

Being a Christian in a pluralistic world

Message for Sunday, June 22, 2014
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: John 14:6; Matthew 7:24–25; 1 Peter 3:15–17

1) Is it intolerant to proclaim Jesus as Lord?

Jesus certainly shook things up when he walked the earth. Overturning the tables of the merchants in the Temple. Healing the sick. Turning a storm into peaceful calm.

But it's his words that caused the greatest challenge to people, and they still do today.

John 14:6, New International Version:

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

That's a great one to use if you want to stop all conversation at a party. It challenges our culture's fascination with spirituality. People are suspicious of religion, but there is a hunger for spirituality, for the deeper things of life. That's what Jesus offers, but many are afraid to take that step. It's because for the last fifty years or so, we have been taught over and over that there is no such thing as absolute truth, no way to really know about God.

Bryan Mavis noted this insight into our culture:

Cherif Bassiouni has been a law professor at DePaul University College of Law for over 30 years. He is one of the world's leading authorities on international criminal law and human rights. In 1999, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in establishing the International Criminal Court. At a January 4, 2000 interfaith dialogue near Chicago, Bassiouni he said this: "All religions lead to God using different paths... judgment is not by the choice we make, but by how we pursue the path of the choice we make. Different religions and cultures are equal in the eyes of God and should be seen as equal in the eyes of man."

That pretty accurately sums up our culture's attitude about faith.

You may be familiar with this story, but it's worth repeating:

Long ago and far away, there lived six blind men who were friends. They lived and worked together, and were very happy.

Then one day, the blind men heard some exciting news. Someone in the village had just received an elephant. The blind men had heard of elephants, but they had never met one. They did not know what an elephant was like. "Let us go and visit," said one of the blind men. "Then we know what elephants are like." So away they went.

When they arrived, the owner of the elephant let them examine the animal. It was quite tame, and did not mind strangers touching it.

The first blind man touched the elephant's side. "It is strong and wide," he thought. "I think an elephant is like a wall." The second blind man felt something long and moving and bending. "Oh, it is just like a snake!" he decided. The third man grabbed the elephant's smooth ivory tusk. "Why, an elephant is as sharp as a spear!" he thought. The fourth man held one of the elephant's legs. He thought it was as round and solid as a tree. The fifth blind man held the elephant's ear which wiggled gently. The fifth man laughed to himself, "It's just like a fan!" The sixth blind man touched the animal's long, thin tail. "An elephant is like a rope," he thought.

They sat down at a table to discuss what they had learned. "I never knew that an elephant is like a wall," said the first man. "A wall?" said the second man. "Oh, no. It is like a snake." The third man shook his head. "An elephant is clearly like a spear." "What nonsense!" said the fourth man. "An elephant is like a tree." The fifth man started shouting. "You're all wrong. An elephant is like a fan." "No! It is like a rope!" yelled the sixth blind man. The six men shouted and called one another names, because each one *knew* what an elephant was like: he had touched it himself.

The owner of the elephant came over and called to them: "All of you are right, but all of you are wrong." And he explained how each one had touched only a part of the elephant; but none had touched the whole elephant.

This is an old, old story from India. It's meant to teach respect for one another.

But in modern times it has taken on a new role. People today use this story to demonstrate that no one religion has the fullness of spiritual truth, therefore all religions are valid. Religions are like the blind men describing an elephant: they all claim to know the truth, but they are all wrong. "All that religion does," they say, "is lead to arguments and fighting."

But there's a problem with this approach. The only way this story makes any sense is if you've seen an elephant. With your superior knowledge, you can chuckle at the image of the these blind men arguing.

So when someone says, “No religion has the truth,” they are claiming to be the owner of the elephant; that is, they put themselves in the position of the one who is above all religions, who with their superior knowledge sees the whole picture and who knows the whole truth. By chuckling at the Christians and people of other religions and their misguided folly, they are demonstrating the same spiritual arrogance they accuse those religious people of.

What I’m getting at here is that it’s OK to be a person of faith. It’s OK to say – not just in private, not just here in church where it’s safe, but also in public, in the world at large – it’s OK to say, “I am a follower of Jesus Christ. I believe he is the Son of God. I have surrendered my life to him as Saviour and Lord.”

No, it’s not intolerant to say this. The intolerant people are the ones who go around saying, “It’s all a bunch of rubbish.”

C. S. Lewis summed it well:

If you are a Christian you do not have to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all through. If you are an atheist you do have to believe that the main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all those religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most. -- C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

2) Is it intolerant to say “I choose Jesus”?

Jesus calls us to follow him, to make him front and centre in our lives.

Matthew 7:24–25, New International Version:
“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.”

Jesus calls us to make a choice, and to choose him. When you say “Yes” to Jesus, does that mean that you are saying that everyone who worships someone else or something else is stupid? Not at all. When you choose to follow Jesus, you are making that decision on the basis of the information you have, and the experiences you’ve had. Maybe someone you admired was a Christian and

you said, “I need that Spirit in my life, too.” Your decision says nothing about other people.

3) You can follow Jesus without being a jerk

There have been many TV shows and movies portraying Christians as arrogant, self-righteous, bigoted, hypocritical, judgemental – you get the idea. Sadly, these shows have had many true life examples on which to base their characters.

The truth is, we have simple instructions in the Bible on how we are to treat others.

Matthew 7:12, New International Version:

“In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.”

1 Peter 2:17, New International Version:

Show proper respect to everyone.

You can accept someone, even love someone, without agreeing with their beliefs or approving of their behaviour. The best way to invite someone to come to church isn’t to argue with them, but to be a friend to them.

Next Steps:

- Ask yourself, “Why *do* I believe in Jesus? And how does he make a difference in my life?” The idea here is to be ready to answer when someone else asks you about your faith.

1 Peter 3:15–17, New International Version:

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, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.