

You Be The Judge!

“Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Acts 4:19-20

Filled with the Holy Spirit and in the context of an act of kindness, Peter shows us what it means to preach the gospel boldly, without compromise or equivocation. Do you notice how Doctor Luke keeps reminding us that a miracle of healing has set the stage for Peter and John’s message, trial and defense? He does not want us to forget about that this man, who was lame for over forty years, is now running and jumping and praising God. No one could deny that “an outstanding miracle” had taken place, even the coalition of opposition had to admit it. The gospel was not just a matter of nice religious words but of real life transformation brought about by the power of God. Peter and John made it clear that it was not by their “own power or godliness” that they had made this man walk. It was by faith in the name of Jesus. A miracle by itself was not offensive to the authorities, but preaching in the name of Jesus provoked their anger and their resistance. The religious, social, intellectual and political leaders of the culture “commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” The power of this prohibition is felt today because it remains offensive to believe that “Salvation is found in one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.”

The Inclusiveness of the Gospel

The early church experienced resistance in the name of diversity and tolerance in much the same way that we do. Yet they were bold in announcing that the gospel was meant for all people everywhere. They took the command of Jesus seriously: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt.28:19-20). The early Christians were "not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16-17). The exclusive truth of the gospel was not meant to exclude, but include. 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.

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).

The scope of God's grace knows no limits. There is a wideness in God's mercy that knows no bounds. This is why Jesus said, "when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (Jn 12:32), and this is the truth of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Jesus commissioned his followers to 'make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28:19), to 'preach the gospel to all creation' (Mk 16:15), to preach 'repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations' (Lk 24:47). Paul declared that 'God commands all people everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30)." (Roger Nicole, CT, 3/20/87:38). He was not reticent to emphasize the inclusiveness of the gospel, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (Rom 1:16). "God our Savior," wrote Paul, "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all people" (1 Tim 2:3-6).

The apostles believed that the promise of God given to Abraham, that "all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you," was and 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. 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).

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 Exclusiveness of the Gospel

The exclusive truth claim of the gospel is consistent with the universal scope of the gospel, the character of God, the meaning of salvation, the nature of truth, and the reality of life. Having looked at the universality of the gospel, we turn our attention to the nature of God.

1. The Character of God

There are not many gods to know, as the Canaanites or the Greeks or Hindus believed, but only one God. All the rest are idols. Neither is God a vague abstraction; a nameless, undefined, indistinguishable being or force or feeling or projection. God's self-disclosure is more definite, definable, specific and singular than we can fully grasp—more than we can completely comprehend, not less! If we consider any distinctiveness or uniqueness to our personhood, should God, the very Author of Life, the Maker of the Universe receive less. If our sense of self recoils at the notion of being just one of the masses, we can be assured that the Lord God is no less the Person that we are. There is in fact only one you! And there is in truth only one God! The Word of God declares, “I am the Lord your God...You shall have no other gods before me...You shall not make for yourself an idol...”(Ex.20:3-4). “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut.6:4-5).

2. The Meaning of Salvation

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.

The biblical view of humanity is that we are sinners in need of salvation. We are fallen creatures who are inclined to follow our own rebellious impulses. Our basic bent is toward sin. We fall short of the glory of God. Hindus and Buddhists view humanity differently. They do not believe in original sin, they believe in original ignorance. The basic solution is not to be saved from sin, but to be enlightened. Instead of looking to a salvation outside of ourselves, we need to look within and cultivate the knowledge within each of our spirits. In our pluralistic society, we would prefer to think of ourselves as good. Our problems are due to ignorance and life's solutions come from within ourselves through enlightenment. But this is

not what the Bible claims is true about humanity. We need to be rescued by God, because we cannot save ourselves.

I remember almost drowning once when I was young. I got turned around and I thought down was up and up was down, and I panicked. I started swimming deeper trying to reach the surface. I remember losing all my air and wondering now what, when suddenly I was yanked up out of the water by my father. The salvation that we need does not come from within but from God. We are saved from "sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life." We are not only saved from sin and death, but we are saved for significance and life. "Salvation has brought [us] peace with God, access to God's favor and presence, hope of regaining the glory intended for men and women, endurance in suffering, steadfast character, an optimistic mind, inner motivations of divine love and power of the Spirit, ongoing experience of the risen Christ in our souls, and sustaining joy in God" (White, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker, 968).

When we begin to consider seriously 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).

3. The Nature of Truth

Truth by definition is exclusionary: if A is true, then B is false. First grade math teaches us something about the character of truth that is worth remembering, $2 + 2 = 4$ not 3 or 5 or any other number of the infinite possibilities. We live with the character of truth everyday and what applies to everyday empirical truth also applies to everlasting spiritual truth. If the traffic light is red, it is not green. We could, but we wouldn't want to begin reasoning that when the light is red some people see green and when its green some people see red. The results would be disastrous. Who would want to drive if people began to reason: "It's not fair to impose a red light on me just because I'm coming from the opposite direction. If it's green for the other driver, it should be green for me as well?"

In most fields of study we are concerned to discover the truth. In medical research and engineering the truth matters. We may not always like the truth we discover, but there is a need to know the truth. When a cardiologist determines that a patient has several blocked arteries and is in danger of a heart attack that patient is free to get a second opinion, but there is little question in the patient's mind that the truth of the matter really counts. Upon hearing a difficult diagnosis, a patient does not say, "I don't like that doctor because he's always negative." In the end we need the truth. Sometimes we need to be reminded that doctors are first of all scientists, they are responsible for discovering the truth about our bodies. What we need from doctors is competence, accuracy, and integrity. And no amount of bed-side manner makes up for the lack of truth.

The more significant the issue the more we value truth. You can count on the fact that track meets at the summer Olympics will be timed with state-of-the-art precision, right down to a thousandth of a second. If we value accuracy in a track meet isn't it reasonable to value accuracy in understanding God's revelation? The pursuit of truth moves us from speculation to submission, from randomness to definiteness. Sometimes we feel that the more we know the less we know, but it would be more accurate to say that the more we know the more we are humbled by the truth. We do not create truth we discover it. Human invention and creativity are set within a finely tuned, majestically balanced, God-created universe. We are the discoverers, never creating what is there, but beholding, marveling, exploring, understanding, and accepting, what is there by God's design and creation.

What is true of the physical universe is also true of salvation. What is true of creation is true of redemption. The scientist submits to the facts in order to be insightful, imaginative, and creative. Similarly, those who are saved accept the revelation of God in order to be forgiven by God and reconciled to God. "If you hold to my teaching," Jesus said, "you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

4. The Reality of Life

If the exclusive truth claim of the gospel is scandalous to the modern mind, there are other scandals to consider! How is it that in this vast universe there is only one planet that we know of that supports biological life. Is this most obvious and fantastic fact analogous to God choosing one small nation through which to bless the nations? Does creation itself not offer a pattern for redemption? The scandal of life on earth alone prepares us for the scandal of salvation through Christ alone. Are we a cosmic aberration, a truly incredible accident without meaning, significance or purpose, or are we made in the image of God? Which is the greater scandal, the scandal of being image bearers of God or the scandal of being a cosmic accident?

Not only is there an analogy to the exclusive truth claim of the gospel to be found in cosmic space but in the bond of marriage. Deep within human nature we honor and long for the fidelity between husband and wife—that exclusive and permanent union. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). The comprehensive, timeless vows between husband and wife are grandly inclusive of all they are and will be. Bride and groom limitlessly limit themselves to each other, offering themselves to each other in a permanent, unconditional commitment. Is the exclusivity of marriage analogous to our communion with God? The oneness of the marriage relationship is not an absorption in the other—it is not the loss of the person, nor is this exclusive relationship meant to hurt other relationships. On the contrary it forms the security and the solidarity to build a family and form friendships.

But how can this be, if one wife or one husband is good, why are not multiple spouses better? (Solomon thought so!) Or if one partner is good now, may not another partner be better later. Modern ideas make the marriage commitment harder, but they may also make it dearer. It appears that the exclusiveness of monogamy is becoming more scandalous than promiscuity. Is this exclusive vowed commitment between husband and wife based on jealousy and insecurity? Is marital fidelity just a matter of social mores or does its reasonableness go deeper, right down to the soul? Might not the marriage union be based in how we were made, body, mind and soul, and how God intended us to live? Is not this limitation our liberation-

-this fidelity our freedom!

When we consider the scandalous presence of biological life on only one small planet in this vast universe and weigh the significance of the human ideal of marital fidelity, the exclusive truth claim of Christ appears much more reasonable. The consistency between biological, social and spiritual life leads us to a deeper, truer understanding of life. If we examine the exclusive truth claim of the gospel in the light of the character of God, the meaning of salvation, the nature of truth and the reality of life itself, not only does it make sense, it is cause for rejoicing. Jesus is the Way—the wondering through a maze of spiritual and secular alternatives, feeling empty and hopelessly lost is over. Jesus is the Truth—the supermarket search for meaning among rival gods, secular ideologies and self-made idolatries is transcended. Jesus is the Life—the feeling of futility, from which we try so hard to escape, and the despair of death's finality are overcome by the Author of Life.

Embracing the Gospel

Faced with the exclusive truth claim of Christ we have several options:

First, we might believe with Carl Sagan, the late Cornell University astronomer, that death ends all. There is nothing more, argues Sagan, and to think otherwise is wishful thinking. Sagan's truth claim is also exclusive. For he believes absolutely and exclusively in nature alone. "The world is so exquisite, with so much love and moral depth, that there is no reason to deceive ourselves with pretty stories for which there's little good evidence" ("In the Valley of the Shadow," *Parade Magazine*, 3/10/96:18). Sagan's conviction clarifies the choice between rival exclusive truth claims—nature alone or Christ alone. Either death ends all or Jesus is "the resurrection and the life." We weigh Sagan's conviction against the promise of Jesus: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (Jn.6:35); "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (Jn.10:10).

Second, we might debate with God, arguing that when all is said and done God is unreasonable. God has taken sin and salvation too seriously—salvation history has been unnecessary. There never was any need for God to reveal himself, to Incarnate himself, to lay down his life and to raise it up again. The whole thing, from beginning to end has been pointless, a waste of time. Christmas and Easter are just long holiday weekends, cultural myths, not solid realities. But who do we think we are to say that to God, the living God, the Lord of the Universe, the Holy and Righteous God? Strangely, ironically, God gives us that right. He gives us that awful freedom. He does not make us accept anything. This is an offer we are free to turn down!

Thirdly, we might be inclined to accept Christ's offer of salvation, but we have this dilemma. Our moral sensitivities are offended; our sense of fairness challenged, because so many have already rejected God's provision of salvation or ignored it. J. I. Packer writes, "The problem of individual human destinies has always pressed hard upon thoughtful Christians who take the Bible seriously, for Scripture affirms these three things: (1) The reality of hell as a state of eternal destructive punishment in which God's judicial retribution for sin is directly experienced. (2) the certainty of hell for all who choose it by rejecting Jesus Christ and his offer of eternal life. (3) The justice of hell as a fit divine infliction upon humanity for our lawless and cruel deeds."

Packer goes on to ask how these truths effect “good pagans” who lived before the Incarnation or “who through no fault of their own never heard the Christian message.” Or what about people “who lived in places where Christianity was a capital offense” or “who were so resentful of Christians hurting them in one way or another that they were never emotionally free for serious thought about Christian truth? Are they all necessarily lost?” (J. I. Packer, “Will God really condemn people to hell?” *Tough Questions Christians Ask*, ed. David Neff, Victor Books, 1989, 123-135).

This concern brings to mind the question that Jesus was asked, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" (Lk 13:23). Now there is much that could be said in answer to this person's question. The Bible claims that God desires the salvation of all people and that salvation is provided only through the grace of Christ Jesus. The Bible also demonstrates the freedom and power of God to extend his grace to whom ever God pleases. Certain people have come to know God in extraordinary ways (Melchizedek, Job, Abraham). Clark Pinnock writes,

"God saves people by faith alone and this excludes no one in principle. There is no one in the world who cannot have faith as Enoch did long ago. This means that the unevangelized are not in fact beyond the possibility of salvation." Many Christians believe that children who die before their ability to respond in faith toward God are saved by the grace of Christ. The atonement of Christ covers the sins of helpless infants. Pinnock asks, "If God can save pagan babies who have no faith, why can he not save pagan parents who do have faith, even though it was not possible for them to have it in Christ of whom they have not heard?" (*Can the unevangelized be saved? The Canadian Baptist*, 11/81:4-9).

Charles Kraft offers a valuable perspective:

"If the message and method are the same today as they were in biblical times, we must ask the hard question concerning the necessity of the knowledge of Christ in the response of contemporary 'pagans.' Can people who are chronologically A.D. but knowledge wise B.C. . . . be saved by committing themselves to faith in God as Abraham and the rest of those who are chronically B. C. did . . . I personally believe that they can and many have. . . Even though I may accept the fact that God continues to save in the same way as in the Old Testament times, I dare not let that belief either allow me to fall into universalism so that I assume people can be saved without making a commitment to their wills to God, or lull me into assuming that because people could come to salvation without specific knowledge of Christ that, therefore, many will. People at all times seem to reject God even when they have plenty of knowledge about him" (*Christianity and Culture*, 1979: 254-255).

God's testimony is universal. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. . . There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard" (Ps 19:1,3). God has "let all nations go their own way" but "he has not left himself without testimony" (Acts 14:16-17). Jesus Christ is the true light that gives light to everyone (Jn 1:9). He has written his truth on our consciences and set eternity in our hearts (Rom 2:15; Eccl 3:11). Yet the problem for the vast majority of people is not insufficient light, but the willingness to respond to the light that they have. Is it possible for someone to genuinely sense their need for God and to turn from their sin and self-righteousness and humbly depend upon God for forgiveness and acceptance? I believe the biblical answer to that question is `Yes'. However, the Bible does not suggest that many people respond to the light they have, sadly just the opposite appears to be true. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands," but people have trouble heeding the declaration and hearing the proclamation (Ps.19). Unnaturally and inexcusably, the more normal reaction appears to be negative; people suppress the truth by their wickedness (Rom.1:18). Instead of turning toward the light of revelation, they turn away. "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). To the one who asked, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"

Jesus focused attention on personal responsibility: "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us' (Luke 13:22-27; see Mt 7:21-23; Heb 6:4-9).

The effect of the story is sobering. It pictures people trying to get in, but not being able to. They are locked out and pleading to get in. The cryptic response from the owner is simple, "I don't know you or where you come from." But they reply, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." But familiarity is not the same as being faithful, just as religion is not the same thing as a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Being nice is not the same as knowing God. Many hear about the gospel but never hear and respond to the gospel. They have no idea that Jesus is decisive for the Kingdom, essential for salvation.

Jesus laid aside the distracting, 'what ifs' and the theoretical question of 'how many' and focused on our response. 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 truth, 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).

Peter and John refused to be intimidated and respectfully rejected the command to no longer speak or teach in the name of Jesus. In a culture where the inclusiveness of the gospel offends, because the church seeks to evangelize the lost, and the exclusiveness of the gospel repels, because the church proclaims Jesus is the only way, we find ourselves standing with the apostles and saying as they did to the ruling authorities, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges!"

We should only stop speaking in the name of Jesus if there is no God to be known, and nothing to be saved from and nothing to be saved for. We should only stop if we no longer want the truth from our teachers, doctors and judges. We should only stop if death ends all and we have concluded that it is nature alone, not Christ alone.