

# The Exclusive Claim of Jesus: The Scandal of Particularity



Maxie D. Dunnam

One of the striking features of the Gospel of John is the way it depicts the ministry of Jesus. The other Gospels, for the most part, have far more stories than John. We read these stories, and like those who witness the event, we ask, “Who is this?” Who is this who feeds the multitude with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish? Who is this that with a word or a touch makes the lame walk and the blind see? Who is it that casts out demons and announces forgiveness?

The Gospel of John is different. Yes, there are stories there, clear accounts of Jesus' ministry. But it's not as likely that you will ask, “Who is this?” as often in reading John's gospel as when reading Matthew, Mark, and Luke. You can't read this Gospel and contend that Jesus never told us who he was. And much of his self-identification is cast in an “I am” claim.

John records a number of these claims of Jesus.

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and who ever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35)

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8: 12). “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”(John 11: 25-26).

None of the “I am” claims of Jesus is more challenging than this: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Tough and tortuous debate has swirled around this claim through the years, and the debate goes on. The claim cannot be disregarded and/or dismissed. It is the most exclusive claim of Jesus, but it has within it all the aspects of his other claims. It is pivotal in thinking about mission and evangelism.

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I believe the greatest theological barrier to mission and evangelism is a diminished belief in the uniqueness of Jesus. We have made idols of tolerance and inclusiveness. We speak and act as though diversity itself is redemptive. I believe our United Methodism and most main-line churches have diminished because of this. If we don't have a clear understanding of and confi-

dence in the gospel, we have no passion for sharing it. The witness of scripture is clear and the teaching of the church for 2000 years confirms that the gospel is nothing more and nothing less than the announcement made in word, deed, and sign, through the power of the Spirit, that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord.

Recently I visited one of the best-known United Methodist churches in America. The people were friendly and welcoming.

The music and worship were lively and uplifting. The church is known across the nation for its outreach to the margins of society, its commitment to the poor and homeless. No congregation in that city is as well known. I was moved deeply by the diversity of the congregation and the seeming breakdown of barriers.

I was shocked, however, when one of the ministers, in the midst of the service, gave an invitation to church membership. He said something like this: “We are family and we want you to belong. We welcome you to our membership. Join us downstairs after the service and we will welcome you. Come all. It doesn't matter whether you are young or old, black or white, gay or lesbian or transgender, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist. None of that matters. Come on and join us.”

I've wrestled with that experience in my mind because I am thrilled by the outreach ministry. But I'm puzzled about such a deliberate expression of no conditions for church membership, no distinctive Christian claims. How can a Jew belong to a Christian church? Or a Buddhist? Or a Muslim? Never mind questions about conduct and the call to holiness, or what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I know that congregation is far from typical, but I believe it is a demonstration of our notions about diversity, tolerance and inclusiveness fostering a totally distorted understanding of the nature of the church.

Jesus' claim is exclusive. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Isn't there a connection between this claim and Jesus' commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt.28:18-20)? Could it be that the Great Commission is no longer a part of the DNA of the church because the church is no longer convinced of the uniqueness of Jesus as Son, Savior and Lord?

Diana Eck, Harvard professor and founder of the Pluralism Project, gets a lot of press as she claims that the God of Israel and the Church is far too “exclusive.” Her vision is that a new geo-religious reality will evolve where Hindu deities are worshiped under the same roof with Allah; Buddhist meditation co-exists with the Christian sacraments; and no faith claims any monopoly for the truth.

It amazes me that persons like Professor Eck get so much attention, as though what they are saying is new. The challenge of religious pluralism and the temptation to syncretism have been around throughout religious history. If we are talking about valuing others, respecting their right to religious belief, as Howard Snyder reminds us, it certainly isn't “good news” to the Buddhist, the Muslim, the Hindu, or even the secularist or “New Ager” to say, “You have only a partial understanding of the truth.

You give up your absolutist claims, and I'll give up mine and together we'll believe in ‘religion in general,’ or a lowest-common-denominator faith that relativizes all the historic claims of our traditions.” This is not good news. In fact, it is presumptuous and imperialistic.

We must not shy away from this exclusive claim of Jesus if we are going to take the Great Commission with any degree of seriousness. This doesn't mean we do not respect the rights of others to believe as they will. It does mean that we are so confident of the gospel and its power that we passionately share it. We don't even begin to pretend that Jesus' claim is not exclusive. We excitedly share the “good news” that this exclusive claim is inclusive in its scope. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but

may have eternal life”(John 3: 16). No one is denied the offer of salvation. The crucified and risen Jesus is Lord. That is our distinctive claim as Christians.

I believe, with N.T. Wright, that this announcement (the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord) “constitutes a summons to all people to discover the true fulfillment of every human aspiration and every human dream, by the paradoxical route of taking up the cross and following Jesus. This will mean giving up the idols that promise the earth, and embracing the God who promises new heavens and a new earth as the true fulfillment of the present creation.”<sup>1</sup>

In our mission and evangelism, we share this exclusive claim of Jesus with inclusive grace. In our Wesleyan way, we believe that

God loves us and all people, seeking them and us before we seek God, so we witness with confidence, but also with humility, knowing that we cannot limit the saving love of God, and we don't do the saving work — Christ does. His is a clear call to all, however exclusive his claim is. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” □

1. N. T. Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World*, 206

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