

The Gospel and Society
Pluralism and Salvation
Session One
January 17, 2005

Dr. H. Richard Niebuhr stated in a lecture at the University of Nebraska, “*our whole culture is involved in a conflict of faiths.*”

That was in 1957, about the time Pluralism was finding a voice in the theological conversation in US.

Obviously religious pluralism is not a new phenomenon; most of the major forms of religion have existed for 2000 years or more.

Following WWII, a greater sensitivity to pluralism as a theological problem heightened in the US, and also in Europe.

In the 47 years since Dr. Niebuhr statement, the world and the world of churches, has moved to even greater conflict.

In *Under the Banner of Heaven*, a story of the Mormon Fundamentalists, Jon Krakauer states there are some ten thousand religious sects – each with its own cosmology, each with its own answer for the meaning of life and death.

Most assert that the other 9,999 not only have it completely wrong but are instruments of evil besides. (p341)

I believe 9/11 raised the bar of importance on the question of Pluralism.

Pre 9/11, many of us had never read the Qur’an.

Some of us did not know a Muslim personally.

Few of knew the different between one Muslim community and another.

Social issues, especially war, demands that the foundations upon which we live & move & have our being be re-examined, re-tested, to see if they can stand against the wave or tidal wave of those very issues.

From the legal and the constitutional, to the theological and ecclesiastical that demand is now being pressed in many churches.

How we read and live by the Gospel in this pluralist society maybe one of the most important questions for the Church today and tomorrow, and will have a reflection in world peace as well as peaceful households.

We have about the same odd of our granddaughters marrying a Muslim as a Methodist in the US today!

Central to any question of Pluralism for Christian is the question of Salvation. For the religious pluralists, salvation is a universal desire mediated through many differing systems, and Jesus Christ is just one of the many ways to the same place – heaven.

For the pluralist, “God has many names.” Or as Joseph Campbell termed it; *“The Hero with a Thousand Faces.”*

Does the Gospel require that we acknowledge only one salvation and that salvation can be found only in Jesus Christ?

Does the Gospel require only that we acknowledge that the salvation offered in Jesus Christ in the New Testament is available only through him? (Video)

If the answer is the former, that the salvation offered in the NT is available only through him, then the illumination offered by Buddha (and others) and the common desire for salvation by those of the pluralists camps is for them a realistic goal and a reality of salvation.

If the answer is the latter, that the one and only salvation offered to humankind is found only in Jesus Christ, then the salvation offered by other religions is a false teaching, and as the little girl said: *“They go to hell.”*

Karl Barth, the great German theologian, once said; *“Tell me where you stand on Christ and I will tell you who you are.”*

Today, we might say, *“Tell me where you stand on Christ, and I will tell you where you live.”*

Like red and blue states, the society of the US is divided on this question. An interesting question; is culture a reflection of religious truth or is religious truth a reflection of culture.

Randy will answer that question next week!

Back to the question of Salvation, *“Is there only one true salvation or are there many.”* Until the middle of the last century, Christians were united on this question, thus the need for evangelism.

In order to bring some clarity to this question and problem, let me outline three understandings that have developed, to some degree, in our life time.

1. **The E group:** the exclusive group that holds the view that Christianity alone is the true religion, because it alone was ‘established by God in the unique event of Jesus Christ.’ This group maintains that only those persons can be saved and go to heaven who are explicitly Christian in both belief and practice, and in fellowship in a particular church.
2. **The I group:** the inclusive group that maintains that Christianity alone is the true religion, BUT allows that persons may participate in salvation anonymously or unknowing without explicit Christian belief or practice. This group extends the net of Christian salvation beyond the boundaries and borders of the Church, or a particular church.
3. **The P group:** The Pluralistic group is the new cook in the kitchen of Salvation. This group holds the view that not only Christians but OTHER religions are true and thus independent vehicles of salvation in their own right.

Many argue that the E group has long since ceased to be credible by the standards of common reason and experience and even is inappropriate to the normative Christian witness of Jesus Christ and God’s love for humanity.

Holding that salvation is available only through explicit participation in a certain church the E’s are stuck with a view that the ‘possibility’ of salvation has actually been offered only to a small segment of the total human population and to those living only after the life of Jesus and in certain geographical regions that Christianity in fact is preached (thus the need for missionaries) and in specific churches.

Perhaps an even larger problem for the E group is the theological question of God.

Either God is not powerful enough to have extended the possibility of Salvation to all people or God did not care enough to want to extend it.

The I group differs from the E group in granting that Salvation is available implicitly through other religions that may be the bears of truth, BUT remains firmly in the camp that claims that Christianity alone is the one religion constituted by God in the saving event of Jesus Christ.

This event is the cause of salvation, is the norm for religious truth in non-Christian religion and without implicit or explicit participation in that event salvation is closed to human being.

The P group differs from both of the former groups and holds that many if not all religion offer a Salvation track to God, just by different names and roads.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from the mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Joseph Campbell, Hero, p.30)

Preachers in this camp, point out that Christians in camp E and I have misappropriated God's grace, and rendered it a particular benefit for Christians rather than a universal gift to be shared with the world, and call US congregations 'Christ health spas.'
(*God Does Not Foreclose: The Universal Promise of Salvation*, David Watson)

In 1996, Anthony Storr wrote in *Feet of Clay: Saints, Sinners, and Madmen: A Study of Gurus in 199:*

"Both revelation and delusion are attempts at the solution of problems."

"Artists and scientists realize that no solution is ever final, but that each new creative step points the way to the next artistic or scientific problem."

In contrast, those who embrace religious revelations and delusional systems tend to see them as unshakeable and permanent.

Religious faith is an answer to the problem of life... the majority of mankind want or need some all-embracing belief system which purports to provide an answer to life's mysteries, and are not necessarily dismayed by the discovery that their belief system, which they proclaim as 'the truth' is incompatible with the beliefs of other people. One man's faith is another man's delusion.

Whether a belief is considered to be delusion or not depends partly upon the intensity with which it is defended, and partly upon the numbers of people subscribing to it."

We have a paradox!

To say that Jesus Christ is God's Son, sent to humankind to save us from sin and for eternal life is a proclamation of God's grace.

Yet this very word of grace seems to imply that those who will or cannot receive these tidings are thereby not saved from sin and are thus in jeopardy of eternity in hell.

What does the Gospel say?

The Good News of the Gospel?

The Gospel says we are to be and make disciples, to build up the ekklesia.
Let me give you my response to this paradox.

William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* stated that *“The best fruits of religious experience are the best things that history has to show...The highest flights of charity, devotion, trust, patience, bravery to which the wings of human nature spread themselves have been flown for religious ideals.*

I call this the D group, the Disciples group.

In the Gospels, Jesus Christ calls disciples and calls them to make disciples. Disciples build up the Kingdom of Good News. Jesus as the Christ is at the same time particular and universal.

Jesus offers a particular grace to all who know his name and as the Christ inaugurates a new age and new kingdom to all.

If the first law of religion is to love God, the first law of Christ is to love humanity.
The fifth chapter of Matthew begin with the Beatitudes and ends with the “You have heard that it was said...” statements.

“You shall love you neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (5:43-45)

As God loves human diversity, the Church is to be the center of human diversity as Christ’s body, and community in the world.

Within the particular and local community, we are to embody the Body of Christ, who died for the sins of the world, not just our sins.

In the universal and mystics Church the incarnate Word, the Logos made flesh, is what saves us, not our doctrine or our worship.

Our salvation is the beginning point of our witness, rather than the conclusion.

The pathos of religious disagreement will never be overcome, but those of us who follow in the steps of Jesus, and who pray to the God of Creation, can show the way by placing our arrogance and our bigotry on the altar of confession, rather than the altar of intercession.

Salvation, in the D group, is seen in responsible action, the tasting in the pudding.

Responsible action is the consequence of salvation not the cause of salvation.

Responsible people of God ask first, not who is good or bad, or what thinking is right or wrong, but what correct and fitting action needs to be taken to make God's world a better place.

The disciple lives and acts from a source which is beyond him, when he can name and even when he cannot name or describe that source, for it is this Source that is the giver of Salvation.

We have before us today, a disaster of Biblical proportion.

Those who have been saved by God and will be saved by God are the ones with broken hearts as we watch the suffering in the world, and open hearts as we respond to bring aid to the suffering.

Those outside of Salvation, watch without compassion and act without charity. Salvation in the pluralistic society in which we live is still the same Salvation proclaimed in the Gospel.

Today is Martin Luther King day, 76th birthday and 40th anniversary of his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize.

At a celebration in Dr. King's home church, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Oscar Sanchez, the former president of Costa Rica, who won the Nobel Prize in 1987 said **"Courage begins with one voice."**

The wheat and the chaff have not changed, and even a child should know the difference.

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