

Week 33

Contemporary Issues: Do All Roads Lead to God?

Key Verses

John 14:6 "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

+ Introduction

Some think Christianity is just one way of many ways to get to God. Many illustrations have been used to attempt to prove this statement as true. Probably the most well-known is the thought that God is at the top of the mountain and there are many paths (all the various religions) to the top, but eventually, all these paths lead to God. Current culture certainly fits into this perspective as well with the popular cultural slogan going something like this, "There are many paths that lead to enlightenment. Beware of those that proclaim there is but one."

Yet, when statements like these are weighed against the teaching of the Bible, it is clear that there is only one way to be saved. That one way is not a method or something that we do. That one way is the God-Man Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear that He alone is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through Him. (John 14:6) Jesus is speaking about something very specific: how fallen humanity can receive complete forgiveness of all sins and the gift of the righteousness of God. So, it is false to say that all roads lead to God when it comes to salvation and forgiveness. However, in another sense, all roads do lead to God, which is explained in this lesson.

But of first importance, we must begin with the truth that there is only one God. No matter what you worship other than God, whether it is self (which is the prevalent god of our culture) or one of the millions of gods that humans have imagined, they are all false. There is only one true God- the God of the Bible. He is the one God who eternally exists in three persons: the Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit – all of whom are co-equal, co-eternal, and co-existent.

Let's dive into our topic.

+ Are all religions the same?

ACTS 17:16-18 *While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.*

It is nothing new to be in an environment of various philosophies and thoughts of religion. In fact, in this particular passage, Athens was known to be the gathering place for people of all backgrounds and worldviews to come to discuss and even debate the various views. Paul did not shy away because of the different views of religion, nor did he disrespect the people gathered in that arena. In Acts 17:22, Paul says, "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious." He recognizes the various idols and altars they have, even titled "to an unknown god" (vs.23). The people wanted to cover all the bases just in case they missed one "unknown god."

There was diversity of religion throughout Scripture, including the 1st Century in the early church days. This diversity continues to the present day.

When it comes to the fundamental teachings of world faiths, they can all be wrong, but they cannot all be right. Consider the differences between Hinduism and Islam. Hindus believe in many gods (polytheism), whereas Muslims strictly believe in one God (monotheism). For Hindus, Jesus is one of many gods, but for Muslims, He is merely a good prophet. In fact, according to Muslim doctrine, to believe in more than one God is to commit the sin of shirk and to destine one's soul to hell for eternity. ¹ Hindus' afterlife involves a karmic process of paying off debt to become one with the impersonal Brahman. Muslims believe in heaven and hell for people upon death, and it is determined according to how they lived their earthly lives in relationship to Allah. While there may be surface similarities between these two faiths, there are core disagreements on the fundamentals. Take a look at the chart below:

RELIGION	GOD	MEANS OF SALVATION	VIEW OF OTHER RELIGIONS
BUDDHISM	No God	Self-reliance	True Way
HINDUISM	1,000s of gods (Impersonal)	Reincarnation	All True
JUDAISM	One God: Yahweh	Works	Just Judaism
ISLAM	One God: Allah	Five Pillars	Just Islam
CHRISTIANITY	One God, Three Persons	Grace by Faith	Just Christianity

As you can see, there are huge differences. Let's dig a little deeper. Most faiths have some form of the "Golden Rule." Jesus said, "Do unto others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). Buddha said, "Consider others as yourself" (Dhammapada 10:1). Other religions, specifically Islam and Judaism, are monotheistic and affirm there is only one God (of course, they get it wrong when it comes to who that God is and what He is like). So, while the core tenets of other religions (particularly when it comes to the nature of God and the nature of salvation) are generally false, we must be careful not to dismiss truth discovered in those religions.

If a religion says to love your neighbor, serve the poor, or treat people equally, we have common ground. Paul, on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17), recognized this concept. He did not completely dismiss the beliefs of the Athenians; he used truth in their beliefs as common ground to discuss the resurrection of Jesus. Respecting other faiths can go a long way in our witness to non-believers.

The Bible is very clear that Jesus is the only path that leads to God. The night before Jesus was crucified, he had the Passover in an upper room with His disciples. He spoke to them for what would be the last time for all 13 of them to be together. One of the truths He wanted them to know was that He would prepare a place for them and return. When He explained that they already knew where He was going, one of the disciples named Thomas stopped Jesus and said he did not know where Jesus was going and asked how they would know the way. Because of Thomas' courage in asking that question, we have the answer Jesus gave, which is foundational to our lesson today. Jesus said to Thomas,

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me"
(John 14:6).

Jesus wanted them to know, understand, and believe that He is the only way to heaven. Not based on good works, ideologies, philosophies, or statues; salvation is based exclusively on a relationship with Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life. 1 Timothy 2:5 says, "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

Ironically, though, Christianity is not the only religion to claim to be the sole path to God. Most other religions (as you can see in the chart) teach that their beliefs are true, and others are wrong. According to Islam, the Qur'an is the true word of God (Allah) and the only avenue to salvation. Mormons believe that ultimate salvation is found only through Joseph Smith and the Mormon Church, utilizing the Book of Mormon as more authoritative than the Bible.

✚ Is Christianity unique?

While many religions claim to lead people to truth, Jesus uniquely claimed to be The Truth. In other words, Jesus did not merely consider Himself a path to God- He considered Himself to be God! In John 17, Jesus is praying to His Father and acknowledges time and again that they are "One." Even Thomas understood the unity of Jesus and God after the resurrection. Upon seeing the resurrected Jesus, Thomas humbly yet confidently proclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

Jesus did not merely make grandiose claims about His identity and ask people to blindly accept Him; rather, He backed them up with compelling proof such as the working of miracles, the fulfillment of prophecy, and ultimately His own resurrection. Of the world's major religious figures, Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Krishna, only one--Jesus is reported to have resurrected from the dead. A compelling body of historical evidence backs up this report. Jesus stands out as unique among the religious figures of the world.

The resurrection of Jesus confirms for the whole world that Jesus is Lord. The apostle Paul, who had seen the risen Jesus, writes that Jesus was *"declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead"* (Romans 1:4). This is why the Gospel of Jesus is considered good news. If Jesus truly is God in human flesh, then God is like Jesus. It means that God is not remote, arbitrary, or unreal. He is a God who loves us and who came to earth, so we could know Him in a personal way.

✦ Is it not arrogant to claim to have the only truth about God?

Years ago, in India, I met a woman of the Bahai faith. She proceeded to tell me that she embraced all religions and that as long as people held their beliefs with sincerity, their religion was true for them. Despite her attempt to be inclusive, she was just as exclusive as any other religion or belief, for even she excluded the exclusivists!

It is clear to see that all religions are not the same. All religions do not point to God. All religions do not claim that all religions are the same. At the heart of every religion is an uncompromising commitment to a particular way of defining who God is or is not and, accordingly, of defining life's purpose. Anyone who claims that all religions are the same reveals not only an ignorance of all religions but also a caricatured view of even the best-known ones. Every religion, at its core, is exclusive.

Jesus did not come down to earth to exclude anyone but to lead as many people as possible to the knowledge of God. Unlike some religions that exclude by gender, poverty, or race, the message of Jesus is inclusive for all. Colossians 3:11 says, *"In this new life, it does not matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and He lives in all of us."* Christ makes no human distinctions- He died and rose again so that all people could have a personal relationship with the living God.

One of the main reasons people stumble over Christianity is that it appears to be "exclusive." Jesus' claims about the nature of God and salvation occurring only through faith in Him seem narrow-minded. Jesus told His disciples, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"* (John 14:6). Jesus said many controversial things during His three-year earthly ministry, but perhaps none was as controversial as this. Jesus makes an exclusive claim to salvation. He says that He is the only way to the Father. He says He is the absolute truth. He said He is the Supplier of life, and there are no other sources. Multiple Scriptures reiterate this point clearly:

JOHN 10:9 *I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.*

1 JOHN 5:5 *Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*

ACTS 4:12 *Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*

1 TIMOTHY 2:5 *For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.*

ROMANS 10:9 *that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*

JOHN 3:16 *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

JOHN 3:36 *He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.*

Many hear those claims from Jesus and the Church and think, "how can that be?" So it should be no surprise that attempts are being made in our culture to urge society to validate the many proposed "equal paths" to God. Tim Keller writes, "This approach creates an environment in which it is considered unenlightened and outrageous to make exclusive religious claims, even in personal conversations".²

Despite the accusatory environment and the hostility toward exclusivity, we can have confidence that Christianity is true. We live in an age of relativism where people do not believe that absolute truth even exists. What is true may be true for me, but many would argue that it is arrogant for me to think it should be true for everyone. What they miss is that while Christ's message is exclusive, it is also incredibly inclusive. Salvation is exclusively found through Him, but salvation is also available to all. There are no hoops or hurdles you have to pass through to gain eternal life. In fact, there is nothing you have to "do." You simply have to receive. You place your faith in Christ and ask for Him to give you eternal life through your faith in His death, burial, and resurrection.

And here is the thing, the resurrection is the hinge upon which the door all of Christianity swings. If the resurrection is false, then Christianity and its exclusive claims fall apart. If the resurrection holds true, then Jesus' exclusive claims about life, death, eternity, and salvation are true.

The truth of the resurrection and the exclusivity of Jesus' claims can be validated by four historical facts given to us in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. Let's examine them.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:3-8 *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*

1. **Christ lived and died** – This may seem extremely fundamental, but it is essential to acknowledge the historicity of Jesus' life and death. Few historians doubt the historical facts that Jesus was a real person and died. Other world religions do not try to sweep away His existence. They acknowledge His life, teaching, ministry, and death.
2. **Christ was buried** – Jesus' body was placed in a tomb and sealed with a boulder in the same city He was crucified. The Scriptures teach us that He was not only buried, but Roman soldiers guarded the tomb. In Matthew 27:65-66 we read, *"You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how and they went and made the grave secure along with the guard they set a seal on the stone."*
3. **Christ was raised** – Jesus was raised from the grave. The Bible teaches us that on Sunday morning, the stone rolled away, and the Lord came out of the tomb. Luke's Gospel tells us that as the disciples went to the grave, *"they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus."* (Luke 24:2-3) He has risen. When apologists look at the validity of the resurrection, the location of the tomb plays a big role. The resurrection message wrote Paul Althaus, *"could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned."* ³ If the Lord Jesus had not risen from the grave, everyone in Jerusalem would have been aware and easily dismissed the rumor.
4. **Christ appeared** – The creed that we find in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 is believed to be passed down to the apostle Paul by Peter and James between 3-5 years after the resurrection occurred. Scripture records 12 different appearances of Jesus after His resurrection. Paul writes that Jesus appeared to 500 people at one time. This is overwhelming evidence established for the validity of Christianity. To have one post-mortem appearance is overwhelming but to have twelve is staggering.

The ultimate apologetic for giving those who doubt the truthfulness of Christianity as the only path to salvation is the resurrection. It has been disputed, scrutinized, doubted for two thousand-plus years. But the evidence of the resurrection is overwhelming. We can be certain that Christianity is the only true religion because of the power of the resurrection. It is an EXCLUSIVE claim, but it is not an exclusivism of Christian culture, Christian ethics, or mean that Christians are the only worthy candidates for heaven. Christianity's exclusive claims are for Christ. ⁴ That He is who He says He is, and He did what He said He would do. Period. Selah.

Jesus' claim of exclusivity is offensive to some. For this reason, believers who spurn the world's version of inclusivity and tolerance are shamed by others. In some lands, Christians are even tortured and killed for their beliefs. Jesus foresaw the persecution that would be heaped upon those faithful to Him: *"Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake"* (Matthew 10:21-22).

There are not many roads to God; only one. God *"commands all people everywhere to repent"* (Acts 17:30) and trust in Jesus Christ, for *"salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name"*

under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). There is no other road to God, so "how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Hebrews 2:3).

+ Conclusion

Scripture says that anyone who teaches another way of salvation is a false teacher in danger of damnation (Galatians 1:6-9). Those who proclaim, "All roads lead to God," are perverters of the Gospel and deniers of "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

Muhammad, Confucius, the Dalai Lama, Mary Baker Eddy, Joseph Smith, Charles Taze Russell, and legions of other voices vying for the world's attention do not speak with the authority of Christ Jesus. Each person proclaims another way to God, but the roads paved by their teachings lead not to God but further from Him. Only Jesus can speak with authority about the way to heaven, because "the one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard" (John 3:31-32).

We will conclude as we began in Acts 17 in Athens with Paul as we look at the response of the people from various backgrounds and worldviews after they heard the Good News of Jesus Christ.

ACTS 17:32-34 *When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."³³ At that, Paul left the Council.³⁴ Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.*

May we be faithful to know what we believe and treat others who do not agree with us respectfully. As we proclaim biblical truth, let us trust that the Holy Spirit will move as He did in Athens that day, calling some to believe, making some curious, and knowing the reality that others may reject the truth.

¹learnreligions.com

² Keller, *The Reason for God*, pg. 7 (There Can't Be Just One True Religion)

³ Paul Althaus in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus- God and Man* (SCM Press, 1968) p. 100

⁴ Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 347.