

How Can You Claim There Is Only One Way To God?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 August 2020

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 0 0] Hi again, welcome back to the second of our Questioning Christianity series, where we take a look at some of the hard questions that are asked today. Maybe you have those questions or you know people that have had them and we hope this will be a helpful way to begin to explore that by looking at what the Bible says and having a think together.

Our question today is, how can you say there is only one way to God? So I'm going to read a part of the Bible and then we'll think about it and I'll pray and then we'll sing at the end there.

So our passage today is words of Jesus from John chapter 6 beginning at verse 27. Where Jesus says, Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval. Then they asked him, What must we do to do the works God requires? Jesus answered, The work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent. So they asked him, What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness. As it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat. Jesus said to them, Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.

For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Sir, they said, always give us this bread. Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me, and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my will, but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. Those are the words of Jesus. Now, last week, I was watching a travel documentary where a father and son travelled to Papua New Guinea, and while on their travels, they went to a very remote island, were met by a villager there who showed them around the island and took them to this cave. And in this cave were a series, a large collection of skeletons and especially of skulls. And he explained that previously his tribe had been cannibals. They would kill and eat their enemies. And he said, we used to be cannibals until Christian missionaries came, and then that all stopped. Now, was that a good thing? Or was that an imposition of a different set of values? This week, we're going to think about a question, isn't it arrogant to say your religion is superior and to try to convert others to it? Perhaps you've heard the objection, aren't other religions also equally good at providing fulfilment and meaning for their followers. So why impose Christianity on them? Or maybe the argument runs that to claim exclusive truth is narrow, it divides people, it can lead to conflict, and indeed it has led to conflict.

[4 : 11] So that initially, and certainly on the surface, it might sound much more tolerant to say all beliefs are equally valid. All religions are equally valid. To borrow the title of a Manic Street Preachers album, this is my truth, tell me yours. Is it arrogant to say that one religion, the Christian religion, has the truth? Let's explore that together. Three questions to briefly touch on. First of all, is it arrogant to claim there is exclusive truth? Is it arrogant to claim there's only one way to God?

And is it arrogant to try and convert someone else to your view? And all along the way, and especially as we draw our thoughts towards a close, where does Jesus fit into the arguments? But let's begin with that question. Is it arrogant to claim there is exclusive truth? Now let's begin by being honest. The claim of exclusive truth is a big hurdle towards someone accepting the Christian faith. You and I probably know people who have used truth as a weapon, as a power play. We know that truth and claiming the truth can be abused, that it can be used to tear others down and to create division. Now of course that's not just a problem for Christianity, but it still remains a hurdle. And I think a sort of an additional layer of complexity, complexity as it were, is that we are now considered to be living in a post-truth society. 2016 post-truth was the word of the year, where how I feel is often regarded as of greater significance than is it true? Where the personal can be valued more highly than the objective? Now Rebecca McLaughlin in her excellent book, *Confronting Christianity*, points out that things can be both personally true and objectively true. One example she cites is the

Me Too movement and those stories of sexual abuse survivors. Their powerful personal stories are just that, they're personal, but they're also objectively true. So truth can be both personal and objective. In fact, Christian testimony, the testimony of a Christian like myself would say, yes, I believe Jesus is the Son of God. I believe that He is my only hope in life and death. And on my best days, He shapes everything in my life, how I think and feel and act. And that's profoundly personal. But I also believe that it's grounded in history, as we thought last week, grounded in the reliability of the Bible. A truth that is personal and truth that is objective at the same time. Because

Christianity, as we said last week, and we need to keep saying, is grounded in historical facts. Now we instinctively know that to deny history is wrong. So I studied history at university and I think it was towards the end of my time there, a significant scholar down in England was sort of being discredited because he was a Holocaust denier, trying to say, trying to suggest that the figures were inflated. We know that's wrong. Turkey's refusal to own its genocide of the Kurds in 1930 is wrong. We in the United Kingdom, we need to recognise, own up to, confess our relationship to slavery in the past. We cannot deny or gloss over history.

Last week, we thought about the fact that Christianity stands or falls on the basis of historical facts that centre on the life of Jesus, his coming into the world, his life, his death, and especially the historical facts around the resurrection of Jesus. How do I feel about that? How do you feel about that?

[9 : 00] We need to recognise that our feelings don't alter that objective reality of events that happened some 2,000 years ago. Either those events are true or they are false. So the onus falls on us to investigate.

But it's not arrogant to claim there is exclusive truth, particularly if it's grounded in historical facts. But here's something that we need to remember as Christians in all of this.

That truth without love comes across as smug and arrogant and is profoundly off-putting.

We would do well to remember the words of Gandhi who famously said, I like their Christ, I don't like their Christians.

So we need to watch how we hold on to the truths that we believe in. Every claim of truth is by necessity exclusive.

[10 : 13] Indeed to say there is no such thing as exclusive truth is an exclusive truth claim in and of itself. So we need to see, sort of taking a bigger picture, Christianity is not the only religion and it's not the only worldview that makes exclusive truth claims. All truth is by extension exclusive.

Truth always excludes its opposites. Otherwise, all we have left is personal opinion. But truth excludes. Is it arrogant to claim exclusive truth?

Perhaps we could turn the question on its head. Is it arrogant to claim there is no exclusive truth? To claim a standpoint where we can say that all the religions and all people in all times have got it wrong and we are the enlightened ones.

So moving from there, let's move to the next question to consider. Is it arrogant to claim there is only one way to God? Now Jesus, again in the book of John, chapter 14, verse 6, says this.

I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Now let's read that again with emphasis.

[11 : 43] I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

That's some radical claims from Jesus, isn't it? Now are those fighting words from Jesus? Is this arrogance? Is it arrogant to claim there is only one way to God?

And that is through Jesus. Let's take a step back. Now you've probably heard at some point, possibly heard the story of a group of blind men who encounter an elephant and they begin to examine the elephant to discover what it's like.

And one person takes hold of the trunk and says an elephant is like a snake. Another wraps its arms around a leg and say an elephant is like a tree. Another finds the tusk and say an elephant is like a spear.

Another finds the tail and says an elephant must be like a rope. In a sense it's an amusing story but there's an assumption lying behind that story that the religions of the world hold part of the truth but they are blinded to the whole picture.

[13 : 01] The storyteller alone sees the whole. He knows the whole truth. The blind people only see a part. Now there are significant issues with that story.

Not least the fact that it is not respectful to the differences that there are between religions. When it claims that when there are claims that all roads lead to the same God or that all paths to God are equally valid.

It flattens out clear differences and distinctions. I will think about that in a moment. But also as the storyteller from a distance claims not to be blind claims to be able to see the whole elephant there is a mocking tone.

There is indeed a sense of arrogance in standing in judgment over other religions. When we take a basic review of some of the major world faiths we recognise there are significant differences that they are not the same.

So one of the things that people would do to sort of stifle debate and discussion is say well all religions are equally valid and should be treated the same. But when we think about how do the different religions view God?

[14 : 31] Well Buddhism as an example would say there is no God. Buddha was very clear I am not God do not worship me. Hinduism has many gods. Islam has a God who is one and who is solitary whereas Christianity has a God who is one but that one is made up of three persons Father, Son and Holy Spirit known as the Trinity.

Or we come to how do the different religions think about Jesus? And some would say he is a prophet many to say he is worthy of respect but only in Christianity is there the claim from the lips of Jesus and from the teaching of the Bible that he is the Son of God and that he is the Saviour of the world.

So we can see that there are vast differences and to flatten the differences to treat all religions as a lump is patronising and unhelpful.

More helpful is to see the struggle that people have as they think about the differences. Nabi Al Qureshi was a famous recent convert from Islam to Christianity that he died just a few years ago.

He wrote the book called Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus brought up in a conservative Islamic home. He came to a friendship with a Christian man and he spent four years wrestling with objections to the Christian faith, wrestling with the claims of Jesus Christ compared to the teaching of Islam.

[16 : 13] And he talks about his day of converting from Islam to Christianity and faith in Jesus and he says he mourned the impact of that decision because he recognised the impact and the cost it would have in terms of family relationships, in terms of his place in his community.

So it's important for us to see that respect recognises the great differences there are between the different religions and world views.

To say that all religions are equal is to ignore the claim of the Bible. To say that all religions are the same is to deny what the Bible says when it describes itself as revelation and not speculation.

So it's not arrogant, it's just recognising that every world view will claim its truth to the exclusion of others and all religions do that.

But again, we need to remember attitude matters. Particularly when it comes to discussing between religions.

[17 : 45] You know, in our culture, which is often described as now an outrage culture, where we see cancel culture happening a lot, we need to see that to disagree with someone does not mean that we disrespect that person.

To take a different view of God or of Jesus or of faith does not mean that I hate the other person. When we treat people as image bearers of God, when we treat people as worthy of dignity, whatever they believe, then we should be able to disagree without disrespect.

It is possible to hold truth in high regard and to hold people in high regard. And the Bible would have us do that.

And that leads us to think about a last question. Is it arrogant to try and convert someone else? So having recognised that everybody who claims truth is excluding the opposite, having seen that there are significant differences in the truth claims between religions, should we ever cross the boundary to try and convert someone else?

Maybe you remember the story of John Allen Chow, which hit the headlines back in 2018. He was killed as he attempted to visit the people of the Sentinel Islands.

[19 : 17] He wanted to share the message Jesus loves you with them. And as he landed, he was killed.

And as people wrote their opinion pieces in newspapers, many came to the conclusion that Chow was wrong and was arrogant to try to convert these ancient tribes, to convert those who were following traditional religions to Christianity.

arguing in some cases that there's a connection between religion and conflict. Maybe you would agree with that viewpoint.

But if we remember what we just thought about, we go back to our last point, to share the truth in love is not to be of necessity arrogant or hateful.

absolutely sometimes the Christian church has been arrogant in the way that they have tried to convert people, that the church has made mistakes but it doesn't necessarily have to be that way.

[20 : 30] And indeed, sometimes we think about everyday life persuading someone of truth can be an act of love.

I smell gas. You should get out of here. You are ill. You need treatment.

That kind of persuasion is loving. Now, if we are persuaded that Christianity is true, then we recognise it has an urgent life or death message.

So the truth has that motivating quality. That we believe Jesus is Lord of all, that he is King of kings, that he is also the judge of the living and the dead, that we are by nature enemies of God, that we have rebelled against God, we've broken his law and we stand under the judgment of God with the certain prospect of eternal punishment in hell.

Now, those are difficult concepts, but we believe them to be true. We also believe it to be true that God in his love and mercy sent Jesus to take our place and to die in the place of every sinner who would put their trust in Jesus to have forgiveness and eternal life.

[22 : 01] so that the Christian message has implications for now and has implications for life after death. There is an urgency to it and so part of our motivation is that we want to persuade of that truth and we want to do that out of love.

Some people would say, no, we should just keep our views out of public life. failing to recognise, I think, that everybody, whether we're religious or not, we all have strongly held views, we all come to a particular agenda or topic with certain biases and it seems rather arrogant to suggest that only some views are valid at the table, only some views are acceptable in public life and Christianity is not one of those.

And when we think about the arrogance question to do with conversion as well, we need to recognise Christianity is not and never has been about morality so we should never come across it as arrogant because we don't believe Jesus came to make bad people good, we believe Jesus came to make spiritually dead people alive, that we believe the only way that we can be saved and be part of God's family is because of his grace, that free undeserved kindness he gives us, not by our goodness, not by our moral performance.

Jesus is our hope, not ourselves, so that should always make us humble and Christianity at its best humbly follows Jesus as Lord.

Now, where does Jesus fit into this discussion? We've already heard him say, I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me and then we read in John chapter 6, verse 27 onwards, a catalogue of exclusive truth claims.

[24 : 02] So we need to recognise that Jesus made exclusive claims, he also showed amazing love and Christians look to follow in his footsteps.

So Jesus says, for example, in these verses, I give eternal life. He says, I have the approval of God my Father.

He says, if you want to please God, you must believe in me. He compares himself to bread and says, I am the bread of life who gives eternal satisfaction.

He says, I do the will of God. My people belong to me as a gift from God my Father and I will lose none of them, he says. He says, to believe in him is to receive eternal life, is to have resurrection life.

And so when you start listening to Jesus, the central figure in our faith, he makes those huge claims, he is unique among religious leaders in saying, I am God and I am saviour and I have come to die in the place of sinners to give the gift of eternal life.

[25 : 27] Jesus is a historical figure. Everybody agrees on that. And as Christians, we are persuaded that the Bible contains truth. And therefore, the crucial question for us and Jesus asked it is, who do you say I am?

Who do we say Jesus is? Because if Jesus is God, then any religion, any worldview that doesn't worship him as God must therefore be false.

Every religion or worldview that doesn't worship him as God fails to love God properly because they fail to love Jesus as he truly is.

Of course, on the other hand, if Jesus is not God, Christianity fails and is false. But the point is that our whole faith rests on historical truth.

It's so important to examine the life, the teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because if he is true and if what he says is true, then you and I need him and his message has life-changing significance.

[26 : 55] Now let's pray together briefly. Dear God, we have been considering some striking words from Jesus.

Jesus. When he claims to be the only way to God, the way, the truth and the life, the one who can give eternal life, giving life beyond death, giving true and lasting satisfaction.

God and yet we recognize in Jesus, someone who was never seen to be proud, but who was humble, who was for the weak, who was for the oppressed, who didn't step on the heads of others to get ahead, the one who willingly came to the cross to die.

Lord, as Christians we would confess there are times when perhaps we have used the truth as a weapon and we've wanted to win arguments rather than wanting to love people well.

But Lord, we also confess there are times when we have failed to overcome our own weakness or embarrassment to deliver this life changing, life giving good news, this declaration that Jesus is the King.

[28 : 20] King. Pray that you'd help each of us to wrestle with the claims of truth, to be willing to investigate and to explore.

Pray that you'd help us with that and help us to help one another with that. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So, next week we will think about the claim that God is good and how we can marry that up with all the evil and the suffering that we see in the world.

One of the main objections to faith, one of the hardest questions to begin to think about. And so, hopefully that will be a time where we can begin to reflect on that.

We'll look forward to that next week. We'll close with a couple of songs just as we did last week. And, yeah, look forward to sharing with you again same time next week.

Take care.