

Questioning Christianity

“How can there possibly be only way to God?”

John 14:1-6

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 18, 2015

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bible's to John 14.
- In this series on *Questioning Christianity* we are raising some of the biggest questions people have about Christianity. Today our question is, ***“how can Christians possibly say Jesus is the only way to God?”*** This question can be summed up in one word: exclusivity. People struggle with the claim that Jesus alone can bring us to God because it is so exclusive.
 - But I want to be a bit more specific than that because when people bring this up it is usually stated like, ***“How can you possibly believe that there is only one path to God?”*** or ***“Are you seriously telling me that Christians are right and others are wrong?”***
 - Within that tone and those questions is the feeling that it is arrogant to believe there is one exclusive way to God and that it leads you to be intolerant of those who believe differently.
- Oprah Winfrey summed it up well on one of her shows. She said, ***“There are millions of ways to be a human being and many paths to what you call ‘God’...There couldn’t possibly be just one way.”***¹
 - So let’s tackle this question in three parts. First, the exclusive claim that Jesus makes. Second, the exclusive claims that we all make. And finally, the exclusive claim that makes us humble.

THE EXCLUSIVE CLAIM THAT JESUS MAKES

- Let’s begin then by talking about **(SHOW SLIDE)** the exclusive claim that Jesus makes. In this first point let’s just clarify what Jesus’ claim actually is.
 - When people look at Jesus’ life they find him to be unbelievably humble. He is so approachable, so tender, so caring toward people whom society looked down on like the poor and the prostitutes. That’s why people like Gandhi, Bono, and Queen Elizabeth, admire and revere Jesus.
 - TIME magazine stated that ***“the single most powerful figure-not merely in these two millenniums but in all human history-has been Jesus of Nazareth.”***²
- What is fascinating however is that Jesus will not allow people to simply admire him. He is always pushing the envelope on how people should think of him. Look at the astounding claim that Jesus makes in verse 6.
 - **READ 6** - ***“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”***
- Note carefully that **(SHOW SLIDE)** Jesus does *not* say, ***“I have come to point out the way to God.”*** Many people have claimed this. Mohammed claimed to be a prophet who points the way to Allah. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, claimed to point the way to God.

¹ The Oprah Winfrey Show, 2/15/2007.

² Time Magazine, December 6, 1999.

- But Jesus does not simply say he came to point out the way to God. He says, **(SHOW SLIDE)** *“I am the way...no one comes to the Father except through me.”* In the original Greek in which this was written it is actually stated even more forcefully. Jesus literally says, *“I, I am the way.”*
 - So Jesus says that it is not through following certain teachings or doing certain things that you can come to God – Jesus says the way to God the Father is through himself.
- But notice also that **(SHOW SLIDE)** Jesus does not say, *“I am a way to God.”* He does not say, *“I am one way among many by which anyone may come to God the Father.”* That would still be a massive claim but Jesus goes much further. **(SHOW SLIDE)** He says, *“I am the way...no one comes to the Father except through me.”*
 - You see behind Jesus claim is the Bible’s story that we have all turned away from God and are therefore separated from God. The Bible calls this sin. Jesus claims to be *the* way because he claims that he alone can deal with our sin problem that keeps us from God.
 - On the cross he took the punishment that we deserve for our sins so that all who receive him can be reconciled back to God.
- Jesus claims to be *the* way to God because who else can forgive your sins? If you asked Mohammed to forgive you he would tear his robe and say, *“Blasphemy. I cannot do such a thing.”* Moses would say the same thing. If you ask a Hindu priest about the possibility of having your sins forgiven he would say, *“Impossible! The law of karma will give you what you deserve.”*
 - That is why one man states, *“If all we need is a teacher of enlightenment, the Buddha will do; if all we need is a collection of gods for every occasion and need and hope, Hinduism will do; if all we need is a tribal deity, any tribal deity will do; if all we need is a lawgiver, Moses will do; if all we need is a set of rules and a way of devotion, Muhammad or Joseph Smith will do; if all we need is inspiration and insight into the sovereign self, Oprah will do; but if we need a savior, only Jesus will do.”*³
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Jesus claims to be the only way to God because he alone can save us from our sin that separates us from God.
- People often speak about God as the top of a mountain. Religion and spirituality are then portrayed as the many different paths that lead to the top of the mountain. The point of the image is to say that in the end all paths make it to the top (to God) and therefore no one single path can be called *the* path.
 - But what if it is more like a maze than a mountain? What if humanity is lost in a giant maze? There are many paths to follow in a maze but there is only one path that ultimately gets you out.
 - Jesus is not saying that everything non-Christians believe is wrong. But what he is saying is that all claims must be measured against his claim. There are indeed many paths to walk in the maze but Jesus is claiming that he is *the* path that will lead us out of the maze and into the presence of God the Father.

³ <http://news.sbts.edu/2014/04/24/mohler-at-t4g-conference-on-evangelism-exclusivity-makes-the-gospel-more-beautiful/>

ALL WORLD RELIGIONS MAKE EXCLUSIVE CLAIMS

- Now all we have done so far is clarify Jesus' exclusive claim but at the end of the day this is precisely what people find so exclusive and arrogant and what can lead to intolerance.
 - Well, as we move to the second point I want you to show you that it is not nearly as arrogant as you may think because we all make exclusive claims that can lead us to intolerance.
 - Let's turn now in the second place to talk about **(SHOW SLIDE)** the exclusive claims that we all make.
- First, we need to say that **(SHOW SLIDE)** all world religions make exclusive claims.
 - This may strike you as odd because we often hear that all religions basically believe the same thing. This is a very attractive idea because it means everyone's views are equally valid.
- The problem is that the religions themselves do not believe they are the same as each other. They are superficially the same but they are fundamentally different. Take the basic question of who or what God or the Divine is. Aside from Buddhism, every world religion agrees that the Divine exists but every religion makes exclusive claims about the Divine that directly contradict each other.
 - In Hinduism the Divine is impersonal but can be approached through 330 million different statues that represent gods. In direct contradiction to this, Judaism says there is only one God who is a personal being and this personal God absolutely prohibits making statues for use in worship.
 - Christians believe Jesus is the eternal Son of God who is worshipped as God. Islam emphatically rejects this stating that God has no Son.
 - In Buddhism and Hinduism there is no forgiveness from the impersonal Divine. There is only the ruthless law of karma. Karma says, **"you sin, you pay."** In direct contrast to this Christianity says you can have your sins forgiven through Jesus. Jesus says, **"You sin, I pay."**
- The Indian-born writer, Ravi Zacharias, states, ***"All religions are not the same...At the heart of every religion is an uncompromising commitment to a particular way of defining who God is or is not and accordingly, of defining life's purpose. Anyone who claims that all religions are the same betrays not only an ignorance of religions but also a caricatured view of even the best known ones. Every religion at its core is exclusive."***⁴
 - The Dalai Lama agrees. In his book *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight* he writes, ***"Among spiritual faiths, there are many different philosophies, some just opposite to each other on certain points. Buddhists do not accept a creator; Christians base their philosophy on that theory."***⁵
- So you see it is not just Jesus who makes exclusive claims. Every religion does. The one thing that all religions agree on is that they are different from each other.
 - It may surprise you to hear a Christian pastor say this but this exclusivity can most certainly lead to arrogance and intolerance.

⁴ Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods*, 7.

⁵ The Dalai Lama, *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*, 45.

- Religious people can act like they are the good people who are in with God while looking down their noses at the bad non-religious people and the bad religious people who, in their view, do not rightly worship God.
 - All world religions make exclusive claims.

ALL SECULAR PEOPLE MAKE EXCLUSIVE CLAIMS

- Well, it is at this point that most West coast people will say, ***“That is exactly why I am not religious. It is too exclusive and arrogant in thinking you are right while others are wrong.”*** This thinking helps explain why British Columbia ranks number one in Canada in terms of people who state they have no religion.
 - But here is the thing. It is not just world religions that make exclusive claims. **(SHOW SLIDE)** All secular people also make exclusive claims. I am using the word “secular” in the sense of non-religious.
- At this point most secular people will use the story of the blind men and the elephant. A king brings in some blind men and has them touch a certain part of the elephant. One feels the trunk and says, “It’s a tree.” Another feels the tail and says, “It’s a rope.” Since they are blind they all have different explanations but the wise king can see the truth that they are all touching the same elephant.
 - Secular people then say the blind men are the world religions and the elephant is God. The obvious point is that religious people need to stop being so arrogant as to think their exclusive claims are correct because the obvious truth is that they all have a part of the truth.
- Again this sounds very attractive but many people fail to realize how arrogant this story really is. Think about it. The secular person is claiming to be the all-wise king who alone can see what the religious people are blind to.
 - The secular person is claiming to stand above it all, to have enlightened knowledge that religious people are blindly ignorant of it.
 - And so we often find secular people looking down their noses and making fun of those poor religious people who just don’t get it.
- But it is fair to ask who gave secular people such an enlightened viewpoint? Why should we assume that secular people can see the truth of religion better than the religious people themselves?
 - Humility would require that if we are going to use this story then all people, including secular people, are blind and trying to make sense of their experience.
- Let me press further with this idea that secular people, like religious people, always make exclusive claims.
 - If you say, ***“I don’t believe in the God of religion. I believe in a god who is all loving and does not judge people for who they sleep with or what they do.”*** But don’t you see that you are making a very exclusive claim to know what God is like and not like. How do you know God is like that?
 - You are also excluding the billions of people who believe God *will* hold us accountable for how we live. You have your own exclusive view of God.
- This is why some people say, ***“Well I just don’t believe absolute truth exists at all. I don’t believe there is one truth that everyone must believe. People can***

believe what they want.” Again that sounds so humble but that statement is one of the biggest, most exclusive, and narrow claims there is.

- It is an very big claim because you are saying that the one true thing in the universe that you know for sure is that there is no truth.
 - It is also extremely exclusive because you are saying that anyone who believes in truth is wrong.
 - And you are being very narrow because virtually everyone in the history of the world, and the vast majority of people alive today, do believe that truth exists.
 - So you see the supposed openness ends up being such an exclusive claim that it excludes just about every person who has ever lived.
- So do you see the point? We are all exclusivists. It is impossible not to be. Every time you claim something is true you are by definition claiming that its opposite is false.
- The follow up is to say that any exclusive claim can lead to arrogance and intolerance. Religious people can think of themselves as the good people and look down their noses at the bad secular people. But secular people can think of themselves as the enlightened ones who understand what those ignorant religious people don’t get. Secular people can then become very intolerant of religious people.
 - In summary, we are all exclusivists and we are therefore all prone to an arrogance that leads to intolerance.

THE EXCLUSIVE CLAIM THAT MAKES HUMILITY

- So is there any way out of this? Are there any exclusive claims that lead to humility instead of pride? In the final place let’s talk about **(SHOW SLIDE)** the exclusive claim that makes us humble.
- In this third point I want to show you that among all the exclusive claims of the world, Jesus’ claim is unique in that at its very core it opposes pride and demands a humility that respects even those who harshly disagree with you. Jesus’ claim has the power to make you humble.
- You see if you follow the exclusive claims of religion or spirituality you get a list of things that you must do to make yourself acceptable to the Divine. It might involve prayer, meditation, and rules to follow. **(SHOW SLIDE)** Religion says, *“I obey and therefore God accepts me.”*
- The trouble with this is that when it is all based on what you do, you can easily feel like you are a good person because you have performed well.
 - You can then feel superior to all those “bad people” who are not religious and treat them with intolerance. **(SHOW SLIDE)** Pride is therefore inherent within religion because it is based on how well a person obeys.
- As we have seen though the same thing applies to the exclusive claims of secularism. In secular thinking we make our own rules and definitions of what is good. **(SHOW SLIDE)** Secularism says, *“I am a good person therefore I am acceptable to myself, society, and the Divine.”*
- Again though, the trouble with this is that when you make up your own standards for what is good you easily feel like a good person because you attain your own standards.

- You can then feel superior to all those bad people who fail to meet your standards or who are not as enlightened as you are. **(SHOW SLIDE)** Pride is inherent within secularism because it is also based on how good a person is.
- This is where Jesus' exclusive claim is utterly unique. As we have seen, Jesus' exclusive claim is that no one can get to God on the basis of their own goodness. None of us are good enough. Jesus claims that we can only come to God the Father on the basis of his goodness.
 - The good news of Christianity is that Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He lived the life we should have lived. He died the death we should have died. **(SHOW SLIDE)** So Christianity says, *"Because of what Jesus has done, I am accepted by God, and seek to obey out of this acceptance."*
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Humility is therefore inherent within Christianity because it is not based on what we have done but on the free gift of what Jesus has done for us.
- Now do not misunderstand. There is no question that Christians can act arrogantly and with intolerance but this is not because they are taking Jesus's exclusive claims too seriously. It is because they are not taking Jesus' claim seriously enough.
 - When you see that you are not good enough to be accepted by God but that Jesus has made you good enough you cannot think of yourself as better than anyone else.
 - When everything is a gift you cannot be prideful because you did not earn it. And so your life is not based on how well you achieve. Your whole life is based on grace. And when you see how God has been so loving toward you and treated you so well even when you don't deserve it, it changes how you relate to others.
- It's like that familiar scene from *Les Misérables*. Jean Valjean, the bitter and hardened ex-convict steals some silver plates from a bishop who had kindly taken him into his house. He is caught by the police and brought back to the bishop's home. Valjean expects to be locked up for the rest of his days.
 - But in an act of grace the Bishop rushes up and in the book he says, *"Ah there you are!...I am glad so see you. But! I gave you the candlesticks also, which are silver like the rest, and would bring two hundred francs. Why did you not take them along with your plates?" Jean Valjean opened his eyes and looked at the bishop with an expression which no human tongue could describe."*
- The bishop gives him the candlesticks and when the police are gone the bishop says, *"Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man....Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."*⁶
 - This act of grace liberates Valjean from his self-absorbed ego. Since he has been shown so much grace he starts to act graciously toward others. He extends mercy to an orphaned child and raises her as his own. He

⁶ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, (Everyman's Library), pgs 111-112.

improves the socio-economic state of an entire town. And he forgives a man who relentlessly tries to destroy his life.

- There is no question that Jesus' claim is exclusive. But I am asking you to consider that among all the exclusive claims of the world, Jesus' claim has the power to make you humble, the power to free you from your ego, the power to make you into a loving and gracious person even toward those who harshly disagree with you.
 - If we think that Jesus' exclusive claim leads to arrogance and intolerance we have not understood it for Jesus proved his humility with his life.
 - He did not just teach about loving others, he loved them. He did not just teach about service, he modeled it in every way. He did not just teach about praying for those who hate you, he modeled it when, during his crucifixion, he asked God to forgive the sins of the very people who drove the nails through his hands and feet.

CONCLUSION

- So what will you do with Jesus today? He will not allow you just to admire him. Will you believe his claim? Will you come to him asking him to forgive your sins so that you can be restored to God the Father?