

Hard Questions

What About All The Religions?

Over the past couple of weeks I've had the opportunity to talk to a number of people who were given conflicting advice from doctors.

Now there are capable medical people who see things differently. Unfortunately, that can cause a lot of confusion for patients. When we go to the doctor we all want to be told this is what's wrong and this is what we need to do to solve the problem.

Of course, medicine at times is more of an art than a science simply because of the unbelievable complexity of the human body.

Our family has good friends in PA who have been an encouragement to us for years. My wife, Sandy, used to baby sit their kids. The mom was her mentor when Sandy was a teen. Two of their daughters were in our wedding. They've prayed for us and at times even helped some financially back in our leaner years.

There's a long history there. But several years ago the dad started having liver problems. He traveled down here frequently to Johns Hopkins for tests. As things got worse there was discussion about a liver transplant.

It was recommended that they get on the list at the University of Pennsylvania as well as at Hopkins so they started the evaluation process there.

Repeatedly a doctor at U of P would ask, "why are you taking this medicine? We never use this medicine." The answer was, "It was prescribed by the doctor at Hopkins."

If you've been in a similar situation you know how unsettling that is.

But the clincher was a few Fridays ago when Art went to his appointment at U of P and they said, "You're not doing so bad. Besides at your age there's a thousand or so ahead of you on the list."

Now you have to understand that by this point he was so weak he could hardly walk and his mind was so clouded he could hardly communicate!

That Friday they returned home and his wife cried out to God and said, "I don't know what to do. I don't think I can care for my husband any more."

The next morning they get a call at 5 AM from Hopkins saying, “Get a police escort and get down here ASAP, there’s a liver that the U of P doctors harvested and say can’t be used but we believe it can.”

What do you do? Are you going to let them put a liver in you that doctors at another hospital say has a problem?

They did. The liver works fine. And one week later he was back home and doing really well. His wife said, “They communicated more the day after his surgery than that had for the month before that. That’s how much his mind cleared up.”

There are times when you say, “I’ve had it with all these conflicting opinions. I just want to know, what’s the truth? What are the facts?”

Were the doctors at both hospitals sincere? Of course. Did they have Art’s best interest in mind. Absolutely. Did he need that liver? No question.

When you get conflicting opinions from experts about your health it’s confusing.

Well, there’s another area of life where we get conflicting opinions from sincere, well educated people and that’s the area of religion.

And just like the medical opinions can cause confusion and uncertainty so can the whole question of “What about all the religions?”

Here’s a pie chart of the major religions. Obviously each of those can be divided up almost infinitely into subcategories.

Urantia, Scientology, The Baha’i Faith, Church of All Worlds, Taoism, Hare Krishna, Aum Shinri Kyo (the folks who brought you the 1995 Tokyo Subway Sarin Nerve Gas Attack, Order of the Solar Temple , Rastafarianism.

What we have in our world is a smorgasbord of religions, all with competing ideas and belief systems.

Now we’re in week 3 of a series we’re calling “Heart, Soul, and Mind,” trying to tackle the tough questions that often keep people from faith.

The first week we answered the question, "Is it OK to doubt? and we saw that the answer is "yes."

As long as our doubts and questions are honest and not just smokescreens to avoid truth, doubts are healthy. Doubts drive us to examine the evidence and find out the facts.

Then last week we asked the question, "Is it rational to believe in God?"

We saw that not only did atheism lead to empty despair, but that it was illogical and contradictory.

So if theism is the answer how are we to know which religion is right. In fact, how can we know if any of them are right?

Here we are at Faith Community Church as Christians. Our purpose statement says we exist to: "Introduce people to Jesus Christ and to equip them to become His devoted followers."

That's because we believe that people are lost with out Christ and we want them to know Him.

But now the question comes up, and it's a legitimate one, how can we say that? How can we say that Christianity's claims are right and other religions therefore are wrong?

That sounds so elitist, so bigoted, so self-righteous, dosen't it?

For someone to say, "Christianity is the only way," sounds unamerican. Intolerant.

After all, we all have our own way. It's just logical.

What I want us to do this morning is to look at four questions that grow out of the main question "what about all the religions" to see if we might get some clarity.

The first question is this: *Don't All Paths Lead To God?*

Doesn't it just seem to make sense that God would be an equal opportunity God? Isn't it just people who get stuck on which path. Not God. He's just looking for sincerity.

That sounds enlightened. Tolerant and pluralistic.

It does until you ask some basic questions. Like who's going to say that the Aum Shinri Kyo bunch who used sarin on the Tokyo subway and killed 12 and injured 5000 isn't wrong.

How about radical Islamacists who smash planes into buildings? How about The People's Temple where 900 people drank cyanide laced Cool aid and died in November of 1978?

The truth is that no one really believes that all religions lead to God. That all religions teach truth.

How about the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. They use rosary beads, bow toward Mecca, and believe that Jesus is the source of power to allow followers to kill.

They practice unspeakable brutality while claiming to be directed by the Holy Spirit.

I challenge you to find anyone who would say, God's only looking for sincerity and they're sincere so who can say they're wrong."

They're desperately wrong and we all know it. Sincerity isn't the test of truth.

Many years ago while my Mom was still alive she let some visiting young men from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, in to have a religious discussion.

Now I had been prayerfully sharing with my Mom the truths of Biblical Christianity but she wasn't a believer yet.

So here she is listing to two very nice Mormon young men who totally contradicted everything I was saying about Jesus Christ and forgiveness.

And when I asked her which is right this is what she said, "I don't know. They're so sincere."

So my question to her was. "Mom, am I sincere?" to which she said, "Yes." So then I asked, "So on the basis of sincerity, who's right?" Of course she didn't know.

Sincerity is important. When people say they have faith and they're insincere that just turns us off. But sincerity alone doesn't prove the validity of any belief system.

The 911 hijackers were sincere but they were sincerely wrong.

So what other criteria do we use to evaluate truth claims?

There are at least two questions, if we were talking about religions, that I think are essential to answer.

What do they teach about God? and What do they teach about ultimate reality?

In logic there's a principle called the law of noncontradiction. Everybody uses this law in their daily life.

The philosopher Aristotle wrote "one cannot say of something that it is and that it is not in the same respect and at the same time."

This is a fundamental principle of human thought. A cannot equal non a.

If $2+2=4$ is true then $2+2 = 5$ can't be true.

If you don't agree with that law I hope you're not an engineer designing a bridge that I'm going to drive over.

Aristotle said they way you show people the truth of the law of noncontradiction is to show them they follow it all the time. He used the road illustration.

He said, "I ask why such a person goes on the Megara road to get to Megara from Athens, since on such a person's view it is just as true that any other road would get him to Megara."

We'd say, "If all truths are equal and there's not a right and wrong way then if you want to get to California, just drive on 95 South or 97 North or 50 East, it really doesn't matter because any road will get you there.

No one lives like that, but people constantly violate the law of noncontradiction when it comes to religion.

All religions make specific claims about God and about ultimate reality. They might all be false but they can't all be true.

For example Hinduism says there's one Supreme God who created the universe. He is all-pervasive. He created many gods, highly advanced spiritual beings, to be His helpers.

God isn't external to creation, but He's inside every soul, in the heart and consciousness, waiting to be discovered. Salvation is knowing God and ultimately merging with the divine consciousness.

Islam would say there is one God, creator of all who is separate from his creation.

Christianity would say that there is one God but He is composed of three persons, Father, Son and Spirit.

Those three different views all disagree with each other on fundamental definitions. They can't all be correct.

The first question is this: *Don't All Paths Lead To God?* Don't all profess to say the same thing.

The Second Question: *Isn't It Intolerant To Claim That There's One Way To God?*

Let me make a couple of observations;

a) There are some religious people who are rude and intolerant. Some of them claim to be Christians.

Pastor Fred Phelps, of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas sponsors pickets of funerals of American service personnel killed in Iraq.

In full sight of grieving families they hold signs saying things like “Thank God for IED’s” and “God Hates America.”

Phelps says God is slaughtering our troops as judgment against our nation’s acceptance of homosexuality.

I shutter to actually speak the name of his church web site but here goes. It’s godhatesfags.com. That’s rude, intolerant, grievous, it’s inexcusable. So there are some religious people who are intolerant.

b) There are aspects of truth in many religions.

Islam stresses submission to God. Hinduism stresses taking time to contemplate God. Baha’ism says “blessed is he who prefers others before himself.”

Those are good things if they’re done rightly.

Just remember because something contains truth doesn’t necessarily mean it’s true in all of it’s teachings.

c) It’s not arrogant or intolerant to care about the truth.

If you knew that the bridge was out down the road. And you saw a car full of people speeding towards certain disaster, would it be arrogant to try to flag them down and warn them? Would it be intolerant because they have just as much right to drive down that road as anyone else?

Obviously not. It would be compassionate. To not try to warn the people in the car would be inexcusable.

If you sincerely believe that someone’s eternal destiny is at stake, it’s not being intolerant to try to share that with them. In fact, if you really care about people you you’d have to try.

As far as Christianity goes, it isn’t Christians who made up the idea that Jesus Christ is the only way to God.

John 6 pg 944 Read vs 35

John 8 pg 947 Read vs 12

John 10 pg 950 Read vs 9

John 11 pg 951 Read vs 25

John 14 pg 955 Read vs 6

These are compelling, dramatic claims of Jesus which He backed up by His resurrection from the dead.

It isn't arrogance or intolerance that compels true believers, it's compassion. It's the joy that comes from having peace with God. It's the love of people that compels a Christian to say, "Look out, the bridge is out."

The first question is this: *Don't All Paths Lead To God?* Don't all religions really say the same thing.

The Second Question: *Isn't It Intolerant To Claim That There's One Way To God?*

The Third Question: *Who Is This Jesus Who Would Make Such Extravagant Claims About Himself?*

Jesus Christ claimed to be the Son of God. He claimed to be equal with the Father. He claimed to be the only way to heaven. And he claimed that His words were divine.

No other founder of any religion made the claims that Jesus made. No other faith has a Creator who humbled Himself to become the Savior of His creation.

The Bible says of Jesus: *He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*

Jesus declared Himself to be the Son of God. But let's just assume for a minute that He really wasn't. If He wasn't the Son of God what are our options?

1) He said He was but He knew He wasn't.

Maybe Jesus was a liar and was just manipulating people to get His way. That would make Him one of the most diabolical liars in all of history.

That doesn't fit at all with the biblical record.

Turn to Matthew 26, pg 878 Read vs 57-60

Even Jesus' enemies had to admit that there was nothing in His character that they could find that was false. They had to come up with lying witnesses at His trial.

Not only that but He'd have gone to a gruesome, tortuous death for what He knew was a lie.

How about this option...

2) He was deluded.

Our mental institutions are full of people claiming to be God. Anybody can make the claim. Vernon Howel, better known as David Koresh claimed he was the reincarnation of both King David and King Cyrus of Persia; he had been appointed by God to rebuild the Temple and destroy Babylon. In other words, Koresh claimed to be the Messiah.

In the end he died along with 85 Branch Davidians in a fiery siege on their compound in Waco, TX. Some Branch Davidians still believe that Koresh will return to Earth someday.

Maybe Jesus was like that.

Of course we tend to lock really deluded people up don't we? They don't found movements that change the course of history to the point where we even divide time into the eras before and after their birth.

Of course there's a third option...

3) Jesus spoke truth

That would mean that He wasn't just a religious figure in ancient history. There have been lots of those. It would mean that He was truly the Son of God who could forgive sin, heal the sick, and rise again on the third day after His death.

C.S. Lewis in his classic, *Mere Christianity*:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God."

That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg--or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come away with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

According to the law of noncontradiction there can only be one answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?"

The first question: *Don't All Paths Lead To God?* Don't all religions really say the same thing? No.

The Second Question: *Isn't It Intolerant To Claim That There's One Way To God?* If it's true it's unloving not to make the claim.

The Third Question: *Who Is This Jesus Who Would Make Such Extravagant Claims About Himself?* I believe He's the resurrected Savior and Lord of all.

Question number 4: *Is It OK To Disagree?*

Of course it is. What we have to avoid is two things. First, if we disagree we have to do it without being combative. We can disagree and in the process really take time to discuss the issues and look at the evidence.

But second of all we have to avoid the intellectual sloppiness that pretends that there's nothing to disagree about.

Intellectual carelessness confuses pluralism with relativism.

True pluralism is OK. We live in a world where there's a plurality of beliefs, worldviews, and religions. Regardless of where we stand we should be careful of respecting the existence of other people's views.

We don't have to agree with those views but we have to respect them.

A couple of years ago we had a conference on cults. The speaker came with a wealth of helpful knowledge. We had a problem though. In his first presentation he repeatedly made fun of some key beliefs of cult groups.

Now granted, some are far out and strange, but they're what the group believes.

After the morning service he and I had a long talk on how we have chosen to present material at this church. I said if I was a visitor and I heard you poke fun at someone else's sincerely held beliefs I'd walk out thinking who are they to be so arrogant and condescending?

To his credit he readily agreed and the rest of his presentations were great. Factual but not in any way disparaging.

Pluralism is a recognition of the world of differences we live in.

Relativism, on the other hand, is something very different. Relativism is the philosophical position that all points of view are equally valid and that all truth is relative to the individual.

Pluralism says there's a lot of different ideas out there. Relativism says they can't be evaluated because no system of truth can be superior to another.

Lets not be sloppy and confuse the two.

Now there are plenty of intelligent people who have belief systems other than Christianity. There are people who lead what we would define as moral lives.

But those who claim to be Christians, of all people, should be humble.

We know we were lost.

We believe the Bible's affirmation "*...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way.*"

We believe the Bible's declaration "*...the wages of sin is death...*"

"...the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness..."

We recognize that we are lost without a Savior.

But we also rejoice that Jesus Christ stepped into our world as the Lamb of God. The sin bearer. The perfect sacrifice.

We know the bridge is out. We know our only hope is faith in Jesus Christ.

That's what compels us to be concerned about others.

Turn II Cor 5 pg 1027

read vs 13 "beside ourselves" "out of our minds"

read vs 14 Read 18-21

Gospel