

Why Jesus is the Only Way

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“I am the way, and the truth, and the life;
no one comes to the Father, but through me.” (John 14:6)

“And 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)

“For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men,
the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all,
the testimony borne at the proper time.” (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

“He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have
the Son of God does not have the life.” (1 John 5:12)

These passages make crystal clear the Bible’s teaching that Jesus *alone* is the way of salvation. Yet, despite the Bible’s clarity, most Christians are tentative in handling this subject before secular audiences. With good intentions, we are careful not to offend people of different faiths. We resist association with those that secular culture caricatures as radical, fundamentalist, or extreme. We desire, by contrast, to appear open-minded, sensitive, loving, intelligent, “enlightened,” and respectful of different cultures and worldviews. We value common ground with other educated, open-minded people—whatever their religious affiliation. Desiring unity, brotherhood, and peace, many Christians find themselves attracted to the sentiment exemplified by this Egyptian Muslim quoted in *Newsweek*: “We all worship the same God. What does it

matter if we call him Allah, the Jews call him Jehovah, and you call him God?"¹ And so, with this sort of countenance, most Christians gravitate toward safer, less offensive subjects in their conversations with the outside world.

A few years ago my colleague Dr. Larry Helyer and I were at a conference on Jewish/Christian relations in Indianapolis sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council and Christian Theological Seminary. The speaker that particular year was the brilliant Jewish Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) scholar Lawrence Schiffmann. After Professor Schiffmann delivered his presentations on the DSS, the afternoon was set aside for group discussion on the subject of Jewish/Christian relations. In that discussion, one of Professor Schiffmann's comments that I have grown to appreciate was his statement that interfaith dialogue will never achieve anything as long as the different faiths refrain from expressing their honest beliefs when talking with one another. Agreeing with this sentiment, and committing myself to it, I was surprised later in our meetings by the testimony of one Christian leader, committed to interfaith relations, who said that as she progressed in her religious experience, she was growing further and further from Jesus. This she seemed to voice as a positive change that would have positive results—for the implication was that her departure from Jesus would lead to acceptance by Jews and others of neighboring faiths.²

While Evangelicals may snicker at the "shallowness" of this leader's faith, I think her drift from Jesus characterizes a broad tendency among contemporary intellectual Christians to "play it safe," when it comes to articulating the exclusiveness of salvation through Jesus when talking with educated non-believers.

¹January 20, 2003 *NEWSWEEK*.

²This recollection is in no way intended to stereotype women as compromisers on this issue. The tendency I'm describing is obviously gender inclusive. This particular person just happened to be a woman.

At the same time, universalism seems to be a popular perception within our culture—that is, that everyone is going to heaven regardless of what they believe. Citing John 12:32, “If I be lifted up, I will draw *all* men unto me,” one universalistic web site lists 488 “famous people throughout the centuries who have declared publicly or strongly hinted that they believe all mankind will ultimately be saved.”³ The list includes not only Jesus himself, but also *all* the Hebrew prophets, the apostles John and Paul, a host of early church fathers, scores of philosophers, theologians, and authors, and arguably the two greatest American presidents (Washington and Lincoln)! Again, although we may laugh at the shoddy scholarship that produced this entirely unsubstantiated list, it does represent a very real perception, perhaps even a contemporary myth that is attractive to many Christians. It is not surprising that David Eller concludes his article on “Universalism” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* by writing, “Clearly universalism, in a variety of forms, continues to have appeal for contemporary faith, in both liberal and conservative circles.”⁴

I think we can understand why that’s the case. To many Christians it only seems fair that others should have the same chances for salvation that we Christians have had—something that can’t easily be said for a child born into a Hindu, Mormon, Muslim, or Jewish family. Even more troubling is the pain many Christians experience in knowing that those whom they love personally do not profess a faith in Christ—parents, siblings, children, and close friends.

And so, how are we to respond to the clarity of the Bible’s teaching on this subject, on the one hand, and our Christian generation’s soft attention to it, on the other? Are we to bluntly cry out, “Hey, *the Bible* says Jesus is the only way, end of discussion?” And with this conviction

³<http://www.tentmaker.org/tracts/Universalists.html>

⁴*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1130.

preach the Gospel in a Jonah-like fashion to accelerate mechanically the return of Christ according to an ice cold application of Matthew 24:14—that the gospel must first be preached to the nations before the end shall come?

Is this the mindsets Evangelical scholars should adopt? Or is there a better way? Can we preach the Gospel *without* compromise, while sympathetically and genuinely ministering the love of God to this fallen world?

I believe Jesus' example leads us to the latter alternative. The following essay attempts to explain in clear, honest terms why Jesus is the only way to God and why awareness of this truth is *good news* and not bad, comforting truth and not disturbing doctrine, a challenging charge and not an excuse for lazy, simplistic dogmatism. For the imaginary non-believing listener, we will be clear, honest, direct and simple—just as Professor Shiffmann advises.

The first honest clarification that has to be made is that New Testament (NT) theology does not allow for Jesus to be compared to any other historical figure. In this discussion, the tendency historically has been to compare Jesus to Judas Maccabeus, Hillel, Confucius, Mohammed and other renowned leaders, teachers, and prophets of neighboring faiths. And yet the Bible does not present Jesus as this kind of figure. The Bible reveals Jesus as the unique Son of God. John 3:18 explains that the unsaved face judgment because they have not believed “in the name of the unique son of God” (*eis to onoma tou monogenous uiou tou theou*). The adjective *monogenous* conveys the idea that Jesus is unique. He is the only one (*mono*) of his kind (*genous*). But how was Jesus unique in ways that other religious figures were not?

The historical Jesus ministered not only with prophetic preaching and teaching, but also by performing a *pattern* of miracles that signaled his identity with God. The discovery of the

Qumran fragment 4Q521 has made this equation manifest.⁵ In telling the disciples of John, “Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over me” (Lk. 7:22//Matt. 11:2-4), Jesus draws attention to the fact that he is performing the very pattern of miracles that the Qumran covenanters were expecting God to accomplish on the eschatological Day of the Lord. The subtle yet radical message Jesus conveys is that he is acting in God’s stead to accomplish feats that the prophets associated with eschatological salvation (Isa. 29:18; 35:5-6). With this understanding of Jesus’ teaching, Matthew’s editorial identification of Jesus as Immanuel, “God with us,” is a logical conclusion. Jesus’ ministry, his pattern of miracles, signaled his identity *with* God—not with human pioneers of other religions. Jesus’ commission of disciples, his walking on the sea, and his appearance after John in fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 lead to the same conclusion.⁶

Directly related to this equation is Jesus’ exclusive power to save. Being one with God, Jesus exclusively has the power to give life. As the Word who was with God and was God and who brought everything into existence that has come into existence (Jn. 1:1-4), Jesus alone had and has the creative power to heal, rebirth, recreate, and resurrect. Wondering about this idea, Nicodemus came to Jesus in John 3:4 asking, “How can a man be born when he is old? He

⁵(7) For he will glorify the pious on the throne of an eternal kingdom, (8) releasing captives, giving sight to the blind and raising up those who are bow[ed down]. (9) Forever I will cleave to [those who] hope, and in his kindness. . . . (10) The fru[it of a] good [wor]k will not be delayed for anyone (11) and the glorious things that have not taken place the Lord will do as he s[aid] (12) for he will heal the wounded, give life to the dead and preach good news to the poor (13) and he will [sat]isfy the [weak] ones and lead those who have been cast out and enrich the hungry . . . (14) . . . and all of them. Translation by John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 117.

⁶In the Old Testament God alone commissions prophets, God treads upon the water (Job 9:8; Hab. 3:15; Ps. 77:19; Isa. 43:16; 51:10), and Isa. 40:3 speaks of one who will come and “prepare the way for the LORD.” In the

cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" For the reader of John, Nicodemus's abstract question is answered by John's prologue. One indeed may be born again by coming to Jesus, who is the Word of God, who made all things, including human life, in the first place. In coming to the Creator, one may have their sight restored, their limbs healed, and their leprosy cleansed. And as Lazarus discovered, Jesus, the living word of God, is even able to bring one back from the dead (see Rom. 4:17)! Christianity is unique in its ability to explain this aspect of salvation. Yes, the resurrection of the dead *is* possible, if the first cause of creation, the living God, the Creator causes that life to be restored. The simple message of Christian soteriology is that God has caused life to be restored in the lives of those who believe in Him.

Identifying Jesus as God incarnate, Christians believe Jesus is "the resurrection and the life" for those saved by Him. There is no other like him, because He alone is "Immanuel." Salvation for the Christian therefore is not a matter of getting on one of many paths that lead to God. There are indeed many paths, but these paths lead to different gods. Christians believe that there is one path that leads to the one true living God. That path, Christians believe, is Jesus.

This relates closely to another very important clarification. When Christians come to Jesus, we believe that we come to God, *as God really is*—Jesus, in the words of the author of Hebrews, is the exact representation of God's nature (Heb. 1:1-3). Other religions therefore do not present God as God really is, because they do not present Jesus as Jesus really is. For this reason, Christians cannot agree with the Egyptian quoted in *Newsweek*. The Christian God is not the Allah of Muslims, who reject Jesus as Son of God. Nor is the Christian God the god of non-messianic Jews, who reject Jesus as Messiah. The God of Christianity is one with Jesus, the same Jesus that these other religions reject. For the Christian, when one rejects Jesus, one rejects

Gospels, John prepares for the coming of the LORD, whom the Gospel writers equate with Jesus. This list is of course not exhaustive.

God. The historical Jesus clearly explained this in Luke 10:16, “the one who rejects me rejects the one who sent me,” and John clearly reaffirms this teaching in 1 John 2:23, “all who deny the Son do not have the Father, the one who confesses the Son also has the Father.”

With this foundation established, we may understand why God saves only those who believe in Jesus. For on the basis of what we have argued, it is impossible for a human being to accurately believe in God without believing in Jesus, God’s exact representation. If God in His sovereignty has willed to have a loving relationship with only those who believe in Him, and if Jesus was and is God’s special revelation, without comparison among neighboring faiths, then it follows that human beings must believe in Jesus in order to have a loving relationship with God.

This broad assertion leads directly to two basic features of salvation--salvation from sin and death. With the Apostle Paul, Christians believe that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). The “all who have sinned” include the Aborigine who’s never heard Billy Graham, the clean cut law-abiding Mormon, the non-believing Jew, and the unbelieving neighbor down the street, who seems to have it all together. All have sinned, all are unholy, and all are unfit for relationship with holy, sinless God. In view of this reality, reconciliation between God and defiled human beings is impossible apart from a unilateral act on the part of God himself. Religion in the form of good works, prayer, alms, fasting, incense, law adherence, meditation, church attendance etc., therefore cannot undo the sinful nature that all human beings suffer in common. This, too, is why Jesus is the only way. What human religion cannot do, God, Christians believe, has done unilaterally through the sacrifice and death of Jesus on the cross.

Christians, like Jews, understand this divine requirement against the background of the Ancient Near Eastern institution of covenant relationships. Covenants were entered in good faith

by all parties and were initiated with full awareness that if the covenant were ever broken, the punishment for infidelity would be death for the guilty partner. This conceptual background established the rationale for the sacrificial system in the OT and the concept of expiatory sacrifice in the NT (Rom. 3:23-25). “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

Christians believe that God has unilaterally by his sheer grace made possible forgiveness of sin and deliverance from death by the union Christians experience with God through faith in Christ. This is why justification is by God’s grace through faith in Christ alone. God has willed that through faith believers in Christ may vicariously unite with Jesus in his death, so that the believer’s punishment for sin is paid in the eyes of God, and the justice of the covenant is maintained. It is with this understanding that Paul claims, “I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Jesus alone has been successful in offering this kind of vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice, because he alone, unlike any other religious figure, died innocent without sin. Thus, in uniting with Christ through faith the sinner passes from a sinful former self to union with sinless Jesus Christ. In this newfound state of existence, the transformed believer is able to commune with Holy God as a member of God’s holy people, because in union with Christ the believer discovers union with God.

It is also through faith that Christians become one with Christ in his resurrection and thus discover salvation from death. Paul writes in Romans 6:8-11, “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin, once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. *Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*” Hence, it is through faith in Christ alone that one’s sins are forgiven, so that one may again become holy for coexistence (atonement) with

sinless holy God. And in atonement with God through faith in Christ one also gains a share of Jesus' eternal life, because through faith the believer becomes one with *eternal* God. Jesus alone makes this relationship with God possible, because he of all human beings is the only one to have ever lived a sinless, holy life as the living God incarnate (Heb. 5:8-10). Union with any other substitutionary sacrifice would not have the same saving effect, because all other unions would be with sinners just like ourselves. Jesus alone, as the writer of Hebrews emphasizes, was tempted as we are and yet without sin (Heb. 4:15) thereby becoming a uniquely perfect sacrifice for human sin. No other religious figure shares Jesus' sinless holy nature.

Properly understood Christians may promote this teaching as *good news* and not bad, comforting truth and not disturbing doctrine. If by comparison there were just one cure for cancer, people everywhere would be overjoyed to have it, and would honor the scientist who produced it. Intelligent persons would at the same time warn against other false cures, which could not accomplish what they advertise. If these false cures were trusted, their treatment would inevitably lead to suffering, disillusionment, and tragic death.

So it is with true salvation, from the definitively Christian perspective. There is one cure for sin and death. For this reason the Gospel of salvation in Christ is good news, because it dispels falsehood, while alone being able to accomplish what it promises—namely, forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and eternal life. Jesus, therefore, we believe, is not only the way, but also the truth.

This salvation is unfair *only* if we disregard the crucifixion of Jesus. But when listeners understand the message of the cross, it becomes apparent that the exclusive way to God through Jesus is beyond *fair*, for it is rooted in the humiliating, tortuous self-sacrifice of Jesus, who died in total innocence as the Son of God to satisfy the justice of God in payment for sin. Therefore

the message of salvation through Jesus is a message of *mercy* and *grace* for all, *though effective only for those who receive the benefits of Jesus' death through faith.*

Another clarification I will make in regard to this discussion is that contemporary Christians need to reestablish that the historical Jesus of NT testimony is one and the same as the risen Lord. We have perhaps gotten too caught up in *the quests*. Yes, the historical Jesus referred to himself as Son of Man; yes, the historical Jesus preached about the kingdom of God and performed miracles; yes, the historical Jesus suffered rejection from Jews and Gentiles alike prior to his historical crucifixion. But no, that's not all there is to the historical Jesus. We cannot allow for the contemporary scholarly distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith to set the rules for either Christian Christology or Christian soteriology. Every NT book presupposes that the historical Jesus is one and the same as the risen Lord who is alive today. It is faith in the historical person of the *risen Lord*, which leads to eternal life with God. Paul therefore writes, "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

Jesus is the only way, Christians believe, because as risen Lord, as the Danielic Son of Man who has ascended to rule with the Father, he is presently acting as judge of heaven and earth. It is he as risen Lord, who will determine the eternal fate of all human beings. John 5:22 therefore tells that the Father "has given all judgment to the Son" and John 5:27 explains that the Father "gave him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man." Jesus is the only way, because, according to his own testimony, his judgment will be based entirely on how human beings relate *to him* specifically: "And I say to you, everyone who confesses me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men shall be denied before the angels of God" (Lk. 12:8-9; cf. Matt. 10:33). In this role

as judge Jesus again is *monogenes*--the only one of his kind. Judas Maccabeus, Hillel, Muhammad, Gandhi, Joseph Smith etc., do not share this function or status.

Finally, I conclude my remarks this morning with the ironic Christian claim that the only chance for true peace that this world has is through the message of the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only way to peace with God and peace with one another. In Romans 5:1 Paul writes, "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." In John 14:27, Jesus promises, "Peace *I* leave with you; my peace *I* give to you; *not* as the world gives, do *I* give to you."

Unbelievers may well ask, *how* is Jesus' peace unique to human experience? To this we may answer: Whereas this world's concept of peace refers to the delay of conflict, or perhaps even the prevention of conflict, the peace that Jesus makes possible is a peace that brings forgiveness, a peace that brings intimate relationship, and a peace that brings mutual love. Jesus' death was the exclusive event that made this kind of peace possible between human beings and God. Paul thus writes in Romans 5:8,10: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.' . . . 'For if while we were *enemies*, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.'" Only through Jesus are human beings able to have a peace with God that is characterized by mutual love.

It is also true that human beings are only able to have peace *with one another* through Jesus Christ. At the close of last fall semester, our president at Taylor, Dr. David Gyertson, demonstrated this well when he showed to our student body a film clip about the miraculous friendship of two former enemies: one a former militant Palestinian terrorist, the other a former member of the Israeli army. The film recounted the story of how both men came to know

salvation through Jesus Christ and then to know forgiveness from one another. Finally, these two former enemies were shown embracing one another and worshiping their common God as brothers in Christ. This is the kind of peace that the Gospel is able to bring to this world. Ultimately, the Gospel of peace is the exclusive solution to world conflict in all of its guises. What Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:13-14 has been proven true, “But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall.” There is no lasting peace, no genuine peace, where there is no forgiveness. Jesus therefore is the only way, because Jesus is the only “propitiatory sacrifice” that *God* has offered for the forgiveness of sins (Rom. 3:25). God has offered no other, because no other is needed—Jesus “is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

Much more should be said. Jesus is the only way, because He alone is the way to ultimate, absolute rest. Jesus is the only way, because, as Hebrews 2:14 explains, Jesus’ death rendered “powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (see also John 12:31; 16:11). These and other unique features of Jesus and his ministry establish the true substance of Christianity. As Christian teachers and scholars, therefore, it is our responsibility to address what the prayer manual *Operation World* lists as the first prayer need of the global church; that is, “maintaining a clear witness to the uniqueness of Christ in the midst of a growing religious pluralism, non-Christian religious revival, urbanization, modernity and relativism.”⁷ Without accomplishing this feat, all scholarly effort elsewhere will be moot—at least as far as Christian evangelism is concerned.

⁷Sixth edition; Carlisle, Cumbria/Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Lifestyle (2001), 11.

In view of this message, what are we to say about the plight of the unfortunate who have not had the opportunities to respond to the Gospel that we have had—those born in environments where the Gospel is unknown or rejected. Sympathetic with their plight, we should reiterate the biblical clarification that God is not partial. Paul affirms in Romans 2:11: “There is no partiality with God.” In regard to judgment, “all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law; and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.” Divine judgement therefore is universal.

The same is true in regard to salvation; “God so loved *the world*, that he gave his only begotten son.” Unless one maneuvers subjectively in their exegesis, the “world” in John 3:16 is the world of fallen sinners, just as the term is used almost everywhere else in John (e.g., John 7:7). The potential for salvation is therefore universal. God is not partial. He is not unfair.

Finally, we should warn the *unreasonably* sensitive of the arrogance that assumes that some human beings are more loving than God is. We should remember that God created all the people of this world and he sent his Son to die for all the people of this world. He alone created them, and he alone sacrificed to save them. In this regard, we are wise to reject every idea of God that makes God less than a good human being.”⁸ His love far exceeds ours. His sacrifice far exceeds ours.

Amidst remaining discomfort with this issue, Christians are wise to remember God’s word in Isaiah 55:8: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Remembering the magnitude of God’s sovereign love and our inability to fully comprehend it, we are wise to come to him in respectful

⁸This quote is attributed to Milo Rediger, former president of Taylor University.

thanksgiving and trust: thanksgiving for the revelation of salvation in Christ that we have received and trust in God's righteousness and love in those areas that we do not yet fully comprehend.