

Understanding Christian Apologetics

Lesson 12: Pluralism and the Exclusivity of the Gospel

I. Christian Exclusivism¹

A. Biblical Christianity insists that it is the only way of salvation

1. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (Jn. 14:6)
 - a) The context makes it clear that the word "through" means "through faith in Christ"
 - b) In verses 1 and 12, Jesus calls his disciples to believe in him
 - c) In verses 7-11, Jesus says that the way to know the Father is by knowing him
 - d) All throughout John's Gospel, eternal life is promised to those who believe in Christ (6:35; 7:38; 11:25; 12:46) and severe warnings are issued to those who do not believe in Christ (3:18; 5:23; 8:19, 42)
2. Peter said, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)
3. Paul said, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (Rom. 10:13-14)
4. In the words of one critic, "Christianity is a contentious faith which requires an all-or-nothing commitment to Jesus as the one and only incarnation of the Son of God."
5. In the first few centuries A.D., it was the Christians' refusal to worship the emperor alongside of Jesus that brought such severe

¹ This lesson is largely drawn from *Is Jesus the Only Way?*, by Philip Ryken.

persecution upon them

- B. Christian exclusivism is especially offensive in our pluralistic culture
 - 1. Seems arrogant and intolerant
 - 2. Seems unfair to say that people who have never even been exposed to Christianity are condemned
 - 3. Sounds much nicer to say that one person's religious beliefs are just as valid as the next person's

II. Three Kinds of Pluralism

A. Empirical Pluralism

- 1. The fact that we live in a diverse society
- 2. We live alongside people of many different races, ethnicities, religions, and worldviews
- 3. For many Americans, religion has become an intensely privatized thing — “In *Habits of the Heart* Robert Bellah reports on an interview with a young nurse who described her religion as ‘Sheilaism’: ‘I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.’” [16]

B. Cherished Pluralism

- 1. Our culture celebrates and approves of its diversity
- 2. Multiculturalism is one of our most treasured values
- 3. Religious diversity is celebrated — a speaker at the 1993 Parliament of World Religions said, “There are many effective, equally valid religions. They are to be equally revered, equally recognized, and equally loved and cherished — not merely tolerated.” [17-18]

C. Philosophical Pluralism

1. An ideology that will not allow one religion to claim an exclusive hold on the truth
2. Denies that there are absolutes
3. Relativistic — all religious viewpoints are equally valid
4. “How could you possibly know that no religion can see the whole truth unless you yourself have the superior, comprehensive knowledge of spiritual reality you just claimed that none of the religions have?”²
5. “Although it claims to be humble about its ability to grasp religious truth, philosophical pluralism has an arrogance all its own. By declaring that doctrine is unimportant, it is condescending toward the truth-claims of every other religion... He [the pluralist] — and he alone — has the perception to know exactly what each religion contributes to the truth. In the end philosophical pluralism’s dismissal of dogma turns out to be just another dogma.” [23]

III. Christian Responses to Pluralism

A. Some have mistakenly embraced Philosophical Pluralism

1. Since the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholicism has taught that adherents of other religions can be saved without having explicit faith in Christ
2. Some evangelical theologians, such as Clark Pinnock, have taught the same thing; Pinnock writes, “One does not have to be conscious of the work of Christ done on one’s behalf in order to benefit from that work. The issue God cares about is the direction of the heart, not the content of the theology.” [27]

B. There is no denying Empirical Pluralism, since it is an established fact

² Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, 9

- C. We do need to tolerate other religions and worldviews and respect people's right to differ with us, but we must not endorse their views
- D. We can admit that there are elements of truth and decency in other religions and worldviews and that non-Christians can do things that are "good" on a horizontal level
- E. We should clarify that those who never have the opportunity to hear the gospel are not condemned because they never trusted in Christ but because they are sinners and failed to live up to the law that God has written on every human heart
- F. We should point out that Christianity is truly a global religion
- G. We need to remember that Christianity is not a coercive religion but one that is advanced through persuasion

IV. Why Jesus Is the Only Way

- A. The unity of truth
 1. Because there is only one truth, contradictory religious claims cannot both be true
 2. Christianity says that Jesus is the Messiah; Judaism says he isn't
 3. Islam says there is only one god; one strand of Hinduism says that there are 300,000 gods; Buddhism doesn't believe in a personal god at all
 4. The Archbishop of Canterbury said, "Jesus is the Son of God, you know." Jane Fonda responded, "Maybe he is for you, but he's not for me." The Archbishop responded, "Well, either he is or he isn't" [40]
- B. The uniqueness of Christ
 1. Jesus made exclusive claims about himself as the only way to God (Jn. 10:9; 14:6)

2. Christianity is an inclusive religion in the sense that it makes salvation available to everyone

C. The reality of sin

1. The reason why Jesus is the only way to be saved is because of the universality of sin
2. Sin places us under God's just wrath and condemns us to eternal punishment

D. The absolute necessity of the atonement

1. The only way sin can be forgiven is if the demands of God's justice are met by a substitute
2. Jesus' death on the cross was a substitutionary atonement
3. "Most ailments need particular antidotes. Increasing air pressure in your tires will not fix a troubled carburetor. Aspirin will not dissolve a tumor. Cutting up credit cards will not wipe our debt that is already owed... Any adequate solution must solve the problem that needs to be solved, and singular problems need singular solutions... Mankind faces a singular problem. People are broken and the world is broken because our friendship with God has been broken, ruined by human rebellion. Humans, you and I — are guilty, enslaved, lost, dead. All of us. Everyone. Everywhere. The guilt must be punished, the debt must be paid, the slave must be purchased. Promising better conduct in the future will not mend the crimes of the past. No, a rescuer must ransom the slaves, a kindred brother must pay the family debt, a substitute must shoulder the guilt. There is not other way of escape. This is why Jesus of Nazareth is the only way to God, the only possible source of rescue. *He is the only one who solved the problem.*"³

³ Greg Koukl, *The Story of Reality*, 131, 132