

## No Other Name

*“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12*

Perhaps, the greatest offense of the gospel is its exclusive truth claim. It may be the single most difficult issue confronting both believer and unbeliever. Even modern objections against the miraculous and soul-searching questions about pain and suffering seem to pale in insignificance, when compared to the claim made by Jesus, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6).

A 1999 Presbyterian Panel survey discovered that “a sizeable number of Presbyterians believe that other religious traditions have parity with Christianity. More than a third of members, 3 in 10 elders, and even 9 percent of pastors *strongly agree or agree* that ‘all the different religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth.’” The survey also concluded that sizeable percentages of Presbyterians, anywhere from 46 percent of pastors to 30 percent of members, strongly disagree or disagree that ‘only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved’” (Jack Marcum, *Is Jesus the only Way? Presbyterians Today*, May, 2002, 5). Does this mean that nearly one half of Presbyterian pastors and a third of the members would challenge Jesus’ claim to the only way to the Father? It would appear that it does.

## The Opposition

Peter and John “were teaching the people” and “proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead,” when a coalition of priests, officials, and Sadducees intervened. Luke describes the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law as being “greatly disturbed.” Allied together in common cause against the Gospel, they represented the social, political and religious authority of Jewish culture. For various reasons the apostles’ proclamation of the Gospel succeeded in offending and threatening all three groups.

The rulers presided over the religious affairs of the people and the peace and harmony of the temple. The captain of the temple guard was second only to the High Priest, and was responsible, along with the priests, for maintaining order. Three things must have made the temple authorities nervous. First, the powerful testimony of a poor beggar, known to be lame from birth, running and leaping and praising God. Second, Peter’s bold and unequivocal proclamation of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who was crucified by the people but glorified by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They had killed the author of life, he contended, but God had raised him from the dead. Third, all of this was happening in the temple courts, in the place called Solomon’s Colonnade, against a backdrop that symbolized the heart of Judaism and literally thousands of people were responding to the message. This whole situation threatened to get out-of-hand like a wild fire.

The Sadducees may have taken the lead role in this opposition, just as they taken the lead role in the crucifixion of Jesus. They were the ruling elite, an aristocracy of privilege and power that controlled the office of the High Priest and maintained a majority among the 71 elders that made up the Sanhedrin, the senate and supreme court of the Jewish nation (Bruce, 97). They were committed to maintaining the status quo and doing nothing that would unsettle the delicate balance of power with Rome. They opposed Jesus and his disciples on practical and intellectual grounds. Their influence is clearly expressed in John's description of the Sanhedrin's debate over Jesus, when he records their concerns: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation" (Jn 11:48). On intellectual grounds, they disagreed with Jesus, as well as with the Pharisees, over the doctrine of bodily resurrection which they denied (Mk 12:18). The Sadducees opposed the Gospel on political and intellectual grounds. This upper class, power-sensitive group determined that the Gospel was out-of-sync with the spirit of the times.

The teachers of the law were also included in this complex coalition, making the opposition to the Gospel complete and representative of all the elements of the cultural establishment. Factions of Jewish society that often opposed one another, came together to oppose the Gospel. Priests, temple officials, Sadducees and Pharisees discovered their common ground in resisting the Gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Their first reaction was to seize Peter and John and put them in jail. It was too late to consider their case, so they jailed them for the night. This is one of the more obvious ways to silence believers, and it is still used today around the world with far greater frequency than we in the West realize. It must have been a dramatic scene. The healed lame man was still praising God and the temple officials were seizing Peter and John in the midst of what must have been a very large crowd. But note the relationship between success and opposition: the effectiveness of the Gospel seems proportionate to its opposition. Perhaps, when we pray for real church growth we should expect real opposition.

## **The Objections**

The religious, social and political leaders were undoubtedly well-intentioned in their opposition to the Gospel. They were endeavoring to preserve the social fabric and moral order of their culture as they knew it. This is true of contemporary attitudes toward religion and spirituality as well. There was as little patience for the exclusive truth claim of Christ in their culture as there is in our culture today. Play write George Bernard Shaw quipped, "There is only one religion in the world, though there are a hundred versions of it." America's seekers' seeker and spiritual icon Oprah Winfrey says: "One of the biggest mistakes humans make is to believe there is only one way. Actually, there are many diverse paths leading to what you call God." (quoted in *Christianity Today*, April 1, 2002, 45). When Prince Charles was questioned about religion, he said that when he becomes king, he would rather inherit the title, 'Defender of Faith,' instead of 'Defender of the Faith' and so represent all his subjects (*The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 7/1/1994).

One of the heroes of the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi, offered his conclusion to the matter in an essay entitled *All Religions Are True*. For many it seems only reasonable to conclude that The Eternal One is perceived differently in different cultures, because whatever we mean by "God" exceeds the scope of human thought, language and experience. The global village shares different and distinctive religious perceptions of the one transcendent Reality. "Religions are different roads converging to the same point," wrote Gandhi. "What does it matter if we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarreling?" (Gandhi 1938, 36; quoted in Burch, *Alternative Goals in Religion*, 1972, 111).

Today's coalition against the Gospel is complex and represents all aspects of establishment culture as it did in first century Jerusalem. The rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law, have their counterpart in today's society. They are the intellectuals, activists, professors, and religionists who see themselves as defenders of political peace, spiritual stability, intellectual freedom and social order, who oppose the Gospel on grounds of its exclusive truth claim. They are defenders of a way of life and a system of truth that is opposition to the preaching of Jesus Christ.

Today's popular perception of truth has changed. Truth is no longer fixed but fluid; it is whatever you say it is. What matters most is how one feels about the truth—what is true for you may not be true for me and what is true of me may not be true for you. Today's cultural establishment says that Jesus is just one of many ways to be spiritual, to acknowledge the Transcendent One. Other religions may or may not claim to be the only way, most do not, creating the impression that evangelical Christians are more like militant Muslims than reasonable, sensible people.

When Harvard was founded in 1636, it was dedicated, "In Christi Gloriam" ("To the Glory of Christ"). The Harvard coat of arms depicted three open books, which represented God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the concept of the book, represented the Bible. Seven years later the inscription was changed from "To the glory of Christ," to simply "Veritas" (Truth) as a shorthand way of recognizing Jesus Christ as the ultimate truth. However, overtime the meaning of the coat of arms changed. The three books no longer represented the Triune God, but the university's task of training ministers, magistrates and merchants in the three languages of antiquity--Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The meaning of "Veritas" changed as well, from the truth in Christ to a broader, generic truth. Ari Goldman writes in his book, *The Search For God At Harvard*, "The most elusive experience for me in my early days at the [Harvard] Divinity School was, to my great surprise, the Christian experience. Everybody, it seemed was trying so hard not to offend the wide diversity of people that were gathered there that Christian spirituality did not emerge. If, for example, there was a mention in class of the divinity of Jesus, the lecturer would offer an apology to the non-Christians in the room. If there was a Christian prayer offered at a convocation, you could be sure that some Buddhist meditation would follow for balance. Religious truth did not seem to exist at the Divinity School, only religious relativism" (43).

I imagine that this is also the case at the University of Chicago, where the words of Jesus are carved in stone, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." When students and visitors see that inscription it is not the truth of Jesus or the conviction that all truth is God's truth

that is being honored. It is rather, the modern notion of "truth" as an elusive goal, the endless search without a final destination. It might be more timely and honest to have inscribed in stone the words of Pilate, "What is truth?"

The very idea that the truth we celebrate in the Gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ is absolutely indispensable for the salvation of humankind is preposterous to many living in the global village. It is offensive to those who wish to celebrate tolerance and it sounds ignorant and arrogant to those committed to religious pluralism. Recently a young woman from China attended our church. Afterwards she said to her friend who had invited her, "I think Christianity is a great religion, but its not the only way." Her friend responded wisely, "If its not the only way its not a great religion." "Why?" said the young woman. "Because Christ claimed to be the only way."

In the tradition of the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law, Professor of Religion John Hick expresses his commitment to today's agenda for social cohesion, tolerance and peace:

“. . . The different streams of religious experience represent diverse awareness of the same transcendent reality, which is perceived in characteristically different ways by different human mentalities, formed by and forming different cultural histories. . . . One then sees the great world religions as different responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances. . . . The divine presence is the presence of the Eternal One to our finite human consciousness, and the human projections are the culturally conditioned images and symbols in terms of which we concretize the basic concept of deity. . . . Thus the many gods are not separate distinct divine beings, but rather different personae formed in the interaction of divine presence and human projection” (*God Has Many Names*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982, 83,11,52-53). (note that his work is published by a PC(USA) publishing house).

John Hick rejects the exclusivity of Jesus on grounds that the incarnation is but a metaphor or a figure of speech to commend Jesus as a great man. It is a poetic compliment used to describe an outstanding human being who is worth emulating. Hick explains that the incarnation is a metaphor for “embodiment”. “Jesus was so open and responsive to the heavenly Father that his life was continuous doing of God’s will, and we therefore say that God was incarnate in his life. Indeed, whenever a man or woman does God’s will, in that action God becomes incarnate within human history.”

## **The Question**

The next day the opposition, with all of its top leaders, assembled in Jerusalem. Three generations of High Priests presided, Annas (high priest in the years A. D. 6-14) and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, the present high priest, and John, one of Annas’ five sons who succeeded Caiaphas in A. D. 36 (Williams, 65). Both Annas and Caiaphas had met Jesus personally at his trial. Annas questioned Jesus first (Jn 18:13-24) and then sent him to Caiaphas who pressed Jesus, saying, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus answered, “Yes, it is as you say. But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the

Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” When Jesus said that, Caiaphas tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” And the Sanhedrin passed judgment, saying, “He is worthy of death.” (Mt 26:63-66).

What must have been going through the minds of Peter and John as they stood before these dignitaries and the Jewish ruling council? The scene is strikingly reminiscent of Jesus’ trial which had taken place only eight or nine weeks earlier. After a night in jail to think about what they had done, did they wonder if they too would be crucified? I don’t think they got much sleep that night, but not because of worry. Presumably the man who was healed was jailed with them, because he was right there with them for the trial. And I doubt whether his exuberance subsided enough to let him sleep. He probably kept Peter and John up all night singing praises to God.

I can also picture Peter and John reminding themselves of what Jesus said about being brought before “kings and governors,” “all on account of my name.” Jesus had said, “Make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life” (Lk 21:12-19). Note the paradox: the opposition will not be able to resist or contradict the message but they will be able to betray and even kill the messengers.

The question posed by the ruling elite was asked sarcastically, “By what power or what name do *people like you* do this?” Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter was ready with an answer that accomplished three important things: first, Peter’s confident and courageous response gave testimony to Jesus in a manner consistent with the resurrection of Jesus. It was not only the trial of Jesus that was fresh in their mind, but also the resurrection of Christ filled them with courage.

From their position of power and privilege these high profile, elite leaders looked down on these unschooled, ordinary men, so they were astonished at Peter’s response “and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). Peter and John’s poise, sense of presence, clarity of thought, boldness of speech, and in-depth reasoning verified that they had been with Jesus. The promise of the Holy Spirit’s guidance in difficult situations should never be used by believers as an excuse for lack of preparation or for careless thinking or for rudeness. Peter’s answer is in the character of the mind of Christ and an outstanding example of grace under pressure. Some believers use the promise of the Holy Spirit to justify an anti-intellectual attitude or to excuse their cultural biases. There’s no hint in Peter’s speech of a “freedom to be me” attitude. What stands out about him, is not his Galilean culture, but his relationship to Jesus.

The second important accomplishment was Peter’s emphasis on the goodness of the Gospel. Peter reflected not only the manner of Jesus but also the ethic of Jesus. He had Jesus’ poise and his position; he reflected his Lord’s attitude and his actions. It was after all “an act of kindness” that precipitated this trial. The situation recalls the time when Jesus asked the people who had

picked up stones to stone him, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” (Jn 10:32). If the Gospel is threatening it is not because it causes harm, provokes fear or in any way endangers people. The Gospel is only threatening when people love the darkness instead of the light, because their actions are evil (Jn 3:19). It is only threatening when people call good evil and evil good (Isa 5:20).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ was never meant to be imposed on people. The doctrines of religious freedom and tolerance are based on the Gospel of Grace. Christians seek neither to intimidate nor indoctrinate. It is not their purpose to impose the truth of God on others. What many American Christians fail to understand is the difference between Christianizing America and living for Christ in America. The former agenda requires worldly power while the latter agenda involves taking up a cross and following Jesus.

In his epistle, Peter challenged believers to make sure it was the truth and goodness of the Gospel that offended and not the believer’s sin prone nature. “Live such good lives among the pagans,” Peter wrote, “that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. . . .Live as free men and women, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. . . .Live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 2:12, 16; 3:8-9).

If the Christian is insulted, persecuted, or slandered it should be for Christ’s sake and not because the disciple of Christ poses a worldly threat. The world should never have to fear a Christian. Those who persecute, insult, threaten, slander, swindle, and murder Christians are never in danger of receiving the same treatment they themselves perpetrate and perpetuate. That is not to say that Christians cannot defend others and themselves from violence, slander, deception and terrorism. But it is to say that the disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ does not fight the way the world does. “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world” (2 Cor 10:4). Christians should be fearless, not fearsome, faithful, not frightful. Since they do not have to fear what the world fears (1 Pet 3:14) they do not have to act the way the world acts.

John Stott writes, “We need to distinguish between the tolerant mind and the tolerant spirit. Tolerant in spirit a Christian should always be, loving, understanding, forgiving and forbearing others, making allowances for them, and giving them the benefit of the doubt, for true love ‘bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things’ (1 Cor 13:7). But how can we be tolerant in mind of what God has plainly revealed to be either evil or erroneous?” (Christ the Controversialist, IVP, 1970, 17).

Canadian writer Tom Harpur contends that the exclusive truth claim of the Gospel produces a “theology of hostility.” If Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, then all other faiths are “at best dreadfully incomplete” and “at worst pagan superstitions.” This conviction has led to “appalling intolerance and violence.” He quotes a special prayer from the Anglican Book of Common

Prayer:

“O merciful God, who hast made all men, and hatest nothing that thou hast made, nor wouldest the death of a sinner, but rather that he should be converted and live; have mercy upon thine ancient people, and upon all who reject and deny thy Son; take from them all ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt for thy word; and so fetch them home, blessed Lord, to thy fold, that they may be made one flock under one shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord; who liveth and reignth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen” (174).

Harpur concludes, “That such a prayer should exist is a tragic scandal. Instead of seeing other religions as part of the entire story of the human race’s continuing struggle for transcendence, or God, the orthodox Christian sees them as fertile fields for missionary enterprise. . . . This kind of absolutism about the claims of Jesus has ‘legitimized relationships of hostility, isolation, and defensiveness’ towards other denominations and other points of view within the Christian Church itself. . . . Here again one may observe the rule: the deeper the commitment to biblical or dogmatic correctness, the stronger the hostility towards other Christians who differ” (Tom Harpur, *For Christ’s Sake*, Oxford University Press, 1986, 8-11).

Lesslie Newbigin wisely answers this objection: “The Christian gospel has sometimes been made the tool of an imperialism, and of that we have to repent. But at its heart it is the denial of all imperialisms, for at its center there is the cross where all imperialisms are humbled and we are invited to find the center of human unity in the One who was made nothing so that all might be one. The very heart of the biblical vision for the unity of humankind is that its center is not an imperial power but the slain Lamb” (*The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 159).

The third important accomplishment was Peter’s courageous Christ-centeredness. He declared, “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is “the stone the builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone” (Acts 4:10-11; Ps 118:22). This was the third time Peter had driven this message home, “you killed him, but God raised him” (2:23-24; 3:15; 4:10). He was not preoccupied with his own defense, but with the proclamation of the Gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ

The apostles clearly understood the absolute claim of Jesus and declared, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The early church was convinced that Jesus was the revelation of God, the culmination of a long history of revelation, the very self-disclosure of God. The exclusive truth of the gospel fits with the purpose of God's promise from the beginning. God chose one, small, weak, insignificant nation through which to make himself known and bless the world. The exclusiveness of the gospel is consistent with the character of revelation and the nature of God's own self-disclosure.

In his early messages in Acts, Peter’s proclamation of the exclusive truth claim of the gospel is made exclusively to “fellow Jews.” He clearly focuses on the “people of Israel.” His audience is Jewish, “let all of Israel be assured of this” (2:14, 22, 36). This is in tension with what we know

is coming—the radical inclusiveness of the Gospel. And Peter is going to be the principle agent for that transformation. But it is important to realize and emphasize that Christianity is the purest form of Judaism. Jesus, the Messiah has come. The promises to Abraham and Moses were not forgotten but fulfilled. He was “accredited by God” first to the Jews, then to the world. Peter is going to struggle with what it means to be Christ’s “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

On Pentecost, Peter did not understand just how radical Joel’s prophecy really was. He proclaimed the word of the Lord through Joel that said, “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.” Peter saw no place for gender or age discrimination, but it would take some special work of the Holy Spirit to convince him that literally “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” He is about to learn what the Spirit means when Peter preaches, “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (2:39).

When Christians speak of the importance of evangelizing Jews, some Jews recoil in horror. When the Lausanne committee, sponsored by the World Evangelical Fellowship, met and drafted a two page theological document on evangelization, Rabbi A. James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee called it a ‘blueprint of spiritual genocide.’

Missiologist Arthur Glasser of the Fuller Seminary School of World Missions remembers the time when they crafted a statement identifying Fuller with Jewish evangelism. When this appeal became known, a group of prominent rabbis protested to David Hubbard, who was president of Fuller Seminary at the time. The rabbis, whom David Hubbard knew personally, asked him to disassociate the seminary from the “proselytizing.” In the face of hostile opinion, Hubbard encouraged the faculty to persevere, saying, “*If Jesus is not the Messiah of the Jewish people, he can hardly be the Christ of the Christian faith*” (Fuller Seminary, *A Man After God’s Own Heart*, 11).

The apostles believed that the promise of God given to Abraham, “all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you,” is fulfilled in Jesus. And each subsequent stage of salvation history, from Moses to the Prophets, from Jeremiah to David, anticipated the Savior; not an ethnic Savior, not a cultural religion, not a tribal deity, but the Savior of the world. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...” (Jn.3:16). As the author of Hebrews wrote, “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Hebrews 1:1-3). The one and only way makes sense because of the one and only Son! Lesslie Newbigin writes, “The claim of the Christian community is that in Jesus the absolute truth has been made present amid the relativities of human cultures, and the form which this truth took was not that of dominance and imperial power but that of one who was without power, or—rather—whose power was manifest in weakness and suffering” (The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, 163).

In the book of Acts the early Christians were known as followers of "the Way" (9:2; 19:9,23; 24:14,22). They shared with the world the incredible good news that there is a way to God, not through self-effort or self-righteousness or self-exploration, but through Jesus Christ. The way to God is not through a maze of tribal deities, cultural faiths, speculative philosophies, and mystery religions. The Way is not by our design, but by God's revelation. We do not travel the Way by our imagination, as if walking through a maze of inner reflection, but by faith and obedience in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Way is not customized according to each person's tastes and feelings, but it is clearly defined by the revealed truth of God. When we begin to seriously consider the exclusive truth claim of Christ we find a cluster of scandalous truths. If we believe in the absolute singularity of God, not a vague, abstract, undefinable, higher power, but the living God who has revealed himself by name and through history, then the only way begins to make sense. If we accept the factuality, the specificity and the particularity of salvation history, we may find a greater openness to and understanding of the apostle Peter's bold pronouncement, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The intellectual, social and political elite were in danger of rejecting the one truth from which all other blessings flowed. *May this not be true of you or me. I pray that we will embrace the truth of Jesus, so that it can be said of us what was said of Peter and John: "they took note that these men have been with Jesus."*

In Psalm 118, "the stone that the builders rejected" represented Israel and the builders stood for the heathen nations that despised Israel. But what the nations despised, God glorified. In the New Testament, "the builders are the leaders of the Jewish nation, who refused to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah; but the Stone which they had thought nothing of had now received from God the place of honor as head-stone of the corner" (F. F. Bruce, 100).

It is tragically ironic that the Jews, who experienced God's unique blessing *and the world's rejection*, would now reject the very reason for their blessing and join the ranks of the heathen in opposing the gift of Salvation. Given the specific context, Peter seems to recall the time Jesus quoted from Psalm 118:22. It was at the end of his parable of the tenants, in which he describes the owner of the vineyard sending his one and only son, who like his servants who had gone before, was rejected by the tenants, and in the son's case even killed. When Jesus finished telling this parable the people said, "May this never be!" But Luke tells us that Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'?" Jesus seemed to hold out little hope for acceptance and pronounced judgment: "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but anyone on whom it falls will be crushed" (Lk 20:15-19).

In so many areas of life we long for definitive, decisive, true answers. In Jesus we believe we have that answer. He has shown us the way to God, revealed the truth about reality, and offered life in all of its fullness. Therefore to confess that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, is not a matter of arrogance, but humility; not a cause for embarrassment, but for rejoicing. If Christ is risen, if he is risen indeed! then we shouldn't be shy about the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Rom.1:16).