

Is Jesus Really the Only Way?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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John 14:1-7 (NRSV)

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Colossians 1:15-20 (NRSV)

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers
all things have been created through him and for him.
¹⁷He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church;
He is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.
¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Few Christian claims fall harder on the non-believing ear in our culture than the claim that Jesus, and only Jesus, is the way to God. Indeed, not merely a path to God, but God himself.

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:6-7) There you have it. Could Jesus be any more clear? Ask any of Jesus’ fellow Jews on the streets of Jerusalem who the Father is and you’d have gotten a straightforward response: “The Lord God Almighty, of course, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush and led us out of slavery in Egypt. That’s who the Father is.” And, of course, the next words out of their mouth would be astonishment and shock that any man could claim such a thing.

Earlier, Jesus had asserted, “I am one with the Father” (John 10:30). Now, Jesus has claimed that if you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father. That Jesus is *the* way, *the* truth, *the* life. Gail O’Day rightly notes that “these verses announce in clear language the theological conviction that drives the Fourth Evangelist’s work. . . . These words express the Fourth Evangelist’s unshakeable belief that the coming of Jesus, the Word

made flesh, decisively altered the relationship between God and humanity.”¹ As the Evangelist put it when he opened his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

From the beginning, Jesus’ followers struggled to come to grips with his claims. Who can forgive sins but God!? Jesus can (Mark 2:5). It is no wonder that many people

A Christ Hymn

If you look up today’s passage from Colossians in your pew Bible, you’ll see that I’ve rendered verses 15-20 somewhat differently than did the NRSV translators. I’ve written it out in the form of a poem or hymn. Why?

In the years after Jesus, his first followers struggled to understand what they had witnessed or had been told. They tried to make sense of Jesus’ teachings, actions, crucifixion, and resurrection. What did it all mean? Who was (is!) Jesus?

Our earliest peeks into these struggles are found in Paul’s letters which are the oldest writings in the NT. In them, we witness many arguments around the shaping of Christianity. Some of Paul’s letters were written no later than 20 years or so after Jesus’ resurrection.

Even within Paul’s letters, there are still older hymns and creed-like passages. The “Christ Hymn” of Phil. 2:6-11 is one and is presented in poetic form in most translations. In 1 Cor. 11:23-26, Paul explicitly passes on the tradition about the Lord’s supper that was given to him by others. And in Colossians 1:15-20, we have another of Paul’s hymns. Its language and structure suggest that Paul has incorporated an early Christian hymn. We can be sure of the passage’s power, which is easier to appreciate when written out as a poem. I urge you to read it aloud as a poem and a proclamation of the supremacy of Christ.

thought he was crazy (Mark 3:20-27). And later, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, his followers struggled to clarify their claims about Jesus. One example is the Christ-hymn of Colossians.

The Christ-hymn

This passage from Colossians is a bit like a hymn in two stanzas, v. 15-17 and v. 18-20. I’ve printed into verse form to help you see its poetry and its structure.

The first stanza emphasizes that all things were created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. In case we miss Paul’s point here, he gives us a list: all things visible and invisible, all thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers.

Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul this way in *The Message*:

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God’s original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels — *everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.”

For any Jew, this sort of language could be used only with respect to the LORD God. Paul was a Jew and not just any Jew, but an educated, zealous Pharisee. He knew the meaning of what he wrote. He knew that he was speaking of Jesus as one would speak of God. Yes, Paul struggles to find the right language, just as Christians have been struggling for two thousands to make sense of a mystery. On the one hand, Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” which might make us think he is about to lump Jesus in with the rest of creation. But no. In the next phrase, Paul says the opposite – all things are created in,

through, and for Jesus! It takes an expansive, open, and imaginative mind to hold together seemingly contradictory truths about God. Such minds are God’s desire for us.

¹ From Gail O’Day’s commentary on the Gospel of John in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 743. This commentary set is in the St. Andrew library.

Notice also that Paul speaks of *all* things and *all* powers. There is no person, no government, no angel, no demon . . . nothing . . . that was not created in, through, and for Jesus. Everyone, everywhere, at all times, sits under the lordship of Jesus Christ, whether or not they know it or acknowledge it.

The focus of the second stanza shifts from creation to re-creation, renewal, and restoration, the embodiment of which is the church. Christ is head of the church, yet distinct from it, just as Christ is distinct from creation. Why is Jesus Christ, though fully and completely human, unique? Because he is the one person in whom God's fullness² dwells.

And what is God's purpose in all this? The reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God, the undoing of the tragedy of the Garden. And how is all this done? Through the crucifixion, the "blood of his cross." This is the good in Good Friday – that, in a way we cannot fully explain, we and the entire cosmos have been put right with God through Jesus' death on the cross. To some, such a claim is not only bizarre but offensive, but for almost 2,000 years, Christians have proclaimed that it is true.

The only way?

I've probably belabored the point about Jesus' deity. But it is essential to understand the Christian claim. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Seeing him is seeing God. He is God! And if we are right about this, then, of course, how could one claim to know God and yet deny Jesus. He is not merely one of the great prophets. He is not merely a great teacher and rabbi. He didn't come merely to show us a better way of living. Jesus is the incarnation of the one true God, the God of Abraham and of Moses. Jesus has revealed much to us about God that we would not know without Jesus.

With all this, Christians today are left with only a few choices:

1. We could simply shut up and enjoy our own private relationship with Jesus. But, then, how could we ever do as Jesus instructed us: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). No . . . the Christian proclamation of the Good News is meant for the whole world. Shutting up isn't really an option.
2. We could change our claims about Jesus to make him more "acceptable" to non-believers. Let's just see if we can't discover a Jesus who is deeply spiritual, but no more than an poor, Galilean itinerant preacher. It really isn't that hard to construct a Jesus to anyone's liking. Of course, it wouldn't really be Jesus, but at least we'd all just get along.
3. Or, we could learn what it is we Christians have claimed about Jesus for most of the last two millennia and then state it boldly and lovingly to all who would hear. The Good News is not exclusionary; it is a joyous proclamation that God has rescued and is rescuing all humanity and all creation.

Our truth claim about Jesus is far too unique to fit with other belief systems. He is not merely a path to God; he is God! Could we be wrong about this? Of course. But I believe with all my mind and heart that we are not. I believe that Jesus the Galilean was truly resurrected on that Sunday morning nearly 2,000 years ago and that belief changes everything. This is something that is knowable, just as it is knowable that Julius Caesar conquered Gaul and George Washington was the first president of the United States.

²Peterson is very helpful when paraphrasing "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." From *The Message*: "So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding."

One caution before closing. Nothing here allows for any us/them mentality or a sense of superiority. Knowing Christ is a gift from God, pure and simple. And it is a gift that I pray will come to all people, if not on this side of the grave then on the next.

I share with you a meditation on Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life written more than five centuries ago by Thomas à Kempis:

“Follow thou me, I am the way and the truth and the life.

Without the way there is no going;
without the truth there is no knowing;
without the life there is no living.

I am the way which thou must follow;
the truth which thou must believe;
the life for which thou must hope.

I am the inviolable way; the infallible truth; the never ending life.

I am the straightest way; the sovereign truth; life true, life blessed, life uncreated.

If thou remain in my way thou shalt know the truth,
and the truth shall make thee free,
and thou shalt lay hold on eternal life.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The content of the Christ Hymn from Colossians (v. 15-20) is staggering, but I wonder how much it actually staggers us! How can we read such a passage and truly embrace, intellectually and emotionally, the immensity of its claims? A man who died in humiliation upon a Roman cross is the image of the invisible God. All things were created in him, through him, and for him. He is before all things. . . . How could this be!? This is about far more than my inner peace or the forgiveness of my sins. This is a cosmic story. What are some steps we could take to reconnect with the sheer enormity of Jesus Christ?
2. It is important to see that saying Jesus is the way is not the same as saying that we desire to live in his way. Do you understand the difference? How would you put this in your own words? Scripture is more focused on the latter, as Marva Dawn puts it, shaping us into people who follow *on* the Jesus way *in* Jesus' way. As Jesus says just a few verses after today's reading, “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do.” How can we hold together our belief that Jesus is the way and our desire to live in his way?
3. In working with our winter Fellowship groups, Rev. Edlen Cowley urges us to use this occasion to reflect on our own proclamation of the Good News. Here are a few questions he wrote to stimulate discussion:
 - How do you plant the seeds of Christ in your circle of influence? Have any fallen in good ground?
 - What is the appeal of the “Going” advocated in the lead-in video? How do “go” and share Christ?
 - Based on the denomination, methods for “going” and “sharing” Christ can be characterized as overly aggressive to extremely passive. What has been your experience if at all, with “evangelizing” others or being “evangelized”? How could we improve on our strategies of sharing Christ?
 - Give some examples of ways you can invite people to get connected here at St. Andrew.
 - Some theologians teach the notion that our call is not to pressure anyone into accepting Christ, rather our job is to plant the seed of Christ in a person's mind. A person may respond immediately to our invitation or they may respond to another person who invites them to Christ at a later point. This teaching reduces the pressure of us being “high-pressure” evangelists. What are your thoughts on this notion?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Mark 2:1-12 Who can forgive sins but God?! Jesus can.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 1:1-18 Jesus is the Word and the Word was God.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Philippians 2:5-11 Jesus is Lord of all creation and every knee will bow to him. (Every?) See Isaiah 45:18, 22-24 to see this language applied to God.</p>	<p>Thursday, Romans 2:14-16 Paul is saying here that non-Jews (Gentiles) have a “law” within themselves, a conscience, that can guide them to doing God’s will. But, of course, much of the time, though not all, it is ignored.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 Paul acknowledges that the proclamation about Jesus seems like foolishness to much of the world. It is the same now as it was then.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

