

# LETTING GOD BE GOD: ECUMENISM'S CHALLENGE

David Yount

**G**oogle, the Internet search engine, does not aspire to be a resource for biblical scholars. Yet it offers over a million and a half references to John 14:6. A disinterested inquirer, skimming a representative sample, will discover that the cached commentaries fall into two principal categories:

Celebratory. Wherein the writers, faithful Christians all, confidently conclude that they enjoy exclusive access to God through Jesus of Nazareth; and

Contemptuous. Wherein the commentators, including disaffected Christians, skeptics, and adherents of other religious faiths, hold that Jesus' proclamation restricts access to God to all but the world's Christian minority, effectively excluding the majority of humankind from his love, his kingdom, and his salvation.

In sum, the passage invites either conceit among Christians or outrage among others, which was surely not Jesus' intention when he offered himself as gateway to the Godhead. Interpreted either way, Jesus' proclamation has been interpreted as divisive, contradicting his prayer that "all may be one, as thou Father in me, and I in thee, that they may be one in us" (John 17:22-23). Two millennia after his sojourn on earth, that wish remains the ecumenical ideal.

To make matters worse, a substantial number of Christians are inclined to consider John 14:6 even more restrictive—arguing that to call upon Christ demands adherence to one denomination rather than any other. Considering that there are at least 200 distinct Christian denominations in twenty-first century America, such a reading of Jesus' words would deny salvation to a majority of persons who call themselves Christian.

The modern movement toward Christian unity was precipitated by the scandals perpetrated by missionary-minded denominations in the nineteenth century. Evangelizing Africa and Asia, they competed to win souls to Christ, inadvertently managing to persuade prospective converts that they were preaching different Christs. Rather than perpetuate that impression, leading churchmen and women came to affirm that, despite denominational differences, there is but one faith, one baptism, and one Lord of all.

## Watered-down Gospel?

Ecumenism is routinely tarred with the accusation that it dilutes the Christian faith, valuing one path to God to be as good as any other. That is patently false. However, ecumenical Christianity does rest on the same repository of revelation—which C.S. Lewis (in a play on words) called “mere Christianity,” referring to what all Christians share in common. The most obvious commonality is the Christ himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

To this day, Christians, Jews, and Muslims agree in this: that humankind is not required to search for God, because God has already sought and found us, and continues to reveal himself to us. All human history can be read as a chronicle of God taking the initiative to connect with his creation.

When God affirmed Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life for those who approach him, he did not thereby surrender his initiative.

Ecumenical Christians read John 14:6 not as a restriction on access, but as further evidence of God’s welcome and initiative. In Jesus’ parable, the Good Shepherd does not shrink from his sheep, but searches for them and rescues them. Similarly, in Francis Thompson’s celebrated poem, God is portrayed as the “Hound of Heaven,” pursuing his creatures even as they find his attention onerous and seek to avoid him.

In its immediate context, John 14:6 responds to the apostle Thomas’s complaint: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (vv. 5). Jesus explains: “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him” (v. 7).

This reassurance is not exclusive to the apostles. In Jesus’ parable, the Good Samaritan is neither Jew nor Christian, and he is unacquainted with Jesus. Yet he is a biblical hero because of his practical compassion. Similarly, the Good Thief crucified alongside Jesus knows little more about Jesus than that he is innocent of crime. Yet Jesus promises the thief Paradise because of his humble confession.

## Thinking Ecumenically

When Christians refer to “church,” we are inclined to think parochially rather than ecumenically—of denominations, congregations, clergy, laity, orders of worship, and even of our church buildings. In fact, the church is nothing other than the presence of Christ with his people, solely identified with him. Accordingly, there can be but one church.

I confess to having been guilty in the past of admiring the

diversity of denominations in America as expressions of the richness of our faith. But I have long since been chastened by Karl Barth, who wrote, “If Christ is indeed . . . the unity of the church, then the only multiplicity which can be normal is that within the Church, namely that of the local communities, of the gifts of the Spirit, of the believers of each sex, language, and race, and there can be no multiplicity of churches.”

Barth insisted that we must deal with the divisions within Christianity “as guilt which we must take upon ourselves, without the power to liberate ourselves from it”—praying instead “that it be forgiven and removed.” Mere civility among the churches is inadequate. Nor can we be so distracted by the divisions within our faith that we fail to continue preaching the Gospel to others.

## Salvation for All

If, indeed, no one comes to the Father except through Jesus, how can those of other faiths, or no faith, return to the God who made them? The answer lies in God’s own initiative. Having once given life, then having sustained his creation in

love, it is unthinkable that God would abandon creatures made in his own image.

Recently, I asked a handful of prominent pastors across the denominations to help express how John 14:6 applies to non-Christians. While all of them agree that we are saved through Jesus, they underscore that it is God who does the saving, not we mortals. Dr. John W. Crossin, a Catholic priest and moral theologian, is executive director of the Washington Theological

Consortium. He notes that “the Holy Spirit can work outside the Christian community, though results for salvation are through Christ. The classic Catholic position is that nonbelievers who try to live a good life according to natural law and/or their religion can be saved . . . Ultimately who will be saved is God’s judgment, not ours.”

Loren B. Mead, Episcopal priest and founder of the Alban Institute, appreciates John 14:6 as Jesus saying to “trust him, be with him, give oneself to him . . . We in the churches draw lines of separation that he’s not even thinking about. This is a plea for us to be with him. . . . It’s a wonderful invitation to a loving relationship with God through Jesus. It leaves . . . the wonderful possibility that God may reach out to many others in many other ways. He does have ‘other sheep, other folds.’”

Michael Cooper-White, president of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, PA, confesses to being “a hopeful universalist—I hope in the end God saves all, and am willing to leave such decisions in the hands of the One whose wisdom is far beyond our own. Embracing the ‘otherness’ of ecumenical partners expands our hearts to risk face-to-face interfaith dialogue with those who call God by other names and who believe there are other Ways.”

Louis B. Weeks, president of Union Theological Seminary (Presbyterian) in Richmond, VA, advises looking at John 3:17 (“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”). Weeks cautions

Christians against the “scandal of particularity” that contradicts “the constructive work of Jesus for the whole creation.”

Two prominent Quaker ministers echo these sentiments. Max L. Carter, director of Friends Center at Guilford College, quotes the theologian Robert Barclay: “Christ has tasted death for everyone,” including “those who by some unavoidable accident were excluded from the benefit of this knowledge.” Carter adds: “It is by getting into the way of Jesus, following his approach to God, his understanding of God, that we come to a deeper relationship with God. But the light of Christ, by which all are enlightened (John 1:9), is a guiding Light that leads out of darkness

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when followed, even by those who have never heard of Jesus.”

Quaker author J. Brent Bill, executive vice president of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, stresses that John 14:6 is “less a command . . . than it is a statement of the fact that anyone who seeks God will find God through the work of the everliving Christ—whether they are aware of the sacrificial nature of atonement or not.” Jesus’ clear intention is that there be “one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16).

In his instructions for congregational singing, John Wesley himself cautioned Christians against competing voices. “Sing modestly,” he advised. “Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct

from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite our voices together . . .” We sacrifice nothing by responding to the ecumenical challenge to unite our voices. We are merely letting God be God. □

David Yount is a widely read religious writer in America. His “Amazing Grace” is syndicated weekly to newspapers with a combined circulation of 25 million. His 10 books on faith,

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