

“I’ve got issues: it is arrogant to claim that Jesus is the only way to God.”

By Dr. Mark Smith

January 24, 2010

Isaiah 43:10-12, John 14:1-7, Acts 4:1-12, Philippians 2:8-12

Last week I began a series of messages on some of the most troubling issues people raise with regard to Christian faith. These are big issues that we *all* wonder about, whether we are believers or not.

I am challenged in dealing with these things in that I only have twenty minutes or so in the pulpit, and I cannot hope to give adequate responses that will satisfy everyone. All I can do is stimulate your own thinking and point you to scripture and to the way in which Christians have generally responded to these often controversial issues, so that when you talk to your neighbors and friends who may not share your beliefs, you will at least be able to frame the conversation a bit and give a reason for the hope that is within you.

One of the biggest issues that people in our culture raise with regard to Christianity really comes across as more of a condemnation than anything else: *“How can you Christians claim that Jesus is the only way to God? What makes you so superior? It is arrogant and downright offensive to claim you have the one true faith. Jesus may be your path to God, but surely there are many paths to God. What about all the other religions of the world? And who are you to impose your religion on me?”*

This is a very common objection to Christianity, and it is very in tune with the times. You see, in olden days, Christianity was the spiritual, moral, and social glue that held western culture together. In the era of Christendom, everyone shared an essentially Christian world view. Everyone pretty much knew the Christian story and that over-arching story gave meaning to their daily lives. Folks were generally familiar with the Bible. Church and state were allies in producing good citizens and fostering public morality. The Christian church stood at the center of culture and its voice was highly respected and taken seriously in the public market place of ideas.

But for the last half century or so, all that has changed. Christendom is breaking down. Christianity is no longer at the center of the culture. That is certainly true of Western Europe, where the churches are largely empty and have virtually lost all influence. It is true of Canada, which is just behind Europe in the secularization process. And North America – especially the Pacific Northwest, is not far behind. Oregon is famous for being the least religious state in the union and Washington is not far behind. The Christian church has been banished to the margins of society. Now the Christian story is just one story among many other equally valid stories. We live in an age of pluralism, amongst people who come from a variety of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds, all of whom bring their own faith traditions or no faith at all. There is no longer a grand, overarching story to give life meaning in our culture today. Now, no story, no belief can be held as universally true for everyone. Truth is considered to be in the eye of the beholder. All truth claims are radically subjective. What is true for you may not be true for me.

When people claim to possess universal and absolute truth and try to persuade others of that truth, it is believed they do so only to dominate or to control or manipulate others. In this culture right now, about the worst thing you can do is claim your truth is universally valid for everyone. That comes across as the height of arrogance. Even to publically state a religious opinion or to offer a political opinion based on a religious motivation, is thought by many to be totally inappropriate, if not downright offensive. Religious opinions have been consigned to the purely private realm; they have no place in the public marketplace of ideas. Not too long ago, various scientists and scholars signed “A Declaration in Defense of Science and Secularism” which called on the leaders of our government “*not to permit legislation or executive action to be influenced by religious beliefs.*” It’s okay to have religious beliefs as long as you keep them private and don’t allow them to influence public policy. Our founding fathers must be rolling in their graves, for they never would have dreamed that religious opinion would be banished from public discourse.

Stephen Carter of Yale responds that it is impossible to leave religious views behind when we do any kind of moral reasoning at all:

Efforts to craft a public square from which religious conversation is absent, no matter how thoughtfully worked out, will always in the end say to those of organized religion that they alone, unlike everybody else, must enter public dialogue only after leaving behind that part of themselves that they may consider the most vital.

Clearly it’s a very different world we live in. Carter in his book, Culture of Disbelief observes:

In an earlier generation there was a healthy respect for what counted as religion. People might have been somewhat limited in their visions of what counted as religion, but there was a respect for it, and I think that was true right across the political spectrum and up and down the social ladder. That has changed. There is less respect for religion, less of an appreciation of it as an important force in our lives without somehow being a symptom of something neurotic. That’s what’s been lost....

Clearly there is a growing hostility to Christianity in our culture today.

So how are Christians to respond to all this? Let me try to frame something of an answer:

The world we find ourselves in today is actually very much like the world in which Christianity was born. That world was pluralistic and diverse. Greco-Roman culture was dominant, but across the Mediterranean, you would find a hodgepodge of different ethnic traditions, and a confusing array of religious and philosophical beliefs. There were any number of mystery religions and cults to which you could subscribe. In many of these cults, spiritual truth was private and secret, known only to initiates. All kinds of teachers offered “truth” tailor made for whatever you were looking for. Truth was in the eye of the beholder; your god could be whoever you wanted him to be. No religion was more valid than any other...

Into this diverse, pluralistic setting came Christianity and its claim to universal, accessible truth for all. The apostles came preaching a universal, public truth: that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and that there is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved. In a world where there were many gods and many lords and where there was a menu of many philosophical ideas to choose from, Peter and Paul and the earliest Christians preached a truth that was universal and valid for all: Jesus Christ is Lord - and they believed it was critical that everyone should know him. He is not one lord among many lords; he is not one way among many ways; he is not one savior among other possible saviors: he is the Lord, the King of all Kings, the one and only savior of the world. Can you imagine the Apostle Paul and the other apostles, confessing that Jesus is Lord and Savior only for those who are disposed to believe this kind of thing? Can you imagine them preaching that Jesus is a Savior for Christians only, but not for the whole world, since there are other truths and other saviors out there which are just as good?

There simply is no denying the fact that from the very beginning, Christians have believed in objective, universal, public truth: that Jesus is Lord and is the Savior of all. He is not to be relegated to the private realm. His life, death and resurrection stands at the very crossroads of history. His story and his teachings has shaped history and culture for centuries. And now there are those would banish all Christian influence?

As I have been saying, this is not a welcome position in our culture today. Many people actively oppose it. But then, people in the days of the apostles opposed their message and their absolute claims. Many of today's critics are like Pontius Pilate who scoffed at Jesus: "*What is truth?*"

Skeptics must absolutely cringe, when, they run across scripture passages like Philippians 2:9-11, where the Apostle Paul makes an absolute and universal truth claim with reference to Jesus who died on the cross . . .

⁹ **Therefore God exalted him to the highest place**
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ **that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,**
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ **and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,**
to the glory of God the Father. ¹

Was Paul being arrogant? Are we when we proclaim Jesus is Lord of all and is the only way to God?

Many respond: "*there can't be only one way to heaven. How narrow can you get?*"

But isn't that statement itself – that there *can't* be only one way to heaven - a religious belief? Have skeptics found some sort of superior position from which to claim to know that there is *not* only one way? Are they not basing view on their own faith assumption - that there are many roads to heaven? How do they know? It seems that those who believe that all religions are equally valid and are all just

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

different paths to God are also making an absolute, objective universal, truth claim and are therefore just as “narrow” as those who hold to orthodox Christian belief.

Who is right? Well Christians believe they are. Secularists believe they are. Okay. Aren't both parties able to compete in the marketplace of ideas? Does the fact Christians believe they are right make them arrogant? Not necessarily. Is it wrong to believe something is true and that all people should share it? Are you and I not free to try to persuade people to the truth we hold dear? Should we never try to share our faith in an attempt to persuade someone else for fear of offending someone? What if Paul and Peter and the apostles kept the incredible good news about Jesus private? What if the gospel never went public?

Some of you may be aware of the reaction Brit Hume, of Fox News, received, for suggesting on air that Tiger Woods ought to consider converting to Christianity, thinking that Tiger might benefit from Christianity's message of forgiveness and redemption. As you would expect, people came out of the woodwork to criticize Hume for mentioning Jesus and for trying to “convert” Tiger from Buddhism to Christianity. He was accused of “proselytizing.” He was called all kinds of names, and was judged arrogant and offensive for advocating Christianity. Hume crossed the politically correct line between private and public and had the gall to commend religious faith – specifically Christian faith in a news panel setting. I've seen the clip, and Hume did not come across in an arrogant way. He offered it rather matter-of-factly, in the spirit of really caring for Woods.

There was a marvelous response to all this criticism in an editorial column in the Washington Post written by Michael Gershon.¹ I want to read it in its entirety for it gets at the heart of what I have been trying to say:

Friday, January 8, 2010

After urging Tiger Woods to accept the "forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith" -- and comparing Buddhism unfavorably to that hope -- journalist Brit Hume insisted he was not proselytizing. In this, he is wrong. His words exemplify proselytization.

For this, Hume has been savaged. [Post media critic Tom Shales](#) put him in the category of a "[sanctimonious busybody](#)" engaged in "telling people what religious beliefs they ought to have." Blogger Andrew Sullivan criticized Hume's "[pure sectarianism](#)," which helps abolish "the distinction between secular and religious discourse." MSNBC's David Shuster called Hume's religious advice "truly embarrassing."

The assumption of these criticisms is that proselytization is the antonym of tolerance. Asserting the superiority of one's religious beliefs, in this view, is not merely bad manners; it involves a kind of divisive, offensive judgmentalism.

But the American idea of religious liberty does not forbid proselytization; it presupposes it. Free, autonomous individuals not only have the right to hold whatever beliefs they wish, they also have the right to change those beliefs and to persuade others to change as well. Just as there is no political liberty without the right to change one's convictions and publicly argue for them, there is no religious liberty without the possibility of conversion and persuasion.

Proselytization, admittedly, is fraught with complications. We object to the practice when an unequal power relationship is involved -- a boss pressuring an employee. We are offended by brainwashing. Coercion and trickery violate the whole idea of free religious choice based on open discussion.

But none of this was present in Hume's appeal to Woods. A semi-retired broadcaster holds no unfair advantage over a multimillionaire athlete. Hume was engaged in persuasion.

...

The root of the anger against Hume is his religious exclusivity -- the belief, in Shuster's words, that "my faith is the right one." For this reason, according to Shales, Hume has "dissed about half a billion Buddhists on the planet."

But this supposed defense of other religious traditions betrays an unfamiliarity with religion itself. Religious faiths -- Christian, Buddhist, Zoroastrian -- generally make claims about the nature of reality that conflict with the claims of other faiths. Attacking Christian religious exclusivity is to attack nearly every vital religious tradition. It is not a scandal to believers that others hold differing beliefs. It is only a scandal to those offended by all belief. Though I am not a Buddhist or a Muslim, I am not "dissed" when a Muslim or a Buddhist advocates his views in public.

Hume's critics hold a strange view of pluralism. For religion to be tolerated, it must be privatized -- not, apparently, just in governmental settings but also on television networks. We must have not only a secular state but also a secular public discourse. And so tolerance, conveniently, is defined as shutting up people with whom secularists disagree. Many commentators have been offering Woods advice in his travails. But religious advice, apparently and uniquely, should be forbidden. In a discussion of sex, morality and betrayed vows, wouldn't religious issues naturally arise? How is our public discourse improved by narrowing it -- removing references to the most essential element in countless lives?

True tolerance consists in engaging deep disagreements respectfully -- through persuasion -- not in banning certain categories of argument and belief from public debate.

In this controversy, we are presented with two models of discourse. Hume, in an angry sea of loss and tragedy -- his son's death in 1998 -- found a life preserver in faith. He offered that life preserver to another drowning man. Whatever your view of Hume's beliefs, he could have no motive other than concern for Woods himself.

The other model has come from critics such as Shales, in a spittle-flinging rage at the mention of religion in public, comparing Hume to "Mary Poppins on the joys of a tidy room, or Ron Popeil on the glories of some amazing potato peeler." Shales, of course, is engaged in proselytism of his own -- for a secular fundamentalism that trivializes and banishes all other faiths. He distributes the sacrament of the sneer.

Who in this picture is more intolerant?

It is not arrogant to believe that Jesus is the only way to God nor is it intolerant to share that belief with others. There are certainly some Christians who have come across too strong or who have tried to bully others. Many Christians have been arrogant. But if someone truly believes in Christ, if someone is truly infused with the spirit of the gospel, then humility and love will show through. The Gospel will be commended in a winsome way. This was the way of the earliest apostles, and should be our way also. If we have been touched by the reality of Jesus Christ and his love, if he is indeed the Lord and Savior of all, why wouldn't we want to share him with others, and even persuade others to consider his claims? Like Brit Hume, it can be, to use Gershon's image, "throwing somebody a life preserver to another person who is drowning..." What saved you just might save another. That is a profoundly loving act...

Still people have legitimate questions that I am unable to answer in the moments left to me: what about those who have never heard the gospel? And what about people who are committed adherents of other religions? Are all religions of the devil? How should Christians approach people of different faiths?

These are important issues – issues that I will have to address in my next sermon....

ⁱ Faith, tolerance and Tiger

By Michael Gerson

Friday, January 8, 2010

<http://www.surphace.com/search/?q=sphereit:http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/07/AR2010010703244.html>