

Isn't it narrow-minded to believe Jesus is the Only Way to God?

This week, we are starting a 5-week series that will coincide with our Beta Groups that will be starting next Saturday at 6:30 pm in the Commons. The point of Beta Groups is to invite new, nominal and non-Christians to come together to explore some of the biggest questions people have about Christianity.

Now, we're not doing it to be adversarial. Our goal isn't to have debates. But our concern is more pastoral. We believe Jesus when he says that he came so that people might have satisfaction now and eternal life later. So, we want to take the time to listen to people's thoughts, but also provide a response from the perspective of faith in Jesus—not strictly intellectual responses, but responses that also get to the heart.

Over these five weeks, we'll talk about these questions: Isn't it narrow-minded to claim Jesus is the only way? Why don't miracles happen today like they did in the Bible? How could a loving God send good people to hell? Isn't Christianity just a coping-mechanism for people who can't handle life? And Why should we trust our lives to a 3000-year-old book?

The Sunday messages will be a little different than the Saturday messages because the audience is different. Now, I know we have some non-Christians and new Christians in here, but most of you are committed Christians. You might not wrestle with the

questions yourself, but you have family or friends who have these barriers. Or you hear them and you think, “That’s a great question” and you want answers. On Sunday and then again the next Saturday, we will talk about the same question in different ways.

Today, we’re starting with the question, *“Isn’t it narrow-minded to believe Jesus is the only way?”* This might just be the grand-daddy of all these questions because the world is shrinking. Years ago, it was a rare in most of America to know a Muslim or a Buddhist or Hindu. Even if people didn’t go to church or follow Jesus in their daily lives, they still assumed a Christian worldview even if they didn’t live up to Jesus’ teachings.

But today, we work with and are on the PTA with people of other faiths and people even no religious faith and they seem to be doing just fine. They have the same problems as everyone else, but they seem to handling life as well as anyone. This question would be a breeze if everyone who didn’t believe in Jesus was always miserable or perpetually drunk thinking about the absurdity of life. But that’s not most people’s experience, so this is a reasonable question.

So, we start asking this question. If so many people seem to be doing OK, how can we say that Jesus is the only way? In fact, our society tends to go beyond this question and makes some broad claims about truth.

The first is that anyone who believes they have the truth is *arrogant*. There's a classic story of the blind men and the elephant often illustrates the idea that no one knows the whole truth. It goes like this.

Five blind men are trying to understand what an elephant is. One man feels the side and says, "An elephant is like a rough textured wall." Another man feels the leg and says, "*No, an elephant is like a tree.*" A third one feels the trunk and says, "*No, you're both wrong. An elephant is long and curvy, like a snake.*"

The point of the illustration is to show that everyone is limited in their knowledge of God, so no one can claim to know the whole truth. All the world religions have just a part of the truth, and none of them have the whole truth. And in fact, it even suggests that if you put all the religions together, they'll add up to the truth.

Now, on the surface, this seems like a humble posture. But the late Anglican missionary Lesslie Newbigen points out the problem with this illustration. You see, the irony of the story is that the only way they can say everyone only has part of the truth is if they themselves claim to be able to see the whole elephant. So, while it seems humble—and I don't think people realize they're doing it—but they're actually saying that the people who started these religions and their millions of adherents are blind, but I can see. It has an air of humility, but it's just another claim to know the truth.

Throughout history, no one had a problem with someone claiming to know the truth. They *expected* there would be people who disagree and they could debate and try to convince each other. But today's society is unique, because it says it's not just the *content* of the belief that's problematic, but just believing you know the truth at all is a problem. They might be willing to say that Jesus knows some of the truth, but not all.

Another way people say it is that "*Religious belief is too bound by culture to claim to be the "truth."*" So, a secular humanist might say something like, "*You're only a Christian because you grew up in a Christian society. If you had been born in Saudi Arabia, you wouldn't be a Christian.*" Now, that very well might be true, but it says nothing about the truth of a belief. The problem is that people usually don't apply this test to themselves. If *he* grew up in Saudi Arabia, he probably wouldn't be a secular humanist. Does that mean his beliefs are wrong?

Another objection says that claims to know the truth are power-plays to gain control over others. Truth is just something made up by the powerful to control the weak. Here are two examples. Some say for instance, that religions create God and morality and eternal punishment to instill fear into people so they can get them to do what they want.

A stronger form of this is to say that religions who claim to know the truth are the source of religious violence that has plagued history. Here's how Tim Keller describes this argument. "*Each religion informs its followers that they have "the truth," and this*

naturally leads them to feel superior to those with differing beliefs. Also, a religion tells its followers that they are saved and connected to God by devotedly performing that truth. This moves them to separate from those who are less devoted and pure in life. Therefore, it is easy for one religious group to stereotype and caricature other ones. Once this situation exists it can easily spiral down into the marginalization of others or even to active oppression, abuse, or violence against them.”

Now, unfortunately this critique has too often been true. As Christians, we have to admit that history has been filled with religious violence. Protestants vs. Catholics and everyone vs. the Anabaptists during the Protestant Reformation. But it’s also true among religions. Christians vs. Muslims. Sunni vs. Shia. Hindus in India vs. Muslims in Pakistan. So, this seems to be a problem.

But, when you really understand history you’ll realize that it’s not just religion that’s the problem. The most oppressive and murderous regimes in the history of the world haven’t been religious at all. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and other unreligious and anti-religious regimes killed as many as 150 million people in the 20th century alone. In ancient times, the Roman Empire believed in many gods and allowed others to believe in their god, but were still ruthlessly inhumane. I don’t say this to excuse religious violence, but just to say that religion itself doesn’t explain violence.

So, you might say, “*Maybe it’s not religion per se that’s the problem, but people who believe they have the exclusive Truth are dangerous and that will lead to oppression and violence.*” The problem is that it’s just impossible to avoid making exclusive truth claims.

If you say, “No one can really know the Truth” that’s an exclusive truth claim. When you say, “All religions are saying the same thing,” you’re claiming to know the whole truth about religion. Plus, if you believe all religions are basically the same, you’re not taking any of the religions seriously and imposing your truth on them. Sure, there are similarities between various religions, but there are *huge* significant differences.

Even if you say, “The most important thing is that we should all love each other and learn to get along,” believe it or not, that’s not a self-evident statement to everyone, but it comes from a particular view of the world so it’s an exclusive truth claim.

It’s impossible to avoid making claims to the truth, but it *IS* possible to hold those claims graciously and humbly. But holding truth humbly still doesn’t solve the problem because how do you KNOW what is true?

Today a lot of people throw up their hands and just say, “*I give up. I’m just going to go with what works for me.*” As Oprah says, they live “their truth.” And at first this sounds liberating. The problem is that even this isn’t neutral. When people say, “I’m not going to

trust God or one of the historical religious traditions as my source of truth, I'm going to trust my own intellect and intuition." This might be the most arrogant claim of all.

Have you thought deeply about this? Have you interacted with great minds in every society throughout history? Or do you believe it because it happens to be popular in our culture at the present moment?

The fact is, it will be impossible for any society to work with people choosing their own truth. There have to be shared beliefs, values, and understanding of the world. While on the surface, it seems like it would be great to decide your own truth, eventually it will only lead to a fragmented society.

For instance, it makes things like *justice* impossible because, *you* might believe in racial equality and that we should all love each other. But if all we have is everyone living their own truth, the Klansman could just say, "*Hey, you live your truth, I'll live mine.*"

So, the question is not whether we ought to believe in some overarching truth, some ultimate picture of the world. The question is, which one is true? What is the content of those beliefs? *Which one is most compelling, satisfying and internally consistent. Which one makes the best sense of the world as it is?*

Of course, there are many to choose from. In addition to Christianity, there are other religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam. Then there are non-religious systems like

secular humanism, Marxism and neo-Darwinianism and a bunch of others. But our main interest today is to talk about Jesus and what he taught us about ultimate truth.

What is truth according to Jesus? How do we get to God? Jesus says in John 14:6-7, **“I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”**

Jesus says that when we see him, we see God. And that’s a bold claim. If you or I made that statement, people would think we’re delusional. And yet, few people think that about Jesus. At the very least, people recognize that Jesus was a revolutionary teacher. But as C.S. Lewis says, *“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”*

The question is, “What reasons would we have to believe Jesus?” Why should we believe that out of all the religions on earth, Jesus is right? Well, of course, we have to be

humble about it because we can prove anything beyond any doubts. But what reasons would we have to believe Jesus when he says he is the way, the truth and the life? Let me just give a few.

Well, first, Jesus claimed, not just to KNOW the truth, but that he WAS the truth, and yet wasn't *arrogant*. Remember the illustration of the blind men and the elephant. In John 14, Jesus isn't just claiming to be the narrator, he was claiming to be the elephant. And yet, he was the champion of humility.

Today, we *assume* humility is a virtue. But that wasn't always the case. Humility was a uniquely Christian virtue. In ancient Greece, humility was actually a character flaw because it denied a person's place in the social hierarchy. Slaves and women should be humble because they had a low status, but not powerful men. If you got it, flaunt it. But Jesus turned humility into a virtue.

The Apostle Paul says Christians should, **“have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant...”**

So even though Jesus saw the whole picture, he modeled humility and he taught us that anyone who takes pride in his knowledge is not following the way of Jesus.

Second, the way of Jesus is not oppressive. Now, there might be some who object to this and say, “Have you seen church history? It’s full of oppression in the name of Jesus.” We have to admit that’s true and I think the church has a lot of repenting to do.

When a person or group of Christians oppress others, they’re doing it in direct contradiction of the teachings of Jesus. Here are a few. In Luke 4:18, Jesus said his mission was to set the oppressed free. He was the one who said, **“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

The way of Jesus is the way that teaches people to **“love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you”** (Mt 5:44) and to **“turn the other cheek.”** (Mt 5:39)

Jesus didn’t side with the oppressors, he identified with the oppressed by allowing himself to be arrested, falsely accused and executed like a criminal at the hands of the greatest oppressor. That’s the way of Jesus. And he wasn’t teaching it as one option among many. He didn’t say the things he did because he was unsure of whether he had the truth. He did it because he was *certain* of it. So, anyone who really, actually believes Jesus is the truth, he cannot become an oppressor.

Third, *Christianity gives a ground for human rights*. Most secular humanists believe in human rights. The problem is that there isn't a sufficient reason why they should. If humans are only the result of the blind forces of evolution, then what makes a baby or a person in a vegetative state more valuable than a tree? Christianity teaches us that every human is created in the image of God and therefore has inherent worth, regardless of our usefulness to society.

Now, you might say, like the Founding Fathers, "*We hold these truths to be self-evident—that all men are created equal.*" But that hasn't been self-evident to all. The Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that some people were created to be slaves and some to be masters. The Hindu doctrine of Karma gives way to the caste system in India because it says that people born into the lower castes are just getting what they deserve.

And while it's true that Christians have distorted Scripture to find justifications for slavery, it's no coincidence that the most powerful advocates for abolition, both here and in England, reasoned directly from the Bible. In fact, I would be willing to say that you believe about human rights today is the result of Christianity.

Finally, the way of Jesus isn't culturally conditioned. Remember the critique that all religions are culturally conditioned, so they can't be true. But this doesn't apply to Christianity. I know many people think Christianity is a white person's religion because it

came to dominate Europe for so long. But if you look both at the history of Christianity and the present, you just can't say that.

Here's how one scholar describes it. *"Two billion people today identify themselves as Christians...Such followers of Jesus are now more numerous and make up a greater proportion of the world's population than ever before. It is estimated that they are increasing by some 70,000 persons every day...those who think the figure of Jesus Christ is of fading significance need to reckon with the astonishingly rapid increase in numbers of Christian believers in other parts of the world, such as Africa and (who would have expected it?) China. Jesus is plainly no longer an icon purely of Western culture, but in fact he never was. He lived in the Middle East, and in the first few centuries of Christianity the faith spread in all directions – not only to Greece and Rome, France and Spain, but also to Egypt, North Africa, and Ethiopia, to Turkey and Armenia, to Iraq, Persia, and India Christianity was a world religion long before it was a European one...no other figure has so extensively crossed the cultural divisions of humanity and found a place in so many diverse cultural contexts."*

Christianity has thrived in virtually every culture because it doesn't favor one culture over another. Instead it affirms parts of every culture and at the same time critiques other parts of every culture. It speaks equally to the oppressed and the

oppressor, to the rich and the poor, to the educated and the child. It's the only religion that can claim this. The question is, "Why?"

What I want you to consider today is that it works because it's *true that Jesus actually is the way, the truth and the life.*

When Jesus said the words, "I am the way, the truth and the life No one comes to the father except through me." Many people imagine Jesus to be speaking like a bouncer at a club. People are eager to get to God, but Jesus is standing in front of the door saying, "*If you want to get to God, you have to get through me, first.*"

But that's doesn't reflect the attitude of Jesus. He's talking to people who are tired because they've been told they have to be morally good enough for God to love them. He talking to people who don't even believe in sin, but can't seem to shake the guilt of their past. He's talking to people who don't know which way to turn, wondering what to believe about God and how they should live.

I know that many people hear the words of Jesus, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the father except through me," as fighting words. But they're actually an *invitation*. Jesus says, "*You don't have look any longer. You don't have to be confused or feel around in the dark. I am the way, the truth and the life.*" In Matthew 11, he says, "**Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest for your soul.**"

My challenge to you today is this. Even if you have trouble accepting Jesus as the only way, try him first as A way—as YOUR way. Get to know him. Start to live his way and just see what happens. As the Bible says, **“Taste and see that the Lord is good.”**

Two things for believers: The best way to communicate truth in our day is for our lives to line up with Jesus; to practice the way of Jesus; to have the heart and mind of Jesus. In our society, so much about Jesus rings true for people.

“Do to others as you would have done to you.”

“Don’t judge, lest you be judged.”

“Love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.”

People will have a hard time believing the way of Jesus unless they see it modeled in the lives of people who follow him. And I think sometimes as believers we SAY we believe Jesus is the way, but we *live* inconsistently—waffling between Jesus sometimes and secular humanism at others.

Second, share stories of how Jesus has been real to you. The truth is, many people in our world aren't asking the question, "Is what you believe, true?" They're asking the question, "Do I want to be like you?" If we truly are like Jesus, I believe the answer has to be a resounding yes!

