

*Rabbi Simeon ben Nathaniel said: Do not make your prayer a fixed task, but a plea to God for grace and mercy. —Abot 2, 18.*

### Many paths?

In the last lesson we discussed the three most widely held ideas among Christians about reconciliation with God: Universalism, Inclusivism and Exclusivism. You can learn much more by reviewing the handouts associated with Chapter 13, but basically Exclusivism holds that the only path to God is Jesus, and we must know and understand the historical facts of His Passion in order to set our feet upon that path. Inclusivism holds that the only path to God is Jesus, but it is possible to be on that path without knowing or understanding all of its historical facts. Universalism holds that there are many paths to God, including but not limited to Jesus. Universalism is a common belief among Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews and those unaffiliated with any traditional religion. Yet universalism is impossible to reconcile with traditional, orthodox Christianity.

- ▶ Carefully consider and list the criteria you believe must be considered to determine if a doctrine is a fundamental part of Christianity which cannot be compromised, or a lesser part of theology that can be disagreed upon between Christians with no ill effect. List your criteria.
  - ✓ Is the doctrine in clear defiance of the Bible's plain teaching, or is the doctrine based on scriptures that reasonable people could interpret differently in good faith?
  - ✓ Will unbelievers' souls be put in jeopardy by if they believe the doctrine, or is belief in the doctrine distinct from their salvation?
  - ✓ Will believers' relationships with God be harmed by the doctrine, or can the doctrine coexist with good discipleship?
- ▶ Is it necessary for Inclusivists and Exclusivists to agree, or can there be disagreement on this subject among Christians?
  - ✓ As was seen in the prior lesson, Inclusivists base their doctrine on reasonable interpretations of the scriptures.
  - ✓ Belief in Inclusivism will not separate anyone from the Lord, because Inclusivists believe in spreading the Gospel, and because Inclusivism only applies to those who have not yet been able to hear and truly consider the information of the Gospel. Those people would be in that condition whether Inclusivism is believed or not.
  - ✓ Because of the above, it is a matter of conscience whether belief in Inclusivism will harm a believer's relationship with God (similar to a believer's response to "meat sacrificed to idols" **1 Cor 10:23-33**).
  - ✓ Because of the above, Exclusivists should not condemn Inclusivists.

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AN HONEST QUESTION!**

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### **Apologetics for “One Way”**

While Exclusivists and Inclusivists disagree upon the exact way people access the Gospel, there is no disagreement that the human spirit can be reconciled to God through the Gospel alone. There are many reasons for this belief...

**Many people ≠ many paths...** There are many kinds of people, but just one kind of soul.

*“Those who believe in “many paths” invariably mention the tremendous diversity among his creation. Why would God create so many kinds of people, they argue, yet require us all to approach him in just one way? ...I might as well say that there are many people at a firing range, so it is acceptable for everyone to shoot in any direction they please. Doesn’t it make more sense to say there is one target, and one way to hit the target, just as there is one God, and one path to God? ...In the same way, when Jesus said, “no one comes to the Father except through me,” he provided a simple, clear path to God, a way that cannot be missed among the clutter of life. Jesus said the gate is narrow and hard to enter. But it is not a maze.” (TGAM)*

- ▶ In what ways are people different from each other? In what ways are we the same? What do your answers imply about the “many paths” idea?
  - ✓ All people are different physically, and in terms of our experiences, which shapes our beliefs and behavior.
  - ✓ But all people are the same in terms of basic desires and needs (safety, food, love, etc.), and in terms of our fundamental abilities.
  - ✓ Since all humanity’s desires, needs and fundamental abilities are the same, it makes sense that the way to meet those our needs and desires would be fundamentally the same.

**Many paths to God...** But just one path is God.

*“...Christianity is radically different from all other religions in one important way: it teaches that its human founder is God. No other worldwide religion makes this claim. If it is true, the God/man idea gives a level of authority to everything Jesus taught that no other religion can match, and this includes his famous “I am the way” assertion. Understanding the Christian’s commitment to the one way doctrine must begin by recognizing that we believe this teaching comes directly from the lips of God Almighty. Either Jesus is God, or he is not. If he is, I had better believe everything he has to say, including “no one comes to the Father except through me.” If Jesus is not God, Christianity is a farce at best and an abomination at worst.” (TGAM)*

- ▶ Why might other religions (especially Judaism and Islam) believe Christianity is an abomination? (Hints: Luke 5:21 and Exodus 20:3).
  - ✓ If Jesus is not God, then worship of him is idolatry.

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**Is it up to us or not?** The Judeo/Christian idea of God's grace is an unavoidable theological roadblock...

*"...Jesus said we can do nothing to earn reconciliation with God, while Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims teach the exact opposite: that peace or salvation is available through the four noble truths of Buddhism, or the dharma of Hinduism, or the five pillars of Islam. Each of these paths involves human effort leading to a harmonious existence or to acceptance by God. But Jesus taught that acceptance by God leads to good works, not the other way around. The importance of this difference cannot be overstated. If Jesus is right, the Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus are simply wrong about the path, and vice versa. There is no middle ground. ...If there were multiple paths to God, I would have a role to play in plotting my own course, exercising my free will to choose this path or that one. Inevitably, I would fail in plotting that course because I lack the necessary moral discipline to stick to the path." (TGAM)*

- ▶ How does the belief that Jesus is God connect with the doctrine of grace? (Hint: John 12:32)

- ✓ Grace is God drawing us up to Him. Jesus, being God, drew all men to himself through his Passion.

**Can we reach the same God when we disagree on who He is?** Our different paths head in many different directions ...

*"...a Hindu may be monotheistic, henotheistic, polytheistic, or pantheistic, depending upon his village or temple of origin. On the other hand, the three Western religions are strictly monotheistic. Both Buddhism and Hinduism teach reincarnation, a concept completely foreign to Christianity, Judaism (except among some fringe medieval mystics), and Islam. Many Buddhists and some liberal Jews actually deny the existence of God. And since Judaism and Islam bluntly deny Jesus' divinity claim, either they are right and he is wrong, or vice versa. We cannot have it both ways.*

*"These are not trifling variations or slippery paradoxes; they are fundamental differences, which prove it is no more possible for all of the world's major religions to be equally correct paths to one God than it is possible to play baseball, football, and soccer simultaneously on one field." (TGAM)*

- ▶ If the answer to apparent contradictions in the Bible is not "This," or "That," but rather, "Yes," as we have studied, why not give that same answer to contradictions between religions? (Hint: Exodus 8:26 and Deuteronomy 18:10-12)
- ✓ This is not a matter of a paradox (antinomy) within the Bible where the same God states two apparently contradictory things, such as with a Biblical paradox such as the Trinity and monotheism. It is a matter of different faith systems (different gods) in opposition to each other. Therefore we not able to assume that both sides of the paradox are somehow equally true even if logic indicates otherwise

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## The Gospel according to

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because the same God is true, but must choose one side or the other, one god or the other.

Even the most similar paths climb different mountains...

*"...Rabbinic Judaism insists that Jesus was at best a human prophet or teacher. But Christianity teaches that he was the incarnate Creator of the universe. To accept the position of Rabbinic Judaism is to disavow the heart and soul of Christianity. There is no truth between these truths, because each side of the question specifically calls the other false. Only one can really be true, hence, one path to God.*

*"...Christianity and (to some extent) Judaism say we must ask God to come down to us. Of course, Christianity and Judaism disagree on how and why God will honor that request. Either he will accept repentance, mitzvot, Torah study, prayer, and fasting as reparation for my sins, or he will accept Jesus' death and resurrection. Again, it cannot be both. The words of Jesus do not allow that luxury." (TGAM)*

- ▶ What does the difference in Judaism and Christianity's beliefs about how and why God will come down to us have to do with ideas about the nature of sin and atonement for sin?
  - ✓ If Judaism is correct about what God will accept as a redeeming payment for our sins, Jesus' sacrifice was unnecessary. If Christianity is correct, nothing other than Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection will accomplish our redemption.

### The Bible

The above reasons for the Christian doctrine of "One Way" call on logic. There is also a firm basis in the Bible for this doctrine...

**Is "One Way" a Christian invention? Consider the Hebrew scriptures...**

*"Able's offering pleases the Lord, but Cain's does not. One way. [Ge 4:4-5] Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's unfortunate sons, are killed by "fire from the Presence of the Lord" because they try to approach God on their own terms. One way. Aaron is cautioned to draw near to God in the Most Holy Place only through the prescribed ritual and at the prescribed time upon pain of death. One way. [Lv 16:2]" (TGAM)*

- ▶ Can you think of other examples of God's insistence on one way of approach in the Hebrew Scriptures?
  - ✓ The Tower of Babel can be interpreted to mean our efforts are unacceptable, and to prove it God made it impossible for our efforts to even come close.
  - ✓ Noah and the flood showed that of all the world's ways, only Noah's was acceptable.
  - ✓ The golden calf.

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**Are Christians the first to say “New Age” is wrong? Consider the Tanakh on polytheism, pantheism, paganism...**

*“All of Israel is warned not to allow a person to remain among them who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead.” That pretty much rules out the New Age religious concepts of today. And the reason for this prohibition? ‘Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord.’ One way. [Dt 18:10-12] ...Each of the ten plagues of the Exodus was intended to prove his [God’s] superiority to a specific god in the Egyptian pantheon, from Hapi, the spirit of the Nile, who was conquered when the Lord turned the Nile to blood; to Seth, protector of crops who was defeated when the locusts devoured Egypt’s grain; to Ra, the sun god, who was vanquished when the Lord caused darkness to cover Egypt at midday; to Pharaoh himself, the ultimate god of Egyptian polytheism, who could not even defend his first born child from Yahweh. It seems that one of the motives behind God’s flamboyant approach to freeing his chosen people was to teach the children of Abraham that the Egyptian religion’s “path” was a dead end. The other popular religious systems of that era fared no better. Consider the following divine instructions concerning the Canaanite religions:*

*“Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. You must not worship the Lord your God in their way. . . . You are not to do as we do here today, everyone as he sees fit. . . . Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. Offer them only at the place the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you.” (Dt 12:2–4, 8, 13–14 ) NIV*

*“The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not wait at the end of many paths in the time of Moses, and God does not change. Why should I believe he waits at the end of many paths today?” (TGAM)*

**Christianity is not a system of man’s search for God,  
but a story of God’s search for man.**

*(Peter Kreeft, Fundamentals of the Faith (San Francisco, CA; Ignatius; 1988) pp. 76–77)*

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