

The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration

Lesson 5: The Selectivity of the Gospel

Statement 4. We affirm that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, the only mediator between God and humanity (John 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:5). We deny that anyone is saved in any other way than by Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The Bible offers no hope that sincere worshippers of other religions will be saved without personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Statement 17. We affirm that although true doctrine is vital for spiritual health and well-being, we are not saved by doctrine. Doctrine is necessary to inform us how we may be saved by Christ, but it is Christ who saves. We deny that the doctrines of the Gospel can be rejected without harm. Denial of the Gospel brings spiritual ruin and exposes us to God's judgment.

I. Introduction: Why These Two Statements Together?

A. They both affirm that . . .

1. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, and His Gospel alone, saves.
2. Despite the degree of sincerity or honesty, neither false beliefs nor true doctrine provides the means of eternal life.
3. Knowledge of and faith in Jesus is God's exclusive and final word on salvation.

B. They both assist the Church in defining its . . .

1. Essential purpose ("make disciples," Matt. 28:19-20)
2. Essential priorities: Evangelize and edify

C. They both explicitly state that there is an important distinction between . . .

1. The doctrine that saves (i.e., the Gospel), and
2. The doctrine that grows us up in salvation

II. Christianity and Exclusivism

A. Dividing Up the Camp of World Religions

1. *Pluralism* is the belief that God has not revealed himself in any unique sense within one religious tradition, but reveals himself in all religious traditions. Consequently, there are as many ways to obtain salvation as there are religions. There is nothing normative about one religion or religious figure. All of the world's religions are equally legitimate human responses to the same divine reality.
2. *Exclusivism* is the belief that the central claims of a particular religion are true and all other central claims to the contrary are to be rejected as false. Moreover, God has definitively and uniquely revealed himself in one religion and, as a result, there is one and only one way in which humans can obtain salvation. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are the chief proponents of exclusivism.
3. *Inclusivism* is the belief that while the central claims of one religious tradition are true, a much more positive view of other religions is necessary. Though Jesus Christ, for example, may be God's unique provision for salvation, God is said to be providing salvation to those of other traditions who do not know the claims of Christianity. Salvation is not limited to those who have explicit knowledge or faith in Jesus Christ. Modern Roman Catholicism is the major advocate of this position.

B. If Christianity is true, then . . .

1. All other religions are necessarily false in so far as they contradict essential Christian precepts.
2. It is the only religion that is biblically faithful, logically consistent, empirically adequate, and existentially viable.
3. No other religion can adequately explain the existence of the universe, the condition of the human heart, and our perennial desire for authentic love and lasting happiness.

C. Quotables on the Uniqueness of Christianity

“If the claim to Christ’s uniqueness and exclusivity rested merely on the declaration of the church or the Christian, it could and probably would warrant the charge of arrogant bigotry . . . Yet the church is submitting to and echoing the claims of Jesus himself” (R.C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right*, p. 119).

“If he [Jesus] was indeed God incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must as such be uniquely superior to all other religions” (John Hick, *The Metaphor of God*).

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John the Apostle).

D. Scriptural Testimony on the Exclusivity of Christianity

1. Old Testament: Ex. 20:1-5; Deut. 5:6-7; 13:1-18; Josh. 24:14-25; Is. 40; 44:9-20; Jer. 10:1-16; 44:2-4
2. New Testament: John 5:24; 10:7-9; 14:6; Acts 4:12; Romans 3:21-26; 5:12-21; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Ephesians 1:21; 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; 1 John 5:12; Revelation 5:1-14; 20:15.
3. John 14:6 — some observations
 - a) Jesus does not simply show the way, but claims He *is* the way.
 - b) Jesus does not say “none among you” but says “no one”
 - c) The definite article repeated before “way,” “truth,” and “life” is an emphatic means of saying that all others making this claim are false.
 - d) Jesus is the way because:
 - (1) He is the Truth of God (Jn. 1:14,18; Jesus *exegetes* God and is God’s final self-revelation)
 - (2) He is the Life of God (Jn. 1:4; 5:26; 11:25; 1 Jn. 5:20)
 - e) Therefore, because Jesus is God’s Truth and Life He is the only way to God. Consequently . . .
 - (1) It is entirely wrong for someone to say they know God based upon some other religious preference that dismisses or contradicts the claims of Jesus.
 - (2) Other religions are wholly ineffective at bringing people to God. “*No-one* comes to the Father except/unless/if not by me.”
 - (3) This exclusive claim is the necessary presupposition behind all biblically faithful evangelistic efforts.
4. Acts 4:12 — some observations*
 - a) Peter’s claim “Salvation is found in no one else” excludes the possibility of finding salvation from, through, or in any alternative source other than Jesus.
 - b) “for” is telic and sets up Peter’s explanation of the claim
 - c) “under heaven” shows how extensive the exclusion is of all other names
 - d) “given to men” where “men” is generic and indicates all humans, not just Jews or Christians
 - e) “‘name’ refers to the focus of God’s universal redemptive plan in the person and work of Jesus.”
 - (1) “name” suggests a specific knowledge about Jesus (his person and work)
 - (2) at the name of Jesus everyone will one day bow (Philip. 2:10)
 - f) Therefore, there is no one else comparable to Jesus that can offer salvation and there is no different name given, now and forever more, whereby we must be saved. This is perfectly consonant with Paul in Eph. 1:21 where he states that Christ has been raised “far above . . . every title that can be given, *not only in the present age but also in the one to come.*”

E. The Uniqueness of the Christianity in Relation to Jesus’ Person and Work

1. No other religious leader was a God-Man (On Christ’s deity see Jn. 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pt. 1:1. On Christ’s humanity see Philip. 2:5-8; 1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:8; 1 Jn. 1:1; 3:16; 4:2; 5:6).
2. No other religious leader atoned for the sins of the world (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pt. 3:18)

3. No other religious leader was sinless (Jn. 8:46; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pt. 1:19)
4. No other religious leader was raised from the dead (Matt. 16:21; Acts 2:24; 4:10; Rom. 4:25; Eph. 1:20)
5. No other religious leader satisfies God's justice (Rom. 3:25-26; 1 Jn. 2:2)
6. No other religious leader reconciles God and sinful humans (2 Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:22)

F. Implications of Christian Exclusivism

1. *We must restore our confidence in the Gospel as a reflection of our confidence in God Almighty.*
 - a) We cannot be ashamed of the Gospel because of charges of intolerance, arrogance, or bigotry.
 - b) The Gospel is "Good News" not just a "good idea." We do not merely persuade others of our "preference" in the marketplace of religious ideas. Rather we convey a divine message with the authority of Almighty God. After all, the Gospel is as dependable as God Himself.
2. *We must hold firmly to the fact that sincerity is not a measure of truth—we must not confuse the two.*
3. *The heartbeat of God and the urgency of Hell must be our motivation when "speaking the truth in love."*
 - a) While it may appear hateful to tell others that their beliefs are wrong, how much more hateful is it to be silent about the one Truth that genuinely offers eternal life?
4. *Not to stand tall for the exclusive claims of Christ may be an indication of our failure to grasp the grace of God in our own lives.*
 - a) It is the height of selfishness and pride to keep the Good News to our selves.
 - b) The Good News is not a fortune to be hoarded, but a treasure to be shared with all.
5. *Other religions offering salvation are not merely inferior, but false and devoid of salvific truth (Eph. 4:4-6).*

III. Christianity and the Place of Doctrine

A. Reflections on the Scope of Doctrine

1. Doctrine (non-essential, biblical teachings) is no substitute for evangelism.
2. There is a minimum set of truths (essential, biblical teachings) that must be believed in order to be saved.
3. Conversely, there is a ceiling to the truths (essential, biblical teachings) that must be believed in order to be saved.
4. Therefore, knowing *some* redemptive truth may not entail knowing *enough* redemptive truth to be saved. Scripture records instances where people received some redemptive truths but were urged to believe further redemptive truths in order to be saved (see, e.g., the Samaritans, Jn. 4:20-24; God-fearing Jews and Gentiles, Acts 2:5; 10:2; zealous Jews, Rom. 10:1-3; presumably Jewish apostates, Heb. 6:4-6).
5. God has spoken finally and completely to us in His Son and we must not fall short in communicating essential truths about His person and work when sharing the Good News with others.
6. At the same time, we must not go beyond what is necessary for one to know about Christ in order to be saved.

* These observations are gleaned from "A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach" by R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips" in Dennis L. Okholm & Timothy R. Phillips, Eds. *More Than One Way: Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (pp. 230ff).