

WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN - Part seven - Teaching #s1234 & 1235

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WHY I BELIEVE CHRISTIANITY IS UNIQUE AND TRUE IN A WORLD FULL OF OTHER RELIGIOUS OPTIONS

I read two very significant items this past week. Both of them touch on the theme of today's teaching on religious pluralism. Listen to these words **John Piper** preached in a sermon in August, 1995. They're even more urgently in need of hearing today than fourteen years ago:

"We live in a world that is immensely different from the world of John Bunyan, 300 years ago, or George Whitefield, 200 years ago, or Dwight L. Moody, 100 years ago. One of the differences hit me this week when I went with my son Abraham to the Barnes and Noble Bookstore. It captures in the space of a half a city block the overwhelming, uncontrollable, ever-expanding diversity of our culture. Every topic, every science, every hobby, every vocation, every sport, every philosophy, every religion you can think of is represented - most of them, not just with a book or two, but with whole sections of books."

"What makes the diversity feel aggressive and assertive is that all the thousands of viewpoints and philosophies and worldviews and religions are packaged in slick, colorful, attractive, professional covers. This gives the feel that there is a powerful industry and movement behind almost every one of the 50,000 ideas competing for your attention and allegiance."

"I thought to myself: This is the world where we stand up - or not - and proclaim the supremacy of Christ. Bunyan and Whitefield and Moody struggled to make Christ known in a much less complex, less pluralistic, less diverse atmosphere. Today the alternatives to Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life are many, not few - near, not far - aggressive, not passive - and handsome instead of homely. They are aggressively marketed. And if you don't read, they are on tape and you can use a headphone to try them out."

"We need to be aware of this. And we need to test our faith in the face of it. Do we really believe in the uniqueness and supremacy of Jesus Christ? Or did we just fall into this particular religious option through tradition, or family, or social pressure."

Then, the very same day, I came across some very disturbing words summarizing the most recent poll of **George Barna**. They're contained in his book (and video), **"Morality And the Church"**:

"Americans unanimously denounced the September 11 terrorist attacks as a textbook example of evil, suggesting that there is a foundational belief in an absolute standard of right and wrong. Subsequent research, however, has shown that in the aftermath of the attacks, only a minority of Americans believes in the existence of absolute moral truth. Even more surprising, the data from a pair of nationwide studies conducted by the Barna Research Group of Ventura, California showed that less than one out of three born again Christians adopt the notion of absolute moral truth. The surveys also found that few Americans turn to their faith as the primary guide for their moral and ethical decisions."

"In two national surveys conducted by Barna Research, one among adults and one among teenagers, people were asked if they believe that there are moral absolutes that are unchanging, or that moral truth is relative to the circumstances. By a 3-to-1 margin (that's 64% vs. 22%) adults said truth is always relative to the person and their situation. The perspective was even more lopsided among teenagers, 83% of whom said moral truth depends on the circumstances, and only 6% of whom said moral truth is absolute."

"In addition, Barna Research noted that substantial numbers of Christians believe that activities such as abortion, gay sex, cohabitation, drunkenness and viewing pornography are morally acceptable."

Barna states, *"Without some firm and compelling basis for suggesting that such acts are inappropriate, people are left with philosophies such as 'if it feels good, do it,' 'everyone else is doing it,' or, 'as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else, it's permissible.' In fact, the alarmingly fast decline of moral foundations among our young people has culminated in a one-word worldview: 'whatever.' The result is a mentality* (and here's where I'm going with all of

this) *that esteems pluralism, relativism, tolerance, and diversity without critical reflection on the implications of particular views and actions.*"

Barna continues, ***"Just one out of ten of our country's born again teenagers believe in absolute moral truth - a statistic that is nearly identical to that of non-Christian teens. Christian families, educators and churches must prioritize this matter if the Christian community hopes to have any distinctiveness in our culture. The virtual disappearance of this cornerstone of the Christian faith - that is, God has communicated a series of moral principles in the Bible that are meant to be the basis of our thoughts and actions, regardless of our preferences, feelings, or situations - is probably the best indicator of the waning strength of the Christian Church in America today."***

Barna continues citing exactly what we studied in the very first teaching in this series ("Why I Believe in Absolute Truth") - ***"...Continuing to preach more sermons, teach more Sunday School classes and enroll more people in Bible study groups won't solve the problem since most of these people don't accept the basis of the principles being taught in those venues. The failure to address this issue at its root, and to do so quickly and persuasively, will undermine the strength of the church for at least another full generation, and probably longer."***

As I said, many of you will remember I already addressed the subject of relativism in the very first message of this series - ***"Why I Believe In Absolute Truth."*** I said at that point that I wanted to deal with that subject first because there was ***no point*** in covering anything else until people believed in absolute truth. And, as Barna's words again prove, the church is now where ***near*** convinced of the reality of absolute truth in areas of religious belief and morality.

All of this leads into the topic of today's teaching - ***"Why I Believe Christianity Is Uniquely True In A World Full Of Religions."*** Obviously the subjects of ***relativism*** and ***religious pluralism*** are related. If absolute truth is up for grabs, any one religion is just as good as another. Shop around until you find one you like, or ignore all of them flat-out. It makes no difference. It's all up to you.

1) **HOW DID WE SINK SO FAR SO QUICKLY?**

There must be others who wonder about this. ***How did we get so mixed up so quickly?*** How did one generation become so blind to the mess they were sinking into? I think there are several factors that were used by the spirit of the age to blind young minds to the truth:

- a) ***First, no generation in history has had so much exposure to the peoples of the world and its religions right on their doorstep.*** No generation has had the opportunity to see ***how good and moral and kind many of these people are.*** Their false belief systems haven't turned them into satanic demons. They are thoughtful, patient, socially involved and friendly.

So how can their beliefs be all that bad? These people, for the most part, are just as nice as we are. Sometimes they're nicer. So why should we reject their religion out of hand? When one generation has had the privilege more than any other of developing relationships with the people of the world's religions it changes the way they evaluate their governing convictions. It is very difficult to think of ***friends*** as ***pagans.***

- b) ***Second, the progress of science and technology has caused people to make a sharp distinction between the public world of factual truth and the private world of values and preferences.*** So a generation has grown up to think there are two separate ***kinds*** of truth. There is the ***hard, factual data*** of the classroom and the laboratory, and then there is the private inner religious world of ***preference and opinion.*** This is the religious system of Oprah, and because it dominates the media, and because we're now ***more*** shaped by television than God's Word, we find it hard to denounce this division in ***kinds*** of truth.

- c) ***Third, for the past decade especially, the contemporary church has been fostering the idea that religion is primarily of therapeutic value, while minimizing the importance of its doctrinal content.*** Most commonly, the whole emergent church movement downplays, not only the ***importance***, but even the possibility of the ***existence*** of knowable doctrinal truth.

This change has invaded the church with incredible swiftness. And it is accelerated by the market driven religion of television. The value of this religion is measured by its **present effect on the quality of one's life**. Every week - every day - thousands of people make decisions for Christ because they think - and are **told** - that they will find peace of mind, or higher self-esteem, or freedom from fear and worry. **Religion will solve their problems.**

Naturally, as a result of this, people have come to measure the validity of a religion by its ability to help them cope with life in this world. And if one religion helps you, while another helps me, then who am I to tell you my religion is better than yours?

- d) **Finally, we've allowed the media and the educators to convince us that we are intolerant people if we don't accept the other religions of the world as being of equal worth to our own.** With the cleverness of a magician's slight of hand, two separate issues have been blended into one so as to confuse the Christian mind. We've been brainwashed into believing that just because we should **love** our neighbor we should also accept the **thinking** and the **values** and the **world-view** of our neighbor.

This is obviously false. We certainly should not **discriminate** against anyone on the basis of race or religion. Not ever. We should, in fact, protect the right of our neighbors to embrace any religion they freely choose. But it's a huge leap from recognizing this to saying all the **ideas** and **doctrines** of one person's religion are as true as any other. That's the deceptive lie of religious pluralism. If my neighbor says there are many gods and I say there is only one, we can both be **wrong** (perhaps there is no God at all), but we can never in a million years both be **right**.

2) WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

If the problem is as overwhelming as John Piper says, and if the situation in the church is even half as bleak as George Barna says, what can we do? Is there really no certain word from the New Testament about this crucial issue? I believe with all my heart that there is:

Acts 4:1-12 - "And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, [2] greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. [3] And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. [4] But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand. [5] On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, [6] with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. [7] And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" [8] Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, [9] if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, [10] let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. [11] This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. [12] And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

You would never think that one miracle could lead up to these powerful words from Peter. Yet the background to the arrest of Peter and John and Peter's explosive words in verse 12 is precisely that. A lame man was healed as Peter and John were on their way to the temple.

And as Peter **explains** the miracle in chapter three, the priests and Sadducees and temple guard all realize that Peter's explanation has strong implications for everyone - implications they couldn't live with. They thought they were going to hear a little compassionate story of a lame man who could now walk. But they heard a lot **more** than just that in Peter's explanation.

They heard Peter say the **healer** of the lame man was the **"Author of life" (3:15)**. They heard Peter say that Jesus was **raised from the dead by God (3:15)**. They heard Peter say Jesus was the fulfillment of 1500 year old prophecy **(3:22)**. They heard Peter say that even now, Jesus is waiting in heaven until the time comes that **He will**

return and restore everything in this world to the way God intends it to be (3:21). And they heard Peter say that, in the meantime, it was God's intention that **all the families of the earth be blessed** through Jesus Christ (3:25). That means families in North America, families in Iraq, families in Israel, and families in China and India, and Russia.

Make no mistake about it. **That's** why Peter and John end up in prison. Nobody cared too much about a lame man walking. That, in itself, was **not** the problem. Peter's **explanation** was the problem.

The next morning the rulers and elders and scribes came to ask Peter and John, **"...by what power or by what name did you do this (7)?"** How did this man end up whole? And the thing to notice is the way Peter only **touches** on the subject of the lame man at all. Look carefully again at Peter's words:

Acts 4:8-12 - "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, [9] if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, [10] let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. [11] This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. [12] And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Notice something very significant. The lame man is mentioned **once** in **verse 9**. That's it. Then Peter moves on immediately to the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. And then, in verse 11, he moves on to give reference to the words from **Psalms 118:22** - "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

Peter pictures a group of builders. Today we would compare them to stone masons or perhaps trained brick layers. They gather around picking up the stones they are going to work into the building. They pick up a stone and feel it isn't usable at all. They cast it aside and go on without it.

Peter says that's what these religious people had done with Jesus. They had picked up the stone called Jesus and felt He wasn't really all that important. There were **other** stones that would function better. Jesus wasn't that important. So they threw the 'Jesus stone' aside.

But God, the chief architect of this world's history, has come along and raised up the Jesus stone. He not only **uses** the Jesus stone, but He sets it up as the chief **cornerstone** - the foundation on which the whole structure rests.

Then Peter draws out the full **implications** of this in **verse 12** - "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Now, the question we need to answer this morning is this: **Did Peter - and did the Holy Spirit who inspired these words - really mean this?** Did he really mean there was no other way to be saved **at all?** To make it clear Peter uses the phrase "under heaven" - "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Notice carefully - not just, "no other name in Israel," or "no other name in Canada," or "no other name in Iraq," or "no other name in India." No. That's not what Peter says. Pick any place that has heaven above it. Pick any place that has sky over it. Right there, in **that** place **Jesus** is the only way for people to be saved.

But there is something else even more important that we must see in Peter's words. Some people - and a growing number of evangelical Christians - say something like this: "**Fine. I agree that Jesus is the only way to be saved. But you don't have to know Him to benefit from the salvation He offers.**"

In other words, if you are a faithful Hindu, or Muslim, or Spiritist, or Jew, you are saved by the work of Jesus on the cross, whether you know it or not. There is salvation in no one else, true. But you don't have to **believe** on Him in order to be **saved** by Him.

Usually these people cite the example of saints in the Old Testament - people like David and Abraham and Moses and such - who never **knew** Jesus Christ, but were covered by His coming sacrifice on the cross. If **these** people

could be saved without believing in Jesus, why can't faithful Muslims and Hindus and Jews be saved without knowing Jesus Christ as well?

But this is a faulty and dangerous thinking. Here's why:

- a) ***It's not an accurate step of logic to move from God's chosen people responding in faith and obedience to the revelation almighty God gave them, to the people who are committed to the practice of religions that are polytheistic, pantheistic, or deny what has now been fully revealed about Jesus Christ, God the Son.***

This is the whole point of God's calling of the Jews in the Old Testament. They were called **out of** and **away from** the religions of the nations around them. Those religions didn't reveal the true God.

True, these Old Testament saints didn't have the revelation of Jesus Christ that we have today, but they **did** know that they were called **out** of the religions of the nations around them.

And here's the important point. There was no hope for salvation, even for these chosen people, if they **refused** to leave these false gods. In other words, pick whatever part of the Bible you want to use - Old Testament or New - God has **always** refused to mix His revelation in with the religions of the nations.

These Old Testament saints may not have had the kind of understanding of God's salvation you and I have, and God may not have required the same degree of response that He requires of you and me, but even these Old Testament saints knew God had planned to save and deliver them. They had to offer all of those sacrifices in **faith** that God would redeem and cleanse them from their sin. They knew they couldn't just turn to **any** God of their own choosing for salvation. That's why they had to leave the gods of the nations.

And they also knew they couldn't save **themselves**. That's what all those animal sacrifices pictured. Then they had all those prophecies, starting right back in the book of Genesis, that God would send One who would crush the serpent's head. Then Moses and Isaiah and all the prophets talked about the coming of the Servant of God who would die for the sins of many.

- b) ***What God requires now that Jesus has been raised from the dead is radically different from what He required of Old Testament saints.***

Acts 17:30-31 - "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, [31] because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

These are Paul's words to the **religious** people of the day. These are his words to the thinkers and scholars. There was a day when people didn't have the kind of complete revelation we have in Christ Jesus. God has now done something He hadn't done before. He has given proof of His intent by raising Jesus Christ from the dead. Jesus is the coming judge. Jesus is the one to whom people must give account. God has proved it by raising Him from the grave.

But there's one other point that is frequently, I think, overlooked.

- c) ***Peter seems to have this objection in mind because he specifically says there is "....no other name.... by which we must be saved"(Acts 4:12).*** In other words, Peter is saying something more than that there is no other **source** by which you can be saved even if you use some **other** name. The point of saying there is no other **name** is that we are **only** saved by calling on the **Name** of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is very important. The Name of Jesus is the **focus** of saving faith. If you want to see it even more strongly you can go to the teaching of the Apostle Paul on the very same subject:

Romans 10:13-15 - "For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." [14] But how

are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? [15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

Here again, the reference is made to the *name* of the Lord. People need to call upon the *name* of the Lord. But Paul says there is a big problem. There are people who don't *know* about the *name* of the Lord. That is the whole point of Paul's first two questions in the sequence of these verses - **verse 14** - **"But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?"**

Not only do these people not *believe* - they have not even *heard*. They know nothing about Jesus. They may have their own religion - probably they do. What are we to do with them? Do we assume they are covered by the cross of Jesus anyway? **Not according to Paul**. Paul makes it clear that these people who haven't heard *must* hear. They simply must be reached with the news about the *name* of Jesus, whatever the cost and whatever the sacrifice.

Why? Why must they hear. We must be absolutely clear about the answer to this question. The future of millions of souls is at stake. They must hear because **"there is no other name under heaven by which they must be saved!"**

Listen, if we're going to be **Biblical Christians** in this pluralistic age we simply must come to terms with this conviction. It calls for courageous, Biblical tough-mindedness.

John Piper is right: **"This is the kind of truth that either makes converts or makes enemies. This is not a live-and-let-live truth."**

You don't drift into this kind of radical, Christ-centered, passionate faith. You can't get it from the faith of your parents or your friends. It takes great courage and diligence to hold on to this truth. But it's also the life that brings glory to God and joy to the heart.