

Is Jesus *Really* the Only Way?

By Glenn M. Penner

In the fall of 2006, Christianity Today asked a number of evangelical theologians what they believed would be the greatest challenge that they would face in the next fifty years. Most answered that they believed that evangelicals will face increasing pressure to compromise the exclusive gospel for a pluralistic world.

I agree. This trend has been evident for many years but more so in recent years. Evangelicals need to have a clear answer to the simply question, "Is Jesus really the only way to God?" Of course, this question begs several others.

- What about other religions? Aren't they evidences of people seeking after God?
- Surely sincerity must count for something?
- Won't God just accept someone's faith as being directed towards Him, if they never had the chance to hear and respond to the gospel?
- Certainly it can't be fair, if they never had the chance, can it?
- What makes us think we're the only right ones?

For many, even among those who call themselves evangelicals, evangelism has become a dirty word, an imperialistic sentiment. What we really need to do, it is asserted, is to dialogue, find common ground, discuss, and learn from each other's faith. But evangelize, proselytize? How dare we! How dare we presume to hold the only key to salvation!

This is *the* issue. And behind it is the question, "Is Jesus *really* the only way

A number of years ago, when I was serving as a pastor in southern Manitoba, a member of my church came to my office one morning, honestly seeking some answers to this question. She had gotten into a discussion with some of her relatives on this issue and was confused. I told her that I'd give it some thought and get back to her in a couple of days. That evening, after supper, I drove back to my office and sitting down at the computer, I began to compile some of my thoughts. As I looked through my files and thought about discussions and study that I had done on the topic. As I worked, two things became clear to me.

The first was the realization that any discussion on this issue must, inevitably, be centred on what the Bible teaches. As a Christian, I must believe that the Bible is absolutely true in all that it speaks about. It is the revelation of God's will, a setting forth of reality from a God who knows all things and who has chosen to reveal truth to mankind in such a way that mankind can understand, yet without error. In all that the Bible affirms, it is to be believed; in all that it commands, it is to be obeyed; in all that it touches upon, it is authoritative. Without this basic tenant concerning Scripture firmly established right from the beginning, any discussion on this topic will, inevitably, degenerate into a confusing, philosophical debate and conjecturing where differing opinions are pitted against each other, each claiming equal authority. Without such a view of Scripture, meaningful

discussion on this topic will prove to be virtually impossible. The Scriptures must be the foundation for our opinions on this issue. If two people can agree on this, and believe that what the Bible says is true, then they can talk; they have a common denominator for determining truth. If not, than any talk will probably be futile. I cannot emphasize this strong enough! We must allow the Bible to speak, allowing it to determine our beliefs in this matter (as in all matters of faith and practice), if we claim to be followers of Jesus. The revelation of Scripture must be kept centre.

The second thing that became clear to me that evening were the theological ramifications that accompany the question, "Is Jesus *really* the only way?" Think this through with me.

- The doctrine of *God* comes under scrutiny. Is He just? Is He fair?
- The doctrine of *Christ* is at stake. Was Jesus mistake when He claimed to be the only way to the Father in John 14:6? And if He isn't the only way, what was the purpose of His coming?
- The doctrine of *salvation* must be examined. Did Jesus really have to die if people could be saved apart from faith in Him? Was the cross really necessary?
- The doctrine of *mankind* becomes suspect. Is man really inherently sinful as the Bible depicts him to be? Is he truly a rebel against God, or does each person possess a element of good (or godliness) within that makes him basically good, needing only a push in the right direction?
- The doctrine of *sin* becomes an issue. Is a person really responsible for his/her actions? Isn't sincerity good enough? Isn't evil just a matter of personal opinion, cultural standards, or societal expectations?
- The doctrine of *end-times* must be evaluated. Is there a future reckoning; a time of reward or punishment? And on what basis will people be judged? Will be a second chance after death?
- The doctrine of the *church* is challenged. Is the church really responsible to share the good news with those who have never heard? And if so, could it not be conceivable that the "good news" could become "bad news" if a person was saved before a missionary comes but rejects the gospel when the missionary brings it to his community? Is the church really God's unique witness to the world? Perhaps He will find other ways of having the gospel given to all people.

Is Jesus *really* the only way? It becomes obvious, doesn't it, that this is more than just some academic question best left to be debated in scholarly journals or seminary classrooms, but which really has very little "practical" impact on "real" life. It is a question that touches upon every major doctrine of the Christian faith. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that the issue goes to the very core of the Christian faith. How we answer this question has profound implications on what we believe and how we will fulfill Christ's commission.

So what *does* the Bible have to say?

In Ephesians 2:1 we read that mankind, apart from God, is "dead in trespasses and sins."

According to verse 3, we are “objects of wrath” subject to the judgment of God. Apart from Christ, each one of us is spiritually dead. Romans 1:25 adds that we are “alienated from the life God.” Galatians 4:4-8 tells us that we are enslaved to false gods or false ideas about God, not knowing God. When we didn’t know God, Romans 8:7 tells us, we were “hostile to the Word of God”, disobedient to the will of God, subject to the wrath of God. We were, to put it simply, rebels without a cause and without a hope. Jesus said that mankind loves darkness rather than light (John 3:19), and Paul adds in Romans 1-3 that we all rebel against whatever spiritual light we do have.

When we look at our own lives with any sense of honesty, we recognize that this is true. Even as Christians, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, recipients of new life from God, joint heirs with Christ, we still tend to walk away from God and resist His control over our life. Why is that? As we look at Scripture, we realize that there really is something, deep within each of us that resists God and His Lordship over our life. It’s been part of us since Adam’s fall (Genesis 3). As David stated it in Psalm 51:5, “surely I was sinful at birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” This rebelliousness is part of us; not from creation but as a result of the Fall. It’s a part of who we are as sinners. Little wonder that Paul describes in Ephesians 2:12 the state of those without Christ as “having no hope and without God in the world.”

Hopeless. Godless. That’s how Paul describes those who have never heard. We really are in a spiritual mess, as human beings. Read any newspaper. Read any history book. Look around you and look at how people treat each other. Look at any society. There are no “noble savages.” Look at your own life, at your deep, hidden thoughts. What does this tell you about the spirituality of mankind?

Rather than loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Matthew 22:37), our heart is darkened, our soul degraded, our mind depraved, our wills (our strength) bent on selfishness (Romans 1-3). Mankind is consistently revealed in Scripture as being tragically, universally, and inevitably sinful. We cannot allow ourselves any kind of romantic, noble, “Star Trek” view of mankind that sees the race as being essentially good and progressively getting better. Neither the Bible nor daily life will allow us to come to this conclusion.

Are we as bad as we could be? No, but none of us is as good as we should be. We were created to be in fellowship with God, bearers of His divine image. Jesus came to make this a reality again. Through His death, he opened the way to God (Hebrews 10:20). If it were possible to be in fellowship with God apart from Christ, then why did Jesus come to dwell among us? Why the ultimate sacrifice on God’s part? Why send His only Son, if salvation was possible apart from Him?

Only the sacrifice of the sinless one could pay the penalty for our sins. Only His death could pay the price for our salvation. Only His resurrection could give life to those who were spiritually dead.

But what about those who have never heard this gospel?

The Bible makes it clear that those who have never heard the gospel will be judged *not* because they did not hear or respond to the gospel, but because of their refusal to live up to whatever spiritual light they did have (Romans 1-3). As Paul looks at the heathen religions of his day, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he declares in Romans 1 that they have exchanged the truth for a lie and worship the creation rather than the Creator. The Scripture is rather unanimous in its judgment that God does not view the various religious systems of the world as evidence of mankind groping after God or seeking after Him, but as being rebellion against Him (Romans 1:22-25; Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:36-39, et al.) As Karl Barth rightly pointed out, judged in the light of revelation, "religion is unbelief. It is the one great concern... of godless man."¹ Thus, Paul concludes in Romans 3:11-12 by quoting the Old Testament, that there is really no one who seeks after God.

We may conclude, therefore, that mankind is judged by God, not because of his/her lack of faith in Christ, but because of his/her ungodliness. Not only does each individual fail to live up to God's standards, but no one lives up to what he/she *knows* to be right.

I should note, however, that if there were a person in some remote (or even some not so remote) part of the world where the gospel has never been preached, but who is open to receive salvation, I believe that God would see to it that someone goes to share the gospel with that person. This may explain why God leads certain Christians to certain parts of the world to serve as missionaries. God, in His wisdom, compassion, and foresight, brings the good news to prepared hearts. We have such a man in Acts 10, a Roman by the name of Cornelius to whom God sends the apostle Peter to share with him how he might have eternal life. In no way, however, does the text indicate that he has saved prior to Peter's presenting the gospel to him. The need for the special revelation of God's plan of salvation was necessary for him to receive the gift of eternal life. The Bible gives no basis for any thought of someone coming to God apart from faith in the finished work of Christ, nor apart from hearing the message of salvation from a human messenger. As Romans 10:14, 15 says:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

This is the reason for the critical role that missions plays in the plan of God. God, in His wisdom, has chosen to spread the good news of His salvation through His people. To *us* has been given the responsibility to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:17-20). The task of the church is not to dialogue but to evangelize and establish churches in all nations. Our calling is not to discover grace and truth in other religions, but to be instruments of grace and truth as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ; grace and truth that will set the captives free.

¹ Karl Barth, quoted in David Mueller, Karl Barth (Word, 1972):92.

Someone once asked me, “Why are we so lucky to have the gospel, while others have not heard?” How would you answer?

In Genesis 12, we find God making a covenant with Abraham, establishing a relationship with him. Why? So that through Abraham all nations of the world would be blessed (Gen.12:3). Jesus echoes this in His commission to His disciples when He calls us to make disciples of all nations (Matt.28:17-20). We have been blessed in order that we may be a blessing to the world. This is why we are so “lucky.”

God has established a relationship with us so we, in turn, can bring others into a relationship with God our Father, and His Son. We have been blessed so that, through us, God might bring all people to Himself, as many as would believe. This is our responsibility as individuals and as local churches.

If we hold that people can be saved apart from Christ, why did Jesus bother to die? And if we were to say that a person could go to heaven by living a good life and being sincere, do we not end up affirming salvation by works? This, Scripture will not allow (cf. Acts 13:39; Romans 2:12, 12; 3:20; all of Galatians; Ephesians 2:8,9).

We really must keep the truth firmly in mind that there is really no such thing as an “innocent” human being. No one will be able to say to God on Judgment Day, “God, you were unfair!” In Romans 3:19. Paul points out that on that Day, every mouth will be silenced because all will know that they are getting exactly what they deserve. They will know that they are receiving the just consequences for their behaviour and beliefs. In the meantime, God is reaching out, preparing hearts by His Spirit to receive the Gospel, and sending out men and women to bring the good news of what Jesus has done for them. Salvation is all a work of God, from beginning to end. Indeed, there is indication in Scripture that one of the reasons Jesus has not yet returned is that He is giving people more time to repent (Acts 3:19-22; 2 Peter 3:3-9). God is concerned about people of all nations, and in His wisdom He has chosen to use us to bring Him salvation to the world.

With every blessing comes a corresponding responsibility. For this reason, it is the responsibility of every Christian to be involved in world missions to some degree. It is a critical part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. He was lifted up on the cross so that people everywhere would be drawn to Him (John 12:32).

Is Jesus *really* the only way? On the basis of Scripture, we must conclude, “Yes.” Jesus, Himself, said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). The apostle Paul, standing before the Jewish high court declared, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). He held to this position to the end of his life when he reminded Timothy, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men” (1 Timothy 2:5,6).

There is one God, one mediator, one name, one way to God. For those of us who have come through this one way, who have bowed before the Lord and accepted His work on

the cross on our behalf, our calling is to be involved in taking this message to all people in all places. God has entrusted His life-giving message to us.

What part can you have in making it possible to every man, woman, and child in this generation to have the opportunity to hear and understand the gospel and receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour? What specifically do you think God would have you to do?