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June 18, 2017

A Christ-like Response Pluralism

Acts 14:8-20, 17:16-34

1. Jesus saves people, not religions.

- *Mark 9:38-40*

2. God is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

- *John 1:1-5; Galatians 4:4; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, 2:6-8;
Galatians 3:1-14*

3. Prevenient grace.

- *Romans 5:8*

4. You are a means of grace.

- *1 Peter 3:15; Matthew 20:25-28; 1 John 4:8; John 13:34*

- **Show Respect**

- **Serve**

- **Love**

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6/18/17

**ISMS: A Christ-like Response
Pluralism¹
Acts 14:8-20; 17:16-34**

I have told you before that when I was in college, as research for a "Psychology of Religion" class back in 1982, a friend and I went out to an infamous cult commune in the middle of Oregon, outside a small town called Antelope. The cult was called the "Rajneeshees" after their leader, the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. They were building a massive, self-supporting compound, and at that time they were giving public tours ("public" was their word for it, but it was guided and guarded by men with assault rifles). I asked the question of our tour guide, "How do you explain differing religions and how your viewpoint fits with them?" She basically said, "We believe that life is a big banquet table, and there are many dishes to eat from on the table. You have made your dish, others have made theirs, and you can eat from any of them. They are all at the same table." What she described is pluralism.

Our U.S. Constitution sets a course for "a more perfect union." Our politicians speak of a great "melting pot" that flows out of a "nation of immigrants." Our pledge of allegiance refers to "one nation." Our nation's seal, *E pluribus unum*, promises "Out of many, one."

Almost all Americans agree about these concepts that we need to live as a society. We agree on many of the basic rules of a democratic society: the right to vote, the right to due process of law, the right to free speech² (although, more and more, it seems that people think you have a right to free speech only as long as it agrees with them). Whether the framers of our constitution intended it or not, the result of our democracy is a pluralistic society.

¹ Resources:

- Truesdale, Albert, and Keri Mitchell. *With cords of love: a Wesleyan response to religious pluralism*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2006.
- Inazu, John D. "5 Guidelines for Living in a Pluralist Society." ChristianityToday.com. Accessed June 14, 2017. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/october-web-only/5-guidelines-for-living-in-pluralist-society.html?start=1>.
- "How to Respond to Religious Pluralism." Gospel-Centered Discipleship. May 11, 2012. Accessed June 14, 2017. <http://gcdiscipleship.com/2012/05/11/making-disciples-in-a-pluralist-context/>.
- Dallas Willard ARTICLES. Accessed June 14, 2017. <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=17>.
- Truesdale, Albert, Henry H. Knight, Karen Strand Winslow, and K. E. Brower. *Global Wesleyan dictionary of theology*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013.

² Inazu, John D. "5 Guidelines for Living in a Pluralist Society."

This issue of “pluralism” is the second in our summer-long sermon series called “ISMS: A Christ-like Response.” There are so many ideas and philosophies and agendas that are swirling around us every day, and it’s hard to know sometimes which ones are good, which ones are bad, and sometimes we don’t even realize that they are influencing us and our faith – in ways that can be beneficial or dangerous to us. Some of them impact us in ways that are good, some bad, and some benign. Some of them infect our faith and leave us with a weak, watered-down, or an altogether different faith than we started with. We want to start thinking about how we should think about these isms. We are praying that this series would affirm, or sound the alarm, or when necessary correct us in different ways, all for the goal that we can *be* and *bring* the presence of Christ most powerfully into our community and culture, because our community and culture needs to be introduced to Jesus. They meet Jesus in our lives by how we treat others and share the Good News with them.

We also want to invite you to share your questions, observations, or concerns with us. You can do that in one of several ways: you can use the cards in the seat back in front of you, you can email us at “isms@wvcnaz.com” or you can message us through our West Valley Church Facebook page. At the end of this series, the pastors will take a Sunday morning and have a panel discussion and do our best to respond to your questions and comments.

Last week we looked at the volatile issue of racism, and were charged in our own hearts to serve in humility and love. The same attitudes and approach are going to carry us into our conversation today about pluralism.

“The basic meaning of *pluralism* is something that exists in more than one form – the condition of being plural. We are focusing on a specific (type) of pluralism – religious. (Religious pluralism is more than just tolerating other religions that are different than your own;) religious pluralism is an attitude or policy regarding the diversity of religious belief systems co-existing in society.”³ Often it is more than simply allowing religions to “co-exist” alongside each other; religious pluralism takes things a step further, stating that all religions are equally valid and that they all equally lead to God. One expert says, “Most religious pluralists believe strongly in the importance of religion, but this belief is coupled with the conviction that each religion is valid and should be respected...Their critical point is that no single religion possesses the truth (so much) that it can (claim to be the only correct religion).”⁴

Now, the fact that we live in a pluralistic culture is not a bad thing – and it’s not much different than the culture the early Church was in. We’ll talk more about that in a few minutes. But it’s probably important to point out what the climate has been, and is, in our culture regarding religion – especially in the secular academic arenas of the United States.

Until the last half century, Christianity has enjoyed a long tenure of being the predominant influence in our culture. That’s because our founding fathers

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_pluralism

⁴ Truesdale & Mitchell, p. 20

functioned largely from a Judeo-Christian ethic and morality even though some were Christians and some were Deists. One author writes, “For most of our country’s history, white Protestants have not had to think much about our country’s deep differences or the extent to which a common good eludes us. Protestant influences on law, culture, and education, combined with deeply embedded racial inequalities, left white Protestants in relative positions of prominence and power.”⁵

This same author goes on to say, “The historical narrative does not mean the United States was itself Protestant. Nor does it mean that Protestants have never faced opposition. To the contrary, the growing secularization of our country (especially among its elites) has brought with it increasing challenges to believers. In (the) world of...higher education, Christian perspectives are routinely marginalized, ridiculed, or simply dismissed as irrelevant.”⁶

The problem for Christianity grew as our culture became increasingly religiously diverse, and at the same time more secular. The distinctions between Christianity and our culture became more and more significant. Then came the turbulent 1960’s and 1970’s, when people began to question and mistrust all authority and power structures. On the heels of this came the highly publicized televangelists’ scandals of the 1980s and 1990s that revealed these so called “Christian” leaders with their sprawling empires being caught red-handed, neck-deep in greed and sexual immorality. This convinced our culture that Christian leaders were just as corrupt as politicians and CEO’s.

All of this came to into conflict in the 1980’s and 1990’s when churches joined together under the banner of the “Moral Majority.” The Moral Majority was “a political action group formed in the 1970s to further a conservative and religious agenda.”⁷

Many Christian denominations and churches adopted this group’s approach, which was an attempt to mobilize Christians to use their money and their votes to exert influence on the culture through legislation that reflected Christian morals, values, and dogmas.

In some ways by doing this, Christians painted themselves into a corner as the growing social tide of secularism and pluralism was simply too strong. Christians had given the culture an ultimatum, and they lost.

This was the momentum that the more liberal parts of our culture and secular academia were looking for. As one author has said, “Today the Christian is often regarded as the big, bad bully who has been humbled and must be punished for past misdeeds. One must accept as a fact that university life is now immersed in an irrational, but historically powerful swing against Christianity. Nothing can be done about this in the short run except recognize it and prepare to stand in the midst of it.”⁸

⁵ Inazu, *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_Majority

⁸ Dallas Willard, “Being a Christian in a Pluralistic Society”

Now there is no way that in one sermon, I can give a thorough explanation for how we got where we are, but have I given you enough of a frame of reference? You might not even be aware of the significance of this “ism,” but trust me: it is real and it is very unlikely that the tide will ever turn back (before Jesus returns).

Still, we live in a pluralistic society. Christianity is now one among many religions in the western world. But we don't have to worry – in a world with different religious stories, we have the story that is the truth of God. And if others are genuinely seeking God, even through other religions, then eventually they will see the true story of God in Jesus Christ. God is very good at revealing himself to people, even in a pluralistic society. In fact, this isn't too different than the culture that the early church was born into.

One example of pluralism in the New Testament comes from Acts 14 when Paul and Barnabas were in the towns of Lystra and Derbe. These towns had no Jewish background at all – they were Roman towns. The narrative says this:

“In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, “Stand up on your feet!” At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.” (Acts 14:8-13, niv)

The people in these towns had no way to understand what God was doing except through their own religion – a religion made up of many different Gods.

Later in the book of Acts, we see another prominent example; it comes from Paul's visit to the town of Athens. Athens was a kind of cultural center, or a cultural marketplace for religions and ideas. Paul was sent there from Berea to protect him from a group of Jews who were trying to kill him, and Paul was given instructions to wait there until Silas and Timothy could join him. So Paul started wandering around downtown Athens:

“While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, ‘What is this babbler trying to say?’ Others remarked, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods.’ They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.’ (All the Athenians and the

foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)” (Acts 17:16-21, niv)

I share these stories with you to help you see that the culture that surrounded the early Christian church was very similar to the culture we find ourselves in today. And despite all that, Christians are still here today! Somehow we survived...and Christians will still be here when Jesus comes back someday. So until then, how do we respond to pluralism?

Let me start by asking for a show of hands: How many of you know someone either fairly well or really well, who is from another religion? Great. Keep that person in your mind, and think about that person with everything I’m about to tell you, okay? That’s important because it’s easy for us to badmouth a religion, but we need to remember that those religions are made up of people whom God loves, Jesus died for, and are they are made in the image of God.

So we’ll start with this...

1. Jesus saves *people*, not *religions*.

We have no reason to think that we have to fight against different religions. God does not intend to save any religions; God longs to save people. God does not want to be in relationship with any religions or institutions – *not even the Church of the Nazarene, or any other Christian denomination* – God longs to be in relationship with people who will come together in the name of Christ as his children. God does not long to be in relationship with the institutions or organizations of the church. That doesn’t mean they aren’t important; as long as they are the means by which God’s people get together. But you will not see this building or our organizational structure in heaven someday. You will only see the people who we have cared enough to introduce to Jesus Christ.

That means, then, that we don’t have to waste our time arguing against or fighting against different religions. They are no threat to Christianity.

We live in a time when religious extremists are determined to treat those who don’t agree with them as bitter enemies. But the Bible tells us that we are to live with respect for people of other religions while still being faithful to the New Testament’s message of the Good News, which is Jesus Christ, crucified, buried, and risen from the dead.

John Wesley, one of the huge heroes of our faith, believed that other religions merely showed how hungry people were for God. One author writes that Wesley taught “No one should try to instruct God in how to bring people to Christian faith. God is free to bear witness to His Son in any way He pleases. Wesley was optimistic regarding God’s activity in people of other religions.”⁹ Wesley preached a sermon on Mark 9:38-40 that says:

⁹ Truesdale, 144

“‘Teacher,’ said John, ‘we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.’ ‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said. ‘For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.’”
(Mark 9:38-40, niv)

In that sermon, Wesley counseled Christians to “acknowledge the finger of God” *wherever* it appears, and that we should “rejoice in [God’s] work, and praise his name with thanksgiving. Encourage whomsoever God is pleased to employ.”¹⁰ God can work even through other religions to draw people to himself, so that means (listen!) *we should avoid all bigotry toward people of other religions or else we will hinder the work of God!*

Do you understand this? I’ll come back to this in a moment, but before we go any further, let me emphasize that...

2. God is ***revealed*** in the ***person*** of ***Jesus Christ***.

God uses any and every means possible to draw all people everywhere to himself, but that doesn’t mean all religions lead to salvation. The possibility of salvation can only be understood in the person of Jesus Christ. Even though we must be completely respectful of other religions and to people of other religions that does not mean that we have to accept that all religions are equally valid. The New Testament makes no mistake that if you want to talk about God, you must talk about Jesus Christ, the incarnate God. The Bible makes no apologies for that, and neither should we:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:1-5, niv)

...and again...

“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” (Galatians 4:4, niv)

If you talk about God, you talk about Jesus Christ. And if you talk about Jesus Christ, you talk about his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and return. Some people might be offended when we say that salvation can only come about by faith in Christ’s crucifixion on the cross, but “the church has no other word to speak but Jesus Christ and him crucified”¹¹ (1 Corinthians 1:18-31)

By God’s will (1 Corinthians 2:6-8), the eternal second person of the Trinity became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the Gospel, the Good News, of God – no one

¹⁰ Truesdale, *ibid*

¹¹ Truesdale, *ibid*, 146

else, and in no other way!¹² In Jesus we don't see one among many different faces of God; we see the *only* face of God. Theologians call this "the scandal of particularity" – that Jesus Christ is the one, true God in particular. That seems scandalous or crazy to the culture and religions of this world. But the New Testament doesn't give us any wiggle room on this (1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Galatians 3:1-14). We must be absolutely clear about that. But in *any* religion – whenever and wherever you see the grace of God at work, you can be sure that Jesus Christ is there, through the Holy Spirit, speaking to people, revealing God to people, and drawing people to God. And God can do that through *any* religions. We call this...

3. ***Prevenient* grace.**¹³

You've heard this term before if you've been around here, but it's important to know. It literally means "***the grace that goes before***" and it refers to God's reaching love. The Bible says...

"But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Romans 5:8, nlt)

God is *always* reaching out in love to every single person anywhere and everywhere, Christian or not, drawing them closer to himself as revealed in Christ. And God will use any means possible to reveal his love to people, *including other religions*. (I wish I could say more about this – there are stories coming out of deeply fundamental Muslim countries that Jesus Christ is revealing himself to Muslims through the religion of Islam and they are converting to Christ!) **Anything that God uses to reveal his love is called a "means of grace."** And God can use *anything* as a means, or method, of revealing his grace and love. But God's primary way, his favorite way, his best way to reveal himself is **especially through his people**. That means that...

4. You are a ***means of grace***.

God wants to show the world his love through you! *You* are a means of God's grace. That means that what you do – how you behave and what you say is very, very important because you are an expression of God's love reaching out to the people around you. Especially what you do and say about other religions because you live in our pluralistic culture. Remember your friend from another religion? Your actions and your words about that person and his or her religion – or about *any* religion for that matter – it all represents God's love. You are God's means of grace to that person. So mind yourself extremely carefully and pray for God to fill you and use you.

That means you must always...

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Truesdale, Albert, Henry H. Knight, Karen Strand Winslow, and K. E. Brower. *Global Wesleyan dictionary of theology*. (pp. 429-430)

- Show *Respect*

Be respectful of other people and their religions. The Bible says:

“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15, niv)

We need to live in such a way that people will see Christ in us and ask us how we can live the way we do. And when they ask, we need to be gentle and respectful – not beat them over the head, not yell, not argue, and certainly not talk down to anyone or their religion. I’ll just say this again, because we said it last week: this also means that we are to...

- *Serve* others.

Remember that Jesus is our example, and we are to be like him:

“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28, niv)

All of this means that our ultimate response to your friend from another religion is...

- *Love*

It always comes back to this, because the Bible tells us that “God is Love” (1 John 4:8), and so if you and I are going to be a means of grace, it means we must always speak and show love to others. Jesus said very plainly:

“So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other.” (John 13:34, nlt)

That means you show love to your friend from another religion, and to any religion, because your friend is watching what you say and how you treat someone else, even someone whose religion is different than theirs and yours. If you are intolerant of other religions, your friend knows you are intolerant of his or her religion, too. And you’ve cut yourself off as a means of grace to that person. You can justify it in your mind as much as you want. But you can’t ignore Jesus’ command to love others.

Because God doesn’t save religions, he saves people. God doesn’t love religions, he loves people. But those religions that you slander and mock are filled with people that God loves and that Jesus suffered and died for. Let’s be a means of grace, of the love of God, by being respectful, by serving, and by loving others. We’ve got nothing to fear and everything to gain, because the true religion of God’s good news in Christ will prevail.

A great example of this is the end result of that cult compound I told you about in the beginning. The Bhagwan was under scrutiny by the Oregon Attorney General,

the FBI, and the IRS. As the pressure closed in on him, his right hand person, a woman named Ma Anand Sheela, lashed out, trying to kill the Attorney General and poison the public. She went to prison and he fled the country and the compound ceased functioning. Today, it is called Washington Family Camp; it is the largest Young Life Camp in the world, and every week around 1100 young people arrive to hear the Gospel and grow closer to Christ.