

A panel discussion was once held at a college in Manhattan between a Christian pastor, Jewish rabbi, and Muslim imam about the differences in their respective religions. The discussion was very respectful, and they actually came to agreement: *they can't all be right*. They all agreed with the statement: "If Christians are right about Jesus being God, then Muslims and Jews fail in a serious way to love God as God really is, but if Muslims and Jews are right that Jesus is not God but rather a teacher or prophet, then Christians fail in a serious way to love God as God really is." The college students would have none of this. None of this business about intolerance. None of this business about pretending these doctrinal differences actually matter. What matters most is being a loving person yourself. One student cried out in frustration, "We will *never* come to know peace on earth if religious leaders keep on making such exclusive claims!"

If you could capture the biggest problem our culture has with Christianity, it could be summed up with one word: exclusivity. "Tolerance, inclusion, acceptance" are all buzz words that make society great. "Intolerance, the Truth, religion" are all taboo words to be banned from society. Insisting that Jesus is the only way to heaven and other peaceful religions lead people to hell can only lead to strife, division, and violence. Exclusive religion only leads to arrogance – and you Christians are the worst. It's arrogant to claim you're the best religion and try to convert everyone to it. That arrogant exclusivity leads to needless division. The differences are minor doctrinal differences, only surface issues of different interpretations. All religions are equally valid views of a larger spiritual reality. All religions fulfill the spiritual and emotional needs for each individual. All religions worship the same God; they just call him different names.

This concern over arrogance is a good one. It certainly is a danger, and Christians are not exempted. Throughout history, Christians have been arrogant. We have failed to dialogue with others with gentleness and respect. We have preferred to instead set up stereotypes of other cultures and religions. It can easily lead to, "I'm saved because of my devotion to our doctrine. My church affiliation gets me to heaven." All of this is sin. All of this is a problem. But how can we resolve this problem, not just on the part of Christians but everyone?

A common solution is the idea, "All religions are equally valid – they all believe in the same God." But there's a hidden assumption lying behind this statement. Who is this God? It certainly cannot be a god who requires child sacrifice or public prostitution of the most vulnerable in our society. No one would say that is an equally valid religion. It often assumes a view of God as an all-loving, non-personal spirit in the world that ties everyone together. It's ironically assuming an exclusive doctrinal belief contrary to many other faiths. Islam rejects Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection as the embodiment of God's love. He's the #2 prophet after Mohammed. Judaism rejects Jesus' messiahship. He certainly cannot be the Son of God. Christianity holds fast to Jesus as a loving God who restored a relationship with us. Buddhism doesn't believe in a personal God who wants to have a relationship with you at all. There are fundamental and self-contradictory views about who God is and what his work means. The view that doctrinal differences are not important is in itself a belief and doctrine. The idea that "All religions are equally valid" is ironically exclusionary to many major faiths.

Another common solution is the idea, "All religions are equally wrong – they're conditioned by your upbringing." You're only Christian because you were brought up in a Christian home in America. If you were raised in the Middle East, you'd be Muslim. Religion is

relative. It's only as good as the situation around you. Therefore, you must doubt any religious beliefs you have because it could be different somewhere else. You can't apply a belief to everyone. But where did we get this idea that religion is relative? Not everyone in the world believes this. In fact, many don't. Ironically we got it largely from our own Western culture. Let's see where this absolute relativity takes us. The idea "Every religious belief is relative and unreliable" is, ironically, absolutist and exclusive. It has that word "every." It's applying a belief onto everyone. It's contradicting itself by trying to make all religions relative except the religious idea I'm making now. If everything is unreliable, we should then doubt *our culture's own skepticism of religion* because of our upbringing. We simply can't cop-out and say, "There's no way to find spiritual reality."

We simply can't live life with complete relativity. We must have exclusive statements and evaluate others, as hard as that is. You have to have one foundation to lean on in life. There's no way around it. Then the question is: which one best solves our problem of arrogance and selfishness and leads to humbleness when dealing with others?

Paul did that very thing with the Romans. His own people of Israel wanted to create an identity without Christ in the picture, much like many people today. "***Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.***" God's righteousness is a gift he gives. Christ freely gives his perfection to you so you have a perfect status before God. That's already done and complete. But if you don't want that, Paul says, fine. This is the result, "***The person who does these things will live by them.***" If you want to establish your identity by what you do and the pride you can achieve, you have to do it perfectly all the time. Live by these commands every day, 24/7. This kind of religion still happens today. Islam requires fulfillment of the Five Pillars – confession of faith, helping the poor, fasting, prayer five times a day, a trip to Mecca. Judaism requires fulfillment of rabbinical traditions. Secularism requires fulfillment of an identity based on how many educational initials are after your name, how many zeros are in your salary, how much prestige and recognition you get at work, how much impact you have on society.

All these religions and philosophies could be lined up in a column with a one word title: do. It's all on you. You must do it all. No wonder we see so much stress. No wonder we see so many relationships broken due to the never ending pursuit of overtime and workaholism. No wonder we see so many religions and life mottos that try to pretend the impossible requirement is possible, "Just be a good person." No matter how much we want to gloss over these problems with this kind of religion, they all end in dead-ends. They rob society of lasting comfort.

Take a look at world religions and philosophies. What other God has done what Jesus has? He stands alone. Above Jesus' work is the word: done! Only Jesus came into this world and rooted himself to our history. No other religion has that. Only Jesus came into this world full of our brokenness to restore what was lost. Only Jesus took it all upon himself to give his righteousness away. Only Jesus sacrifices for everyone without demanding anything to pay him back. Only Jesus demands 100% from himself and 0% from us.

Christian exclusivity is the only exclusivity that leads to humbleness. We are no better than others, since we're not saved by what we do. We're only saved by God's sheer grace for us. We're not surprised to find people in other religions or secularism who act kind and compassionate to others. Christians need Christ precisely because we're not kind and compassionate to others. It's an exclusivity that, at the heart of its reality, has a God who sacrifices to bring others peace and empowers his followers to do the same.

Christian exclusivity is the only exclusivity that leads to inclusivity. When we try to establish religion based on our own works, that must exclude people since it's requiring the impossible. When we reject all our works that can never, no matter how hard we try, establish the righteous identity we crave, then all people can be included. Take that burden off yourself! Stop trying to do the impossible task of establishing your own worth based on what you do. Look to Jesus to do it all for you. Trust him. Confess him.

If you really want religion to be inclusive of all sorts of peoples, just look around at the early Christian church. Look around today. Jews and Gentiles, enemies for centuries with an immovable cultural divide between them, selling their possessions for each other, even the poor and despised, inviting them into their homes. ***“There is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.”*** Today, Christians from Zambia, Norway, Pakistan, Japan, Mexico, and Brazil all joining together. No matter what culture, no matter what color of skin, no matter what language – all united. ***“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”***

“Only in Christ does Exclusive = Inclusive.” When we exclude our works that can never give us that righteous status before God, then everyone can be included. Religions or philosophies based on a person's own works, as good as that might sound, ironically end up excluding everyone. No one can match up. Christianity sure seems to be the epitome of exclusivity and needless division. *But just imagine this sight.* People from “every nation, tribe, people, and language” – a Nigerian man, a Nepalese woman, an Indonesian child standing alongside a German-American and African-American – joining together before God's throne in heaven, casting aside any hope of trying to bring in their own righteousness but instead confessing Christ alone as their only Savior. That will be one inclusive sight indeed. Amen.