

“Is Jesus the Only Way?”
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In between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two, I spent every summer the same way--walking the lush fairways and beautiful greens of one of the premiere country clubs in the United States. Medina Country Club, where the U.S. Open and many great tournaments have been played. I didn't walk the course as a golfer. I walked the course every day as a golf caddie. I had the privilege of waking up and arriving at 6:00 in the morning--just to put my name on a list, then wait for two or three hours to have the privilege of lugging two sets of golf clubs that were twice my weight. Groveling at the feet of rich people, carrying twenty-eight lightning rods in the midst of a thunderstorm--it was the best job I ever had. While I was at Medina Country Club, I got to meet interesting people: Jack Brickhouse, the classic sports announcer in the Chicago area, senators, even some sports heroes, like Walter Payton, Jim McMahon, and . . . Michael Jordan. Not that I'm name dropping--just part of the story.

Not only did I meet interesting people, but I got to see a different world. This thirteen year old kid from a lower middle class family got to see what it was like to be someone who had a few extra dollars to drop on a golf club membership. Before you pick up your first club or have your first round at Medina, twenty-five thousand dollars in membership fees are required. Medina Country Club was a men-only club. Every member at Medina was male. There was a golf course for the ladies, but the ladies weren't allowed to golf on the championship course--unless they teed off Friday morning before 9:00 AM. The championship course was for the men. Further, at Medina Country Club every member was white. There wasn't one black member, one Hispanic member, one Asian-American member. There was no rule against minorities—just an interview that you had to pass in order to become a member at Medina. Somehow, by coincidence, every time a black, Hispanic, or Asian person applied, their membership was rejected. Medina was a course for rich, white, men only.

The closer I grew to Jesus as I grew older, the more that exclusive nature just grated against my nerves, made me feel like I wanted to break outside of a box. You may wonder: “Well, you say the more you grew close to Jesus, the more that grated against you. Isn't that just the way Jesus is? I mean, doesn't He say, ‘Hey, there's only one way. It's my way or the highway. I've got my own exclusive club where only some people are allowed to join. There are insiders and there are outsiders.’ Isn't that the same as Medina Country Club?” That's the issue we will address today. Is there really only one way to heaven?

We have a number of doors up here on the stage. Doors throughout history have represented a lot of things-- opportunities, progress, something new that could be opened for you, options, purpose, and the directions that your life could take. Doors have also represented the idea of religion. You may have heard this analogy in the past: Religion is like many different doors that enter the same building. A similar analogy is that religion is like many different paths that lead up the same mountain. All of them wind up in the same place, all of them are essentially the same. They just look different in the way the path is designed, in the way the door feels when it's on the outside. This morning let's look at questions surrounding the ideas of world religions

and whether or not Jesus is the only way. This discussion will help us to avoid certain common pitfalls as people think about religious matters.

Basically the Same?

The first pitfall comes with this idea that there are many doors that lead into the same building, that religions (the building) are essentially all the same. I think that this is an idea driven primarily by compassion, by care for people around us. The world has come to our doorstep now, hasn't it? It's not uncommon to pick up the phone and get a customer service representative who is a Hindu in India. It's not uncommon to have a Muslim who is in the cubicle right next to us. It's not uncommon to have an old roommate who was a Buddhist in college. Things that used to seem far away and foreign are now right in our laps. What drives people to say, "Hey, out of compassion, I'll say that all religions are basically the same," is that they don't want to say anything bad about the people around them. I respect that motivation in people. Unfortunately, I think it leads to a pitfall, a pitfall that can be avoided simply by good education about the ways that religions work. Religion is not just a doorway that enters into the same building—a different door entering the same building. As a matter of fact, the buildings that religions erect are very, very different. In their most fundamental constructs, the most basic ideas that they propose about the world and life, the religions of the world are very different.

The question every religion must answer first is: What is prime reality? What is God like? What is the most fundamental in the universe and what is it like? Looking at the largest religions in the world, Hinduism says that there are millions of gods and they are all very different. The original Buddha never taught anything about any kind of a personal god. If he believed that any god existed, he believed that god was irrelevant. Christianity teaches that there is one God who expresses Himself in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Islam teaches in its first pillar that there is one god, Allah, and he does not express himself as millions of gods, zero gods, or three in one gods. There is simply strict monotheism, one god, Allah. These are very different ideas to answer the fundamental question of any religion – What is God like? Different religions answer this question differently.

Another example is eternity. What happens after you die? What comes next? Some religions teach that when you die you come back again in a new life form, you're reincarnated. Others teach that when you die you're judged and you go to heaven, hell, or maybe some other existence, based on your judgment. Other religions teach that when you die that's it, you're done. You rot in the ground and you're worm food. When we die we will find out. One of those things will happen and the other things will not happen. The things taught are not essentially the same. It's not the same building; it's not the same mountaintop. There are very different places that you wind up. Again, the key to combating this notion that religion is many doors leading into the same building is simply good education. If you are interested in finding out more about world religions, I put together a little world religions guide that is available to download from our website www.christcommunityomaha.org .

Some people have rightly said that religions really are pretty much the same--except when it comes to the nature of God, the nature of humanity, the problem with the world, the solution to that problem, what happens in eternity, and morality. Besides that, they are pretty much the

same. Dr. Robert McKim, who was my philosophy of religion professor at the University of Illinois, had a great quote. He is not a Christian, but he had studied religions well. He said this: “Anyone who believes that all religions are basically the same has taken none of them seriously.” Religions really are not the same and a basic education in religion will help you to see that.

Philosophical Suicide

The second notion in popular culture is that even if the doors lead into different buildings, all of the buildings are essentially the same. One door may lead into Target and another one lead into Wal-Mart, but you will find the same variety of goods and ideas in both. Basically, it’s the same idea. This pitfall can be avoided by good philosophy, sharp thinking about the way that the world operates. These buildings are not like Target and Wal-Mart. Religions, fundamentally, make claims about the way reality operates in the universe. The claims that they make are contradictory claims.

If you go into a college logic and reasoning class, the very first thing that you will be taught, the very first law of clear thinking, is the law of non-contradiction. Formally, the law of non-contradiction says that “A and Not-A cannot be simultaneously true in the same sense.” Therefore, I cannot say, “I am in Beijing, China” and “I am not in Beijing, China” and have both statements be simultaneously true in the same sense. I can’t say, “It is safe to drink orange juice,” and “it is not safe to drink orange juice” and have both of those be simultaneously true in the same sense. I can’t say that the Cornhuskers spanked the Trojans last night, and the Cornhuskers did not spank the Trojans last night, and have both of those be simultaneously true in the same sense. We won’t mention which one of those is true. But the same thing is true with religions. You can’t say “there is one god” *and* “there is not one god.” “There are millions of gods” *and* “there are not millions of gods.” “When you die you will rot in the ground”; “when you die you will not rot in the ground,” and have those both hold. It violates the law of non-contradiction upon which all clear thinking and understanding has been built. It simply isn’t philosophically tenable.

The Law of Exclusive Claims

Beyond that, different religions make different claims about the way the universe operates and some of the claims that they make are exclusive claims. As a matter of fact, every religion out there makes exclusive claims. In Christianity, Jesus says in John chapter 3, verse 18, “Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” He says with great clarity: “There’s an in crowd and there is an out crowd.” Mohammad made a similar claim. In the very first pillar of Islam he says, “There is one god, Allah, and Mohammad is his prophet.” If you believe differently then you’re wrong. Even Unitarians make exclusive claims. “There are many ways to God” is an exclusive claim because they say, “If you believe differently than that, then you’re wrong. We’re right and you’re wrong.”

Philosophically whenever somebody makes an exclusive claim, there are two possibilities. Let’s take Jesus. He says, “Whoever believes in me is not condemned. Whoever does not believe stands condemned already.” There are two possibilities. Either Jesus is right and everybody else

is wrong, or Jesus is wrong, and maybe somebody else is right. But, you can't conclude that Jesus is right and everybody else is right as well. It doesn't make sense. Similarly, you could conclude that Mohammad is right, that there is one god and that Mohammad is his final prophet. That's possible. But if that's true then everybody who disagrees with him is wrong. Or, you could conclude that Mohammad is wrong and maybe somebody else is right. But, you can't conclude that both of them are right. It doesn't match good philosophy. Some people at this point might ask, "Isn't that awfully closed-minded? To think that there is one way? That one of them is right and the rest must be essentially wrong?" I would say, yes. There is a point at which it becomes closed-minded.

Close Minded

I would also say that there is a point at which we are really happy when the people around us are closed-minded. Let's take for instance pilots. Imagine yourself taking a flight into O'Hare Airport in Chicago. Suddenly over the speaker the pilot crackles in, "Ladies and gentlemen, we're about to land in just about twenty minutes here. Today I'm feeling rather open-minded, so instead of landing on the runway at O'Hare, I'm thinking Lake Michigan looks pretty good." At that moment you're saying, "I do not want my pilot to be open-minded." Or let's say you go in for heart surgery. You want your heart surgeon to be closed-minded about certain things. You don't want him to open you up and say, "Ummm, a heart... a kidney, it's basically the same thing with two different names attached." No! You want your heart surgeon to believe that a heart is a heart and to operate on the right organ. And the higher the stakes are, the more trustworthy you want your messenger to be. Now, a pilot and a heart surgeon are high stakes, but how much higher are the stakes that life and religion and eternity are built upon. How much more critical it is that your messenger is not only closed-minded, but is reflecting reality the way that it should be? So the question that plagues us all is the question of . . . which door? Which door is the right door to pick? One of them leads towards reality. The others don't.

At this point I think it is important to mention that there is some truth in all of the popular religions. There is some truth in all of the religions. If there wasn't any truth in those religions, people are smart enough that they wouldn't follow it. The question that we have to ask is not, "is it possible to find some truth in religions," but "which one is *fundamentally* true?" Which one is the one that will lead me the closest to the way that God and humanity and the universe really operate? For me this question really bothered me. In high school I did a thorough study of the evidence for Christianity. Many of you know that I did research into all of the evidence for Christianity. I read the Christian authors. I asked all of the questions about the evidence against Christianity. I read atheist authors and other people who attacked Christianity. I came to the conclusion that the evidence for Christianity stacked up so well that it would be a much bigger step of faith for me to reject that and walk away from it than to believe it. When I got to college I realized I had done this intensive study of Christianity, but had not done the same kind of intensive study of other religions. What popped into my mind was this question, "what if there's similar evidence for the other religions?" I decided to check it out.

The advantage of going to a secular school like the University of Illinois was that I could take classes from people who really believed alternative viewpoints. I could spend a year studying Buddhism with a Zen professor. I could spend a year studying Islam with an expert in Islam. I

could spend a year studying Eastern religions with somebody who really practiced Hinduism and hear about it from the horse's mouth. And so I did. I spent a year studying each one of those different religions, looking for the evidence, comparing each to Christianity. The more I've studied, the more deeply I've looked into those religions (I add Judaism, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other cults out there), trying to study those and find the evidence, the more I encourage people to do the same: Read about Jesus and then read about other folks, because the evidence simply is not even close. As we think about which door, the key is simply to make good comparisons. Check out the evidence and see how it works.

Standards of Comparison

What kinds of standards do you use to make the comparison?" You may come up with your own standards, but here are some that I looked at. I asked:

- What kind of teaching did they do? How known has their teaching become throughout the world? How compelling was it, how memorizeable? How many people critique it, pass it on; how much has it changed the world?
- What about their claims about themselves? Are they radical, high-flying claims or are they kind of mediocre?
- What about the miracles? Do the miracles substantiate those claims? Is there anything supernatural?
- How about the quality of their life? Was it a moral life; was it a saintly life? Did any of them actually reach perfection?
- Finally, what about their death and what happened after their death? Was their death something memorable or compelling? What happened in the aftermath of their death?

I looked at Jesus and every other religious leader, did some comparisons and tried to rank Jesus compared to the others.

The truth of the matter is--Jesus simply smokes the competition in every category.

- Jesus' teaching is the most known, the most loved, the most quoted, the most critiqued, the most understood, the most misunderstood teaching in the history of the world. No one is even close in the amount of teaching that they have seen change the world.
- Further, Jesus made radical and outrageous claims about himself. He didn't just claim to be a good teacher or a good prophet or a nice guy who will point you toward some truth. He claimed, in fact, to be God in the flesh, who came from Heaven to show us what God is really like and teach us His ways.
- Then he backed it up with outrageous miracles, more strong evidence than any other religious leader in the history of the world. Miracles that were done in public, miracles of

public healing, of turning water into wine, of walking on water, miracles that broke the physical laws of the universe. Jesus fulfilled prophecies that were hundreds and thousands of years old in ways that no other leader in history has done.

- Further, Jesus' life was morally compelling. It wasn't just a good life or a saintly life. Jesus is unique among all of the different religious leaders in that His life was a perfect life. He claimed that He never did anything wrong and his enemies, when they confronted Him, couldn't think of anything that He had done that was immoral. His followers who knew Him deeply for three years, who hung out with Him day and night, said that He had never done anything wrong. He never misspoke, He never lied, He never powered up on somebody, He never did anything that was wrong.
- When you move into the category of death and its aftermath, Jesus once again is alone in His death being the most memorable, the most remarkable, the most told story in world history. His death did not end in death. The Buddha is still six feet under. Mohammad has a grave that you can visit. Confucius died and stayed dead. But Jesus died and He didn't stay dead. Jesus rose from the dead. He came back, and He showed evidence. He appeared to people over a period of forty days and He showed people that He was in fact alive, putting Him in a category vastly different than any other person who has walked the face of this earth. No one else ever predicted their resurrection and then pulled it off. Jesus is simply head and shoulders above the rest. Jesus is, as He claimed to be, the fundamental reality of the universe that He wants to point us to.

One Way?

Listen to this important message from Jesus about Himself and the way to God. In the book of Luke, chapter 13, beginning at verse 24 Jesus is talking to His disciples about how many people are going to be saved. He says to them, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me all you evildoers.'"

Jesus is saying here that the door that you pick matters! The door that you pick matters. There is one door, the narrow door, that leads to life. There is one way that leads back to God and the rest don't. He says, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door," because not only is there one door, but there is going to come a time when that door closes and you will be saying, "Oh! I wish I would have gotten in while the door was open!" You will bang on the outside, there will be weeping and people will gnash their teeth in regret saying, "Why didn't I go in when I had the opportunity?" There is a door and some day that door will be closed.

Arrogance

Well, some may still ask: "Isn't it arrogant to pick one door? Isn't Jesus a lot like Medina Country Club when He says, 'We have an exclusive group. Some are in and some are out.'" I

remember one time I was teaching a lecture similar to this one. A young woman, probably twenty-five years old, stood up at the end of the lecture. She said, "I have a question. How can you be so arrogant, so closed-minded, so intolerant to think that your way is better than everybody else's way? How can you be so rude to say that people of other religions aren't getting in because they don't believe the same as you? I was an Eastern religions minor when I was in college and I have friends who are Hindus and Buddhists. How dare you say that your way is smarter than their way?"

After thanking her for asking such a provocative question, I said, "You know, would it be okay Leslie, if I just asked you a few questions in return?" She said, "Sure." So I said, "Do you think that it's possible that there's a God out there who is one way and just isn't the other way that's the opposite of that?" She said, "Sure, I think that's possible." I said, "And do you think it's possible that God might care enough about us that he would want to communicate to us and let us know what he's like?" And she said, "Well, yeah, that's possible." I said, "And do you think that maybe when he communicates to us he would say 'I am this way and not that way. I'm creating a pathway for you to have a relationship with me. If you try these other ways they just won't work.'" She said, "Sure, that's possible." I said, "And if he did, would it be arrogant for him to do that? I mean, would that be arrogant and closed-minded and intolerant?" She said, "Well, I guess if he's God and he's telling us what he's like and it's the pathway, that's not an arrogant thing to say." I said, "Just one more question. If there was somebody who discovered this God and the message and the communication that he gave and they said 'I'm willing to set aside all of my other beliefs that I used to believe and instead agree with God in what he said,' would it be an arrogant thing to say that?" She said, "No. No, I guess that wouldn't be arrogant." I said, "Would it be more arrogant or more humble?" She said, "Actually, I guess, if you set your beliefs aside to agree with somebody else, that would be a humble thing to do."

"But," she said, "I don't believe all those things are true. I don't know there's a God out there who's like that--who's communicating with us. I don't know what the evidence is for that." I said, "Well, fair enough. Your job then over the next eight weeks" (which was the length of the class) "is to discover that and see if it's really true. And, if it is in fact true, would you be willing to have the humility to agree with God and go His way?" And she said, "Yeah, I guess I would be willing to have that kind of humility."

Open Doors

You know what she discovered along the way? Jesus is a God who wants to include everybody. The doors are not closed to people because of their gender, because of their ethnicity, because of their socio-economic status. As a matter of fact, what you find as you look throughout the world, is that the majority of people who are followers of Christ are people who are poor. Jesus Himself said that His message is good news for the poor. Look around the world. The majority of people who are followers of Jesus are actually women, and not men. If you look at the places where followers of the Jesus are the hottest, are spreading fastest, are the most popular, you wind up in places like Seoul, South Korea, and Nigeria, and Bogotá, Columbia. The faces are not white, but they are black, and brown, and yellow, and all the colors of the rainbow of the diversity that God created. Jesus is not shutting people out. Jesus is saying, "The door is open. The door is open for anybody who will call on my name."

Another way that Jesus says this is in Revelation, chapter 3, verse 20, where He says, “Behold! I stand at the door and knock.” (Sound of knocking on door) “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with him and he can eat with me. I stand at the door and knock. I’m interested in a relationship. I don’t care what your past is. I don’t care what your color is. I don’t care what your status is. I don’t care what you believed before. My reality, my truth, my life is available to you.” (Knock, knock, knock) “And I want to come in.” (Knock, knock, knock) The question is, will we open the door for Him?

Let’s pray. Jesus, thanks so much for your message of life. Thanks for the truth that you give to us. Thank you for the way that you have revealed yourself to us and that you bring us hope in the midst of hopelessness. Thanks that you have been generous enough with us that you haven’t left us alone to make up our own ways through religion, but instead you made a way for us by dying on the cross. And Father, I pray that the people here who have not yet made that decision, who are still contemplating, who are still examining, God I pray that they would open the door of their hearts, that they would believe in you, that they would believe in your death, and believe in your resurrection. In Jesus’ name. Amen.