

Can Only One Religion Be True?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a six-part series

September 13, 2015

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John 14:1–7 (CEB)

“Don’t be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. ²My Father’s house has room to spare. If that weren’t the case, would I have told you that I’m going to prepare a place for you? ³When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. ⁴You know the way to the place I’m going.”

⁵Thomas asked, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

⁶Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him.”

Colossians 1:15–20 (CEB)

¹⁵The Son is the image
of the invisible God,
the one who is first over all creation,
¹⁶Because all things were created by him:
both in the heavens and on the
earth,
the things that are visible
and the things that are invisible.
Whether they are thrones or powers,
or rulers or authorities,
all things were created
through him and for him.

¹⁷He existed before all things,
and all things are held together in
him.
through the blood of his cross.

¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church,
who is the beginning,
the one who is firstborn
from among the dead
so that he might occupy
the first place in everything.

¹⁹Because all the fullness of God
was pleased to live in him,
²⁰and he reconciled all things to
himself
through him—
whether things on earth
or in the heavens.
He brought peace through the
blood of his cross.

Few Christian claims fall harder on the average ear in our culture than the claim that Jesus is the only way to God. Indeed, not merely a path to God, but God himself.

This week we begin a six-week series exploring some of the really difficult and challenging questions that confront our claims about Jesus and the Good News.¹ These are all really good and important questions. None lend themselves to simple, flippant answers. Even if the question seems to demand no more than a “yes” or “no,” and even if we are confident of our answer, the question is whether we are equipped to talk about this, really talk, with others? Or do we send them off to see a pastor or some other “church-type”? These are our questions, our issues, our answers, our claims and we need to devote to them the energy, intellect, reflection, and time that we have devoted to our careers and interests.

Even this first question, “Can Only One Religion Be True?,” has some even bigger questions behind it. What do we mean by true? Can truth even be known? What is a religion? The questions come so fast that often all we can really do is plunge in and try to stay afloat. So we shall . . .

True?

I read a lot these days about “my truth” and “your truth.” The problem is that such usage turns “truth” into an utterly useless word. “My truth” is simply a way to talk about “my opinions” or “my values or “my feelings,” all of which is important but not what English-speakers have always meant by “truth.” For that, we can turn to the dictionary. In my

¹ The series is based on the new book by Bishop Scott Jones and his son, our own, Rev. Arthur Jones, *Ask: Faith Questions in a Skeptical Age*, just published by Abingdon Press.

Collegiate Dictionary (ink and paper!), truth is “the body of real things, events, and facts: actuality.” Something is true to the extent it is in “accordance with the actual state of affairs.” The earth revolves around the sun or it doesn’t. Washington was our first president or he wasn’t. Sure, it may well be that the actual state of affairs is unknowable or only partly knowable or even unknown to us now. But we can still usually get closer to the truth, the actual state of affairs, or we can drift further from it.

We’ll talk more about “truth” in the coming weeks so let’s turn to “religion.”

Religion?

The world’s religions divide into two general systems: (1) the spiritual/pantheistic religions of the east such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and so on, and (2) the monotheistic religions of the west: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. One of the most important differences in these systems is that the eastern religions are not focused so much on truth claims about history, geography, people and so on. They tend toward spirituality and philosophy. In contrast, the big three monotheistic religions are all grounded on truth claims about a divine being who acted in actual time and space to accomplish certain purposes. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are not philosophical religions but instead make claims about a god who has chosen to reveal himself in what he has said and done.

For Christians, talk of God always come back to Jesus. We make truth claims about a man named Jesus who lived in ancient Palestine and was executed at the order of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Crucially, we claim that this Jesus was resurrected after his death, thus vindicating all he said and did. More on all this as this series progresses, but for now, here is one of Jesus’ statements about his relationship, his identity with, the Creator:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him”
(John 14:6-7, NRSV).

There you have it. Could Jesus be any more clear? Ask any of Jesus’ fellow Jews on the streets of Jerusalem who the Father is and you’d have gotten a straightforward response: “The Lord God Almighty, of course, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush and led us out of slavery in Egypt. That’s who the Father is.” And, of course, the next words out of their mouth would be astonishment and shock that any man could claim such a thing – that if you know him you know the Father! Ridiculous! Blasphemy!

But earlier, Jesus had asserted, “I am one with the Father” (John 10:30). Now, Jesus has claimed that if you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father; that Jesus is *the way, the truth, the life*. Gail O’Day rightly notes that “these verses announce in clear language the theological conviction that drives the Fourth Evangelist’s work. . . . These words express the Fourth Evangelist’s [and, hence, all Christians’] unshakeable belief that the coming of Jesus, the Word made flesh, decisively altered the relationship between God and humanity.”² As the Evangelist put it when he opened his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Thus, from the beginning, Jesus’ followers have struggled, in light of his resurrection, to come to grips with his claims, with what he said and did. A small portion of one writing about Jesus, from about 60AD, illustrates the shocking conclusion his first followers came to. You might take a moment and read the above passage from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Colossae (in Asia Minor).

Jesus: Creator and Lord

The opening stanza emphasizes that all things were created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. In case we miss Paul’s point here, he gives us a list: all things visible and invisible, all thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers. For any Jew, this sort of language could be used only with respect to the LORD God. Paul was a Jew and not just any Jew, but

² From Gail O’Day’s commentary on the Gospel of John in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 743. This commentary set is in the St. Andrew library.

an educated, zealous Pharisee. He knew the meaning of what he wrote. He knew that he was speaking of Jesus as one would speak only of God.

Certainly, Paul struggles to find the right language, to express the inexpressible. On the one hand, Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” which might make us think he is about to lump Jesus in with the rest of creation. But no. In the next phrase, Paul says the opposite – all things are created in, through, and for Jesus. It takes an expansive, open, and imaginative mind to hold together seemingly contradictory truths about God. Such minds are God’s desire for us.

In verse 18, the focus shifts from creation to re-creation, renewal, and restoration, the embodiment of which is the church. Christ is head of the church, yet distinct from it, just as Christ is distinct from creation. Why is Jesus Christ, though fully and completely human, unique? Because he is the one person, the only person, in whom God’s fullness³ dwells.

And what is God’s purpose in all this? The reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God, the undoing of the tragedy of the Garden. And how is all this done? Through the crucifixion, the “blood of his cross.” This is the good in Good Friday – that, in a way we cannot fully explain, we and the entire cosmos have been put right with God through Jesus’ death on the cross. To some, such a claim is not only bizarre but offensive, but for almost 2,000 years, Christians have proclaimed that it is true, in accordance with actual spacetime reality.

The only way?

I’ve probably belabored the point about Jesus’ deity. But it is essential to understand the Christian truth claim. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Seeing him is seeing is seeing God. He is God! And if we are right about this, then, of course, how could one claim to know God and yet deny Jesus. He is not merely one of the great prophets. He is not merely a great teacher and rabbi. He didn’t come merely to show us a better way of living. Jesus is the incarnation of the one true God, the God of Abraham and of Moses. Jesus has revealed much to us about God that we would not know without Jesus.

With all this, Christians today are left with only a few choices:

1. We could simply shut up and enjoy our own private relationship with Jesus. But, then, how could we ever do as Jesus instructed us: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). No . . . the Christian proclamation of the Good News is meant for the whole world. Shutting up isn’t really an option.
2. We could change our claims about Jesus to make him more “acceptable” to non-believers. Let’s just see if we can’t discover a Jesus who is deeply spiritual, but no more than a poor, Galilean itinerant preacher. It really isn’t that hard to construct a Jesus to anyone’s liking. Of course, it wouldn’t really be Jesus, but at least we’d all just get along.
3. Or, we could learn what it is we Christians have claimed about Jesus for most of the last two millennia and then state it boldly and lovingly to all who would hear. The Good News is not exclusionary; it is a joyous proclamation that God has rescued and is rescuing *all* humanity and *all* creation.

Our truth claim about Jesus is far too unique to fit with other belief systems. He is not merely a path to God; he is God. Could we be wrong about this? Of course. But I believe with all my mind and heart that we are not. I believe that Jesus the Galilean was truly resurrected on that Sunday morning nearly 2,000 years ago and that belief changes everything. This is something that is knowable, just as it is knowable that Julius Caesar conquered Gaul and George Washington was the first president of the United States.

One caution before closing. Nothing here allows for any us/them mentality or a sense of superiority. Knowing Christ is a gift from God, pure and simple. And it is a gift that I pray will come to all people, if not on this side of the grave then on the next.

³Peterson is very helpful when paraphrasing “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” From *The Message*: “So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding.”

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Mark 2:1-12 Who can forgive sins but God?! Jesus can.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 1:1-18 Jesus is the Word and the Word was God.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Philippians 2:5-11 Jesus is Lord of all creation and every knee will bow to him. (Every?) See Isaiah 45:18, 22-24 to see this language applied to God.</p>	<p>Thursday, Romans 2:14-16 Paul is saying here that non-Jews (Gentiles) have a “law” within themselves, a conscience, that can guide them to doing God’s will. But, of course, much of the time, though not all, it is ignored.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 Paul acknowledges that the proclamation about Jesus seems like foolishness to much of the world. It is the same now as it was then.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Scott Engle’s Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Matthew’s Gospel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall (No class on Labor Day)

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Acts

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series:

Biblical stories that will make you feel better about your own family!

Beginning September 13

A follow-on series for the Ask! sermons on some of the big faith questions. We’ll go deeper in class and have plenty of time for Q&A.

Second Information Meeting: Fall 2016 Israel Trip with Scott Engle and Arthur Jones

Sunday, September 27 at 6:30 in Piro Hall

We are planning a ten-day trip to Israel, similar to the Fall 2014 trip. If you’ve ever thought about taking an in-depth tour of Israel, this is the trip to take.

Visit Nazareth, Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Masada, and much more with friends and family. This trip is life-changing. Your faith will be deepened, you will never read the Bible the same way, and you will have a great time. We hope that you will join us!

The deposit deadline is October 1!