

Jesus Christ - He is Lord of All

Part One: The Issues of Pluralism

I. Introduction -

I was presented with the question “do you believe in religious pluralism?” My answer was: “It depends on what we mean by pluralism.” If we mean that it is presently best that all religious folks should have a level playing field upon which to practice their faith and to present it to others - the answer is a resounding “Yes!”

On the other hand, if by religious pluralism we mean that it is the enlightened approach to view all religions as being of equal value or as leading to the same God - the answer is a resounding “NO!”

II. Pluralism as a level playing field -

Why do I like “pluralism” if by that we mean everyone should have a level playing field? The answer is obvious. What happens when we do not have a level playing field? Let us quickly review a few salient facts from history.

Over the centuries religions and societies have tended to enforce issues of faith requiring people to conform to views and religious standards set by the society itself. The pressure on people to conform has often been unbearable.

In the days of the Roman Empire - the non-Christian Romans saw themselves as being quite benevolent in allowing people to worship as they saw fit so long as they also honored the gods of the Romans. This was entirely unacceptable to the Jews and to our earliest Christian brothers and sisters.

Later, with the merging of post-biblical Christianity and state we find that entire populations were forced to embrace post-biblical versions of Christianity. This too was untenable to many, including some people of Christian faith who felt compelled to worship in accordance with their own understanding and consciences.

Eventually such tension resulted in the Protestant Reformation. That reformation saw a fracturing of Christianity in the west which persists to this day. It has been noted that where Protestant sects gained the upper hand politically, they in turn exerted pressure,

even persecution against whoever might be at variance with their particular views - again, even against other Christians. John Calvin's complicity in the death of Michael Servetus being a notorious example.

Later, history records the flight of the Puritans seeking to escape oppression under King James and establishing colonies in "the Americas." And yes, the Puritans themselves then created societies which might be considered oppressive in their own right.

In sum, history is filled with examples of those with numerical, economic, social or political advantage constraining others who dissent from their views. That same history is also replete with the oppressed - once finding relief - then themselves becoming oppressors.

The result of all of this is that both truth and people have suffered. How would we be delivered from such cycles of forced faith? How would we come back to the refreshing words of Luke in Acts 2:41 "Then they that gladly received [Peter's] words were baptized"?

It would seem that hope was found in the Americas. Here was found a new freedom for diversity of political thought - political pluralism if you will. And it is in the environment of political freedom that we have come to an entirely new level of religious freedom. In fact, it might be said that in America God used democracy to deliver Christians from each other.

So it is in such a wonderful day that we live, a day in which we can gather in this place with little fear of being set upon by the legal authorities. We embrace our faith in Christ knowing that likely the worst that can happen is social pressures and coercion. But, if as believers we are willing to disregard those more abstract wounds - we can gather, speak and write of the things of the kingdom of God - just as we are doing here today.

So then, what do we ask for? We ask only for a level playing field in which our thoughts about God and Christ can be spoken and then considered by the people with whom we have to do. And, if we are speaking with those who confess Christ but might differ from our sincere - and I think scripturally sound - points of view, I believe that many will be persuaded of the veracity of our faith.

But, more than that, I believe that is also the case when we find ourselves speaking to people who do not confess Christ at all. Wherever we may go in the entire world, I believe that our faith in Christ can shine. I believe that it can prevail, and find place in the minds of many good people.

III. Pluralism as a Detriment -

I said, however, that I do not at all embrace the thought of pluralism if by that we mean that all religions should be thought of equal value or leading to the same God. The word pluralism has become rather popular in our time and often as implying those very ideas.

The reason I disavow that notion of pluralism is that I believe it often has much the same effect as forced faith. Though it comes from a different direction, the end result is often the same. True debate is stifled, not by political force, but rather by a new kind of social pressure that says to be an enlightened, kind or caring person, one would never say that someone else's faith is wrong.

However, this fails the test of reason at any level. If we cannot say that there is any view that is wrong, then by the exact same logic, neither can we say that anything is right. This is a *reductio ad surdum*. How can this ever be thought to be an enlightened approach? It rather fosters a cold status quo "for all" that can never really benefit people or truth.

This is in sharp contrast to the apostle Paul who was found "arguing" the matters of the gospel in synagogues and the market places (Acts 17:17); debating the issues of faith "daily" in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9) and clearly setting forward the tenants of the kingdom of God when he stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and told them that they did not yet know the true God of heaven and earth (Acts 17:22). Clearly, Paul was never reduced to playing a game of religious "show and tell" that allowed the distinctiveness of his message or its importance to humanity to be at all obscured.

IV. Christian Pluralism -

I said that I do not at all favor "pluralism," if by that we mean that the enlightened view would be to say that all faiths, all religions should be considered of equal value. And, I recognize that such a way of thinking can inhabit the Christian realm itself. Here, it

would be suggested that no one's Christian views should be questioned or challenged. That the "Christian thing" to do is to emphasize the love of Christ. It is felt that free discussion of beliefs is somehow detrimental or injurious.

I think this notion of Christian pluralism comes in part from a sense of guilt and perhaps a fear of ourselves. Guilt, because Christians have harmed many by force and social coercion over the centuries. Fear because we are afraid that any discussion of differences will lead to Christians repeating those same wrongs again.

This leaves us in a day and time in which Christians often do not seek to resolve critical issues in differences of faith. Rather, they scramble to find and hold to some common thread (no matter how thin) which can be declared "orthodoxy." This then allows social harm and coercion to be limited - to those fewer numbers of people who because of conscience do not embrace the "orthodox" view.

If Christians would find a new starting point in unity, it should begin with all joining together in giving the world a great and sincere apology for the wrongs that have been done by Christians in the name of Christ. How shall we win to him peoples whom we injured in his name? With friends like that, Jesus Christ needs no enemies. It is likely that no other people have ever fallen so short of the faith they claimed as have Christians. On the other hand, no other people have ever had so much to fall short of in terms of the mighty faith that they pursue.

As to me, my pursuit of original Christianity is framed by the compelling exhortation of Jude. He tells the people in the third verse:

Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.

It was an unchanging faith - "once for all" delivered to the saints. I consider contending for that faith to be a mandate. And, notice, it is not post-biblical "orthodoxy" that we are to contend for. It is the faith once and for all delivered. Faith in Christ is too wonderful and too important to not seek to get it right.

How good is a faith that must be forced upon its hearers? In order to be healthy, Christianity needs the awakening that can only come with a recognition that many

teachings today in Christian traditions are only considered “orthodox” because they were forcibly pressed upon people in days gone by.

Discussion in the pursuit of original Christian faith among those claiming Christ today should be greatly encouraged. Any form of “Christian Pluralism” that suggests that we suppress contending for that original faith is, in my view, *prima fascia contra* original Christianity. Are we to believe that the “Christian” thing to do would be to not contend for that faith?

Clearly we must emphasize the love of Jesus Christ. But by what reason or scripture will we say that his love would obscure or in anyway diminish truth to the people he loves? Jesus’ statement in John 14:23 “If a man love me, he will keep my words” can easily carry the weight “If a man love me, he will declare my words.”

We must decide first and above all - are we truly disciples of Jesus Christ. If so, then we must stand up and be counted with him. We must beware that there is a line between being true men and women of God versus being philosophers with Bibles.

Part Two: The Next Thing Buddha Will Hear

I. Introduction –

I am genuinely excited as I think about our message being extended to those who are not of Christian heritage. For too long, the result of the adaptation of post-biblical Christian thought to Greek philosophy has obscured the distinctions of original Christianity to the non-Christian world.

I think we have a wonderful mission to restore those distinctions for people of all backgrounds. Our closeness to original Christian thought gives us the opportunity to set before the world a clearer, more understandable picture of God and humanity than is often the case for others professing Christ.

II. Our Unique Message –

I believe that three great aspects of our message particularly have the potential for resonating with many non-Christians. They are: 1st - Our understanding that there really is only one who is God. 2nd -The uniqueness of Jesus Christ in bringing us to that one God. And 3rd - our message of the kingdom of God.

First - There is but one who is God.

Post-biblical Christian orthodoxy is confusing and unclear on this matter. That orthodoxy has been an unfortunate barrier to Jews and Muslims as well as a host of other people - including many sincere Christians.

Our position is both clear and entirely sensible. There is one God and that God is one! Jesus Christ brings us this truth in unequivocal terms in his landmark statement of John 17:3. Praying to the Father he says:

And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Jesus is telling all of us that there is only one who is truly God, and also identifying that One as being his Father. This then brings us to a question often posed in religious pluralism: Don't all religions essentially lead to the same God? Clearly the God of the Bible has spoken to the matter: There is one God and not everybody is him!

The first of the 10 commandments is God speaking and declaring that the people should have no other gods before him (Exodus 20:3). Having other gods before the only one who is truly God is something that could and did occur. Moreover, it is something that God specifically forbids. Hence, the notion that all roads lead to the same God is both illogical and unscriptural.

The serving of any other as god was unacceptable to the God of the Bible. And, serving any other god and calling it the one God of the Bible would hardly have fooled him. It can only follow then that if there is only one who is God - there can also be only one truth. It is that which flows from him.

Second - Jesus Christ is The Unique Way to God.

When we speak to the world in the name of Jesus Christ, we must tell people about his importance and significance to humanity. A common assertion of religious pluralism is that we should not allege exclusivity in Christ. It is thought that to propose Christ as the only way to God is “mean spirited” and even morally wrong. But, by definition being a disciple of Jesus Christ means following his teachings. It is he who must direct our thoughts regarding this issue. It makes no sense for one to claim Christ and yet deny his words.

In that regard we find that Jesus himself declares that he is the unique way to God. The monumental statement on this matter is found in John 14:6:

Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’

This declaration is decisive. And, if it were not what the people of New Testament times believed, then why did they risk all - even suffer death - in order to bring the message of Christ to the rest of the world? As a person in pursuit of original Christianity, it is not reasonable for me to set forward Jesus Christ as one of many avenues to God, when he himself has told us that he is the only way.

Why Jesus is unique –

For our message to be effective, it is essential that we tell people why Christ is “the way.” It is because Jesus brings us to God in ways that others cannot do; in ways that others do not even claim to do. It would seem clear that no one has a reasonable right to expect more from a religion than what it itself proposes to give. With that in mind, there are certain issues which people would be wise to consider as they determine their adherence to any faith. Particularly, what does that religion propose to offer?

With regard to this, varied religions do not propose to give people solutions to very essential issues of life and eternity. For example, the Eastern religions most often do not believe that human beings experience a real death. The notion of immortal souls and even migrating souls assumes that the “real person” never dies. Hence, a real resurrection is not a matter of concern or consideration. As we know, these same matters are also greatly obscured in post-biblical Christian approaches to these issues.

Hence, when it comes to matters of this present life, the Eastern religions might offer some word of wisdom. However, it is clear that they cannot be of help when it comes to the critical issues of a real death and the need for a real resurrection as the Bible teaches. They know nothing of such matters. I would think that the truth of the scriptures regarding real death and real resurrection would be of interest to many thinking people.

And, we find that Jesus Christ is the unique key to these matters. Again remember the words in John 17:3. This is eternal life - to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. And, while most have heard of the death of Jesus Christ, how many have understood that his was a “real” death that required a real resurrection by God for him to live again? How many have realized that he is the true human son of God and that God has counted his death to the good of all who will trust in him? How many have realized that Jesus was truly one of us and that by raising him from the dead God has given assurance to all men that he will also raise us from the dead (Acts 17:31)?

The Rest Meet Jesus Christ -

On this same order, we find that it is Jesus who is empowered by God to raise the dead and impart immortality to his people. In John 5:25 he declares:

Verily, verily, I say to you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.

No other religious founder or leader has been empowered by God to raise the dead. If we see the Bible as a book of truths - and many in our pluralistic world do - then let all know this, it is Jesus Christ who has been chosen by God to raise the dead. It is he who will raise the founders of other faiths and their adherents back to life.

In this same vein, by the scriptures, Jesus is the one whom God has chosen to be the judge of the rest of us. He tells us in John 5:27 that God has “given him authority to execute judgment also, **because** he is the son of man.” (Emphasis mine)

Again, in final judgment we find something not addressed by the eastern religions and the matter is confused by post-biblical Christianity which often has everyone meeting their reward before they are judged! It is time that the world heard the clear message of final

judgment. It is this message that caused Felix to tremble before Paul:

And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee (Acts 24:25).

And, I think that its time the whole world should know this: whether anybody likes it or not - Jesus is the one God has chosen to be our judge. He earned this place with God because he's the one who died for us. Not Moses, not king David, not Elijah or any of the prophets of old, not Buddha, not Mohammad - - no one else! None of these died for you - and none of these will be your judge. In fact, all of those men will be judged by Jesus. And why should I concern myself with following them - when I can follow the one who is going to judge both me & them?

Hence, we come to our title "The next thing Buddha will hear." Buddha is truly dead. He is in the realm where the scriptures tell us that they know nothing (Eccl. 9:5). Where there is neither "work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom" (Eccl. 9:10). The next thing that Buddha will hear is the voice of Jesus Christ calling him forth to judgment.

Third - Our Message of the Kingdom of God

The message of the kingdom of God as it was proclaimed by Jesus was and is unique upon the earth. This is a message of unparalleled hope that would, I think, be of interest to people of all backgrounds.

And, Jesus Christ is central to this aspect of our message as well. Notice it is relationship with him - not any other religious founder or leader - that brings us entrance into that kingdom. Paul tells us in Romans 8:17 that:

...and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ; in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Who shall inherit the kingdom of God? It is those who are the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul tells the people in Galatians 3:26-27 that:

...for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

And while indeed there is an exclusivity in the matter of coming to God through Jesus, we must also tell the world that the call to this kingdom through Christ is “all inclusive.” Everyone of every nation is invited to share in these wonderful things. No one is excluded! The decision to follow Christ is then a choice that anyone can make. Paul goes on to say in Galatians 3:28:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

The people of the religions of this world must be challenged to realize that they may follow whatever faith that they may choose. However, if they desire an unending life in the kingdom of God, Jesus Christ is the only way they will find that. We need to make people aware that entrance into the kingdom is dependent upon relationship to the one God has appointed to be king of that kingdom. Allegiance to the kingdom and allegiance to its king are indivisible. Peter declared in Acts 10:36:

You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ. He is Lord of all.

Let us go forth and tell the world that same message. God has made him to be Lord over all and for all time.

III. Conclusion -

A great number of people on our globe profess no faith in Christ at all. Perhaps some have been put off by professing Christians that have wrought evil things in the name of Christ. Others simply may not have heard this word of the gospel of the kingdom. We may see these things as insurmountable problems or as limitless opportunities. I chose to see the latter.

I do not fear a world of pluralism in the sense of a level playing field where many ideas can be heard. On that field, our message will be extraordinary and strong. We have the singular advantage of being able to bring to the world a clearer, more meaningful understanding of great matters than traditional post-biblical Christianity has been able to bring.

I am persuaded that if the world heard God's word rightly presented, many would believe. And, perhaps they would more readily embrace the truths I have outlined above than some Christians who tend to be stubborn and unyielding in their resistance to considering anything other than what they have already believed.

Given a level playing field, our faith becomes most impressive. We do not need political advantage or social coercion in order to advance our cause. We can proceed with all kindness and love. I believe our message is so wonderful, reasonable and scripturally sound, that all it requires is to be presented in wisdom and that message itself will accomplish great things.

IV. A Brief Exhortation –

In conclusion, I ask your permission to exhort us all today. My exhortation goes to the matter of attitude toward the challenges before us. I mention attitude because I think it is most central to going forward. How many armies have gone out and won wars with the battle cry "We're going to lose!!" We must go forward fully persuaded that with God's help - we can win. As I said earlier, it is a good day and we have the most amazing message on earth. What we must set in order is our own attitude in going forward. And, there are three things that I am thinking about in particular:

First - Let us be sure that we are proceeding in love toward all people. Christ did not die for a few. He did not die for the "good people." Paul writes that he died for sinners of whom he declares himself to have been "chief" (1 Timothy 1:15). Remember, God so loved "the world" that he gave his son (John 3:16). And the scripture tells us that without Christ, all are under sin - both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 3:9). We must love the people that God has loved. That is everyone!

If we are not proceeding with the love of God toward all people - we will not do well at accomplishing the work of God. And, we must never forget that our ultimate goal is not just to win arguments. Our ultimate goal is to win the hearts and minds of people. And as someone observed, "People don't care how much you know - until they know how much you care."

Second - We must speak with confidence. People will seldom will take more confidence in what you are saying than what you yourself seem to have. We do not suffer for lack of a wonderful and powerful message. We do sometimes suffer because we ourselves lack sufficient confidence in presenting that message.

There is genuinely a power in the word of God that can be persuasive to people of all backgrounds. But, it must be the same pure - accurate - living word which turned the world upside down in New Testament times - if we expect the world to be turned upside down today. It cannot just be words on paper - it must be words in our hearts and in our minds.

And if you lack personal confidence because you lack understanding or strength in the word - Go! Go where the word is spoken with clarity! Get into an environment where people are in the word. And get in there with them. It's that important.

Third - We must all speak the word clearly. We have a saying in Tennessee: "Plain talk is easily understood." It is certain that if we speak with words easily understood, all then can understand. And, if there is anything to be learned from the approach of the people of the scriptures it is that they did not "sugar coat" or water down the word of God. They did not apologize for the truth. Neither should we! If we say that we love people, then we must recognize that real love tells people the truth.

God bless you all. And God bless our wonderful cause for the kingdom of God.