

“Why do Christians say that Jesus is the only way to God?”

THE OBJECTION

One of my students, a young Asian woman who was a Buddhist, approached me during a break in our class. Obviously angry and upset, she asked, “Why do Christians say that Jesus is the only way?” In posing this question, she was voicing one of the most frequently heard of all objections to the Christian faith, and one that demands to be answered.

My answer to her was twofold. First, I apologized to her if anyone had told her that in an unkind way, for that is not how the Bible teaches us to respond to those who ask about our faith (1 Peter 3:15). Second, I explained to her that we believe that Jesus is the only way because that is unquestionably what the Bible teaches. Jesus Himself taught this. In Matthew 12:30 Jesus said, “He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.” The Gospel of John contains several statements to this effect:

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (3:36).

“Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (8:24).

“I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” (10:9).

Perhaps the most compelling of all is John 14:6 because it states the principle both positively and negatively in an unmistakable way:

... “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

This is what Jesus taught, what the apostles preached, and what other New Testament writers stated. In responding to the threats of the Jewish council in Jerusalem, Peter said, “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Paul wrote to his young associate Timothy, “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). John summed up the New Testament view:

The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life (1 John 5:10–12).

Since this is the obvious teaching of Jesus, of the apostles, and of the entire New Testament, Christians simply are not at liberty to believe anything else. To do so would be to deny the very essence and core of our faith. For non-Christians, this teaching is one of the most offensive of all Christian beliefs. Schmuley Boteach, a well-known American Jewish rabbi, has said, “I am absolutely against any religion that says that one faith is superior to another. I don’t see how . . . that is anything different than spiritual racism.”¹

¹<http://cnn.com/Transcripts/0001/12/1k1.00.html>; Internet, accessed 10 February 2012.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a feminist theologian, described the belief that Jesus is the only way to God as “absurd religious chauvinism.”² Swami Vivekananda, one of the popularizers of Hindu thought in the West, once stated, “It is a sin to call a man [a sinner].”³ Clearly, the exclusive claims of Christ stir deep emotions in those who are not Christians. What should Christians say in response?

CONSIDERATIONS IN ANSWERING THIS OBJECTION

1. When we say that Jesus is the only way to God, we must do so with the utmost humility and kindness, “speaking the truth in love,” as Paul taught (Ephesians 4:15). Often the objection that non-Christians raise is not so much about the belief itself as it is an objection to the attitude with which it is expressed. We must remember Peter’s admonition about making “a defense” to those who would ask us about our faith “with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15, 16; ESV).

We should patiently explain that, in saying that Jesus is the only way, we are bound by our Scriptures—and this is what they teach. This should help people to understand that this is not a “new” doctrine, or something that Christians have made up in order to feel superior to others. Rather, we are bound to what God’s Word says. We believe the Bible is true, and it would be both unloving and dishonest of us to say anything other than the truth.

2. The claim that Jesus is the only way sounds especially strange to “post-modern” ears—to people brought up with the doctrine of relativism, which says that nothing is universally true for everyone at all times and in all places. From this point of view, something is “true” only to the extent that it is true for the individual. We must realize in dealing with post-modern individuals that we are dealing not with the objection to a specific doctrine, but with a belief system that is antagonistic to believing in *any* absolute truth.

²Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 141.

³Swami Vivekananda, Address to the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 (<http://www.lifepositive.com/spirit/masters/swami-vivekananda/chicago.asp>; Internet, accessed 10 February 2012).

At times, therefore, we will need to address the larger issue of truth and how it can be known.

For example, we can point out that everyone believes some things are absolutely right or wrong. For some people the one “wrong thing” is racism; for others it may be animal cruelty, child abuse, or the mistreatment of women. *No one truly believes that there is no absolute truth*, and we can help them realize this by asking their thoughts and feelings about a variety of subjects such as those mentioned above. Everyone believes that some things are right and others wrong, which exposes the falsehood of the whole concept of relativism.

Also, we need to emphasize that two opposite statements of fact cannot be true. For example, Muslims teach that Jesus was not crucified,⁴ while both the Bible and virtually all scholars of ancient history say that He was. Both statements cannot possibly be true: Either He was, or He was not. Likewise, if what the Bible claims about Jesus is true, then other points of view are false. We cannot admire Jesus as a “great teacher” and at the same time claim that He did not teach what is true.

It should further be pointed out to someone who objects to Christianity on the grounds of post-modern thought that denying the existence of absolute truth is itself a claim to absolute truth. If there is no such thing as absolute truth, how can they make such a claim? No one can have it both ways.

3. Those who make this objection also need to be shown that Christianity is not the only religion that makes claims to exclusive truth. In fact, most religions do. For example, Muslims claim that the Qur’an is the sole sufficient revelation from God, and that it can only be truly understood in the Arabic language. Buddhism began with the rejection of the fundamental beliefs of Hinduism, such as the rejection of the Hindu Vedas and the caste system. Sikhism arose as a challenge to both Buddhism and Hinduism. The Baha’i faith, which claims to embrace all religions, says that those who are exclusive are to be excluded. Jews, Muslims, and those of other religions do not hesitate to say that Christians are wrong about Jesus. We see, then, in claiming that Jesus is the only way to God, Christians are not doing

⁴Qur’an 4.157–158.

anything different than what other religions do: saying that what we believe is true and that other claims are false.

Most religions do contain some truth, but that does not make them all the same or all equally true. The big question is this: Which faith contains the *whole* truth and not just part of it? It cannot be the case, as often claimed, that “all religions lead to God,” since some do not even believe in a personal god (for example, Buddhism). What we as Christians claim is that in Jesus lies all the truth of God. We must be careful to point out that we are not claiming that we know all truth, but that we know Him who *is* all truth. This is an important distinction, for it puts the emphasis where it belongs—on Jesus, and not on us.

4. Most who object to the idea that Jesus is the only way to God do not have a good understanding of sin. As a result of post-modern thought, with its emphasis on the relativism explained earlier, many do not believe that such a thing as sin exists. Without an understanding of sin, it is impossible to understand the necessity of Jesus and His death on the cross; so we must help people to acknowledge sin. Usually, it is not very difficult to get people to acknowledge the reality of sin; however, it is more difficult to get them to accept the concept of being “lost” (separated from God) because of sin. Unless someone is very arrogant, he will readily admit his own moral and ethical failures. This,

we can point out, is one aspect of sin. If sin is indeed real, then what is the solution? Only Christianity offers a valid answer that is consistent with both God’s mercy and His justice (see Romans 3:23–25). Otherwise, the guilt of our sins remains.

We must emphasize that morality itself, while an important aspect of the Christian faith, is not its primary goal, nor is practicing “religion.” Rather, the goal is redemption, salvation from sin. Many religions offer a respectable morality, and their religious rituals may be attractive to large numbers of people; but this does not remove the effects of sin. However, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross does exactly that.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Many people reject Jesus not because His truth-claims cannot be verified, but because He “bids us to come and die.”⁵ Following Him changes who we are and what our lives are about. Religions that require less may naturally be more appealing to people. In addition, other religions seem more “politically correct.” Our concern must always be this: “What is true, and what is not? What—or Who—will lead us to God?”

■ Tommy South

⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1959; reprint, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964), 79.