is what Jesus intended it to be.

So, you and I as Christians, the followers of the Way, find ourselves with an interesting question in our day, and I propose an answer. Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. The question is, how far does Christ's salvation stretch? Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, but who is included in the salvation act of Jesus?

There are a number of responses to that. On the one hand there is the restrictive response, say the word and you will be saved. Salvation is about confession. Romans 10:9 states, "*If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*" Such was the creedal statement of the New Testament Church. It is still valid, important, and practiced in our life. However, it also creates an interesting question. Does it institute a new kind of phariseeism that Jesus deeply opposed? Are we somehow trying to make it creedally right? Does it "*strain out a gnat but swallow a camel,*" as Jesus said? What about the millions who have never heard the good news of Christ? Will Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be excluded from heaven? What about the babies, are they going to be sent to hell?

What do you do with the confessional statement if you make it a narrow position? Was that what Jesus had in mind? I suggest it was not. I suggest that in His salvation act, He was much more inclusive than sometimes we want to proclaim Him to be. Jesus hints at it again and again. In John 10:16, Jesus says, "*You need to know that I have*

other sheep in addition to those in this pen.” In Mark 9:38, Jesus tells his disciples, “*Those who are not against us are for us.*” The verses imply salvation is to be far and wide.

Frederick Buechner said that Jesus did not say that any particular ethic, doctrine or religion was the way, the truth, the life. He said He was. He didn’t say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could come to the Father. He said it was only by Him. So, it is possible to be on Christ’s way and with his mark upon you without ever having heard of Christ, which brings me to the final question.¹

WHO HAS THE FINAL ANSWER?

Who has the final answer? My favorite television show is *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* The thing I really love about it is I know all the answers under \$500. The other thing I really love about the show is life lines. When you get in a corner, you have a place to go for help.

I suggest to you, on the subject of salvation, who enables it, and how it is appropriated to people, you better do something besides poll the audience. We ought to ask a friend. The friend is none other than Jesus Christ.

Who has the final answer? The biblical witness is profound, true and consistent. The Son of Man coming in all of His glory will finally sit on the throne and all nations will be gathered before Him. He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. If the parable is right, the final Judgment is going to be full of surprises.

The ultimate question in the parable in Matthew 25 is, “When?” I do not remember when I welcomed strangers, fed the hungry ... and when I failed to do so. I have news for you, you are not the final judge and neither am I. For that, I am deeply, deeply grateful. The good news is you do not have to agree with me. We do not have to be at the same place because all that really matters in this conversation is that Jesus the Christ, the Just and the Merciful One, has the final answer. In the meantime, do not draw the road too narrow.

Every image I read of heaven is the image of one that is wide and open. I love the story in Revelation about the twelve gates on every side. All are open. You do not have to have a code to get in. What is John the Revelator trying to say? The great Holy City is an open, welcoming place. The missionary, John R. Stott said, “I cherish the hope that the majority of the human race will be saved.” C.S. Lewis, the great Christian thinker, said, “I think that every prayer which is sincerely made even to a false god is accepted by the true God and Christ saves many who do not think they know him.”² I say to you today out of the convictions of my own heart, I believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world and that his salvation extends to all who have not specifically refused his invitation.

*There is a wideness in God’s mercy,
like the wideness of the sea.
There is a kindness in his justice,*

that is more than liberty.

This is the Word of the Lord as this one messenger understands it. May God and his mercy enlighten us all. Amen.

NOTES

1. Frederick Buechner, Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner/compiled by George Connor, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 1992, p.

57.

2. Evan Gibson, C. S. Lewis: Spinner of Tales, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1980, p. 216 cited by Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders, What About Those Who Have Never Heard?, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, IL., 1995, p. 45.

