

IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY?

A common complaint about Christianity is that it is exclusivistic, that it alone has the truth about God and salvation. With all the different kinds of people in the world, and all the different cultures, how could there be only one true religion? Aren't all people saved as long as they're sincerely worshipping God the best way they know how? Aren't all religions basically the same? How can Jesus be the only way for salvation?

The answer has two parts. One part deals with the objections themselves. The other part looks at the claims Jesus made about himself.

When we look at these objections it's important to recognize that they each reveal a misunderstanding of what truth is and a misunderstanding of the kinds of claims that are being made by different religions. There is an old saying that "all roads lead to Rome." This is often used as a way to understand different religions, that they each lead to God in their own way. One road says Rome is everywhere. One says Rome is in oneself. One says Rome is unknowable. One says Rome doesn't even exist. One says Rome is in a specific place and can only be gotten to in a very specific way. Another says its in a different place and gotten to a different way. Really, instead of all roads leading to Rome, all roads lead to their own exclusive destination and do not even intersect. They may even each call their destinations "Rome," but they don't mean the same things by it. Either one road or religion is right or all of them are wrong. Two or more competing and contradictory claims cannot each be true. This is because the nature of truth is exclusivistic.

When we say something is true we mean that our belief corresponds to the way the world really is. And we are also saying that every claim that does not agree is false, that the world is not that way. The reason this is important is because all religions make truth claims about who God is and how we can relate to him. And the way we tell different religions apart from each other is that they disagree. Because they disagree, every religion makes an exclusivistic claim. Exclusivism is not only true of Christianity; it's also true of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and every other religion. This is why there are no Buddhist Christians or Islamic Hindus.

It may be that Hinduism is perfectly open to accepting Jesus into its pantheon of gods. And Buddhists might be willing to allow that Jesus is someone who attained enlightenment. And it is true that Islam is willing to admit Jesus was a great prophet. But the acceptance of Jesus by other religions does not mean Christianity is uniquely exclusivist. For Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam to accept Jesus they must reject all of what he taught about himself. In other words, Jesus fits in Hinduism as long as Jesus is Hindu, Jesus is fine with Buddhism as long as he is Buddhist, and Jesus is fine with Islam as long as he is Muslim. The same follows for every religion including Universalism and Bahaimism. And Christianity would welcome the Buddha or Muhammad or any other religion's founder into the fold if they were to renounce their exclusive teachings and accept the work and person of Jesus for their salvation.

Another objection to exclusivism points to the billions of religious people around the world who

each worship God in the best way they know how. This objection also reveals a misunderstanding about religious claims. What makes faith valuable is its object, not its sincerity. If the object is false then sincerity is irrelevant. Should believers be sincere in their belief? Absolutely! But sincerity about a belief does not make the belief true. People can be very sincere about something that isn't true. Ultimately, this objection is nothing more than an appeal to emotion. No one rejoices that there are many people who have false religious beliefs. But again, it is the object and content of faith that determines whether or not it is true. Having faith in faith is nonsense.

Having dealt with these misunderstandings, we see that there is either no way to God, or there is only one way to God. Now we'll look at what Jesus taught about knowing God and why it leaves no other way to God open.

The teaching of Jesus is unique among world religions because of what he taught about himself. Other religions could still exist if their founders had been someone else or even unknown. For example, Buddhism could still be Buddhism whether or not the Buddha ever existed. This is because the founders of other religions did not claim to be God and were not the object of worship. However, Jesus did claim to be God and was worshipped as God even before his death. This is at the very core of Christianity. If Jesus was not God then the rest of his teachings carry no weight since his authority to teach was based on his self-understanding as God.

It is true that in Scripture we never see Jesus say the words, "I am God." But this doesn't mean that Jesus didn't claim to be God. In the first century, much like today, to say "I am God" would be almost meaningless. Even Roman Emperors were ascribed deity or claimed deity for themselves. What Jesus did do was claim to be a very specific God to a specific people in a very specific way. And the way in which he made his claims was unambiguous and unmistakable to those people.

To make his claim Jesus spoke idiomatically, meaning he spoke in a way that was peculiar to his audience, first century Jews. For example, consider the sentence: "That cat can wail." If you heard a veterinarian say that sentence, it would mean something completely different than if you heard it from an old jazz musician. Though the words are the same, the idiom provides the framework for the proper interpretation.

With this in mind, we see that Jesus claimed to be the God of the ancient Hebrews as revealed in the Old Testament. He made this claim explicitly in ways that would have rightly been considered blasphemous if he wasn't God. He also made this claim in more implicit ways by exercising prerogatives that belong solely to God Himself, such as forgiving sins and accepting worship. We'll look at each of these briefly.

One of the best indicators of who Jesus claimed to be is the response of His audiences. Their reaction to His words is very helpful in understanding the content of His words. For example, look at John 8:56-59.

Jesus said, "...Your father Abraham was overjoyed that he would see My day; he saw it and rejoiced."

The Jews replied, "You aren't 50 years old yet, and You've seen Abraham?"

Jesus said to them, "I assure you: Before Abraham was, I am."

At that, they picked up stones to throw at Him. But Jesus was hidden and went out of the

temple complex.

Why did the Jews respond with such violence towards Jesus? When Jesus said, "I am" He was not being grammatically incorrect. He was claiming the personal name God gave Himself when He spoke to Moses from the burning bush. His audience understood this but did not believe it. Not only that, but they immediately tried to execute Jesus because of Leviticus 24:16 which says, "Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord is to be put to death; the whole community must stone him." Death by stoning is the punishment for breaking the fourth commandment, "Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God."

But this is not the only time we see Jesus' audience react this way. In John 5:16-18 and 10:30-33 the Jews try to kill him because he "made himself God." And in Matthew 26:63-66, Jesus' claim to be the Son of God convinced the high priest at Jesus' trial to convict him of blasphemy and sentence him to death. Jesus' response to his audience's response is also telling. He never tried to correct their understanding of his claim. Instead, he tried to correct their misunderstanding of his identity.

Jesus also claimed to be the God of the Bible in implicit ways. Jesus' claimed the rights, privileges, and powers that belong exclusively to God alone. One of the divine prerogatives that Jesus claimed was the ability to forgive sins. We find an example of this in Mark 2:3-12. Here Jesus tells a paralytic that his sins are forgiven. The scribes immediately recognize the kind of claim this is and accuse him of blasphemy. Jesus then authenticates his claim by healing the paralytic. The miracle confirmed the claim that Jesus is God, and as such, can forgive sins.

Another example is found in Luke 7:36-50 when Jesus was dining at a Pharisee's house and a woman identified as a sinner washed Jesus' feet with her tears and fragrant oil. When the Pharisee became judgmental toward the woman and Jesus, Jesus rebuked the Pharisee and forgave the woman's sins, astonishing the other guests. Again, the audience understood that Jesus was claiming for Himself a right that belongs to God alone. And again, they were unwilling to accept the implications of the claim. But they did understand the claim was a claim of being the Hebrew God incarnate. Though the claim is implicit, it is a bold and unambiguous statement made in such a way that Jesus' hearers would not misunderstand His meaning.

Another way Jesus claimed to be God is by accepting worship. If Jesus was simply a good teacher living an exemplary moral life, then he would surely rebuke such behavior as misguided or inappropriate. Otherwise his teaching would not be good and we would find him acting immorally by accepting that which was not his. Jesus, however, taught and reacted in the opposite way, a way that indicated that it was right and proper for Him to receive worship.

Consider Matthew 14:22-33, the famous story of Jesus walking on water. According to verse 33, when the disciples realized Jesus was not a ghost and saw him calm the wind "...those in the boat worshiped him and said, 'Truly You are the Son of God!,'" Though Jesus has just rebuked Peter's lack of faith in verse 31, he did not rebuke the disciples when they reacted to his works with worship. In Jesus' view this was the proper response. We also see Jesus accept worship in John 9:35-38 and Matthew 21:14-16.

But Jesus goes even further in his claim. He does not simply accept worship, He teaches us to pray to God in his name, an absolutely outlandish thing to do if he was not, in fact, God. In John 16:23-24 Jesus says:

I assure you: Anything you ask the Father in My name, He will give you. Until now you have asked for nothing in My name. Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be complete.

Jesus' teaching to pray in his name is also seen in John 14:12-14; 15:16. This is surely more than a recommendation such as, "Tell God, 'Jesus sent ya!'" It is a claim of divine authority and access to the very throne of God. By teaching us to pray in his name, Jesus is claiming to be in the position of mediator or reconciler between man and God. It is only through praying in Jesus' name that believers can approach God. We see this in John 14:6 when Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." This doesn't mean that invoking the name of Jesus itself is some magical incantation that obliges God to hear and answer prayer. Rather, it is belief in the work and person of Jesus that allows believers to come before a righteous and holy God.

Jesus explicitly says this in John 3:16-18.

For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world that He might condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. Anyone who believes in Him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the One and Only Son of God.

This is also seen in Matthew 11:27:

All things have been entrusted to Me by My Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son desires to reveal Him.

Jesus' understanding of himself as the way in which we can approach God is exclusive. No other options are open. And his audience clearly understood this. Peter, for example, says, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved." Jesus, being fully human and fully God, is uniquely qualified to be our mediator.

As mediator, Jesus did not come to be a good example for us. And he didn't come to be part of a buffet of saviors that we could choose from. Jesus' purpose was to reconcile sinners with God. It is the death of Jesus that paid for the sins of those who believe in him. And the perfect obedience of Jesus' life is then credited to them, giving them right standing before a holy and righteous God. This mission is the whole point of Jesus' life on earth.

One last thing to consider is this: If Jesus is not the exclusive way to salvation, but just one way, then why did he die? In fact, why did he live at all? For what possible reason would God become incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, live a life of perfect obedience, service, and self-denial, suffer torture and then execution in one of the most horrible ways imaginable if there were other avenues to God? Only a cruel and sadistic God unworthy of worship would commit such a gratuitous and evil act. For those who say there is no fundamental difference between religions, this is the God they are left with.

It is clear, then, that Jesus thought of himself not just as God, but as the God of the Jews— the God of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, David, and so on. He also made claims to be this specific god in a way that would be easily understood, though not necessarily accepted, by his culture. Jesus also taught that belief in him was the only way by which we can access God. These claims leave no room for any other options.

Again, it is imperative to understand that these things deal with the content of faith not the sincerity of the believer. Many people sincerely believe false things, but that does not change the truthfulness of what they believe. The object of faith, the content, is what determines whether a religion is true or false, not the sincerity of its adherents.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Apologetics Study Bible Articles:

- Aren't All Religions Basically the Same? By Craig J. Hazen, 566.
- Does the Bible Teach That Everyone Will Be Saved? By Gregory Alan Thornbury, 1395.
- Why Would a Good God Send People to an Everlasting Hell? By Paul Copan, 1484.
- What About Those Who Have Never Heard About Christ? Chad Owen Brand, 1535.
- What About Those Who Have Never Heard About Christ? William Lane Craig, 1696.

Doug Powell, *The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics*

Chapter 12, Did Jesus Claim to Be God? Is Jesus the Only Way?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you respond to someone who tried to show how all religions are basically the same by pointing out they have such similar ethical teachings, such as the Golden Rule?
2. If someone you knew claimed to be God, claimed to be able to forgive sins, accepted worship, and taught that you should pray in his name, what would it take to convince you he was telling the truth?
3. If someone told you they were a Buddhist Christian, how would you respond?
4. Do you think Jesus' claims to divinity can be mistaken for something else? If so, what?
5. What is the hardest part about defending Christianity's exclusive claims?