

A path of smooth, dark, rounded stones leads from the bottom center towards the top of the page, curving slightly to the right. The stones are arranged in a line that recedes into the distance, creating a sense of depth and direction. The background is plain white.

# **WHAT IF THERE REALLY IS ONLY ONE WAY?**

J. David Trawick

**J**esus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John. 14:6) If we believe these words mean what they say, what do we do with that? Some have used these words to proclaim their own superiority over non-Christians, gleefully announcing, “I’m saved and you’re not.” That is not evangelical. That is un-Christ-like and mean-spirited, far from the truth that our salvation “is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph. 2:8b-9a) The fact that some people do not come to Jesus should never cause us to feel superior, but to be heartbroken for them.

Within the words of John 14:6 are found the greatest heartaches and the greatest joys of the evangelical Christian. I have reveled in the joy of people committing their lives to Christ and entering into the adventure of following him through time and eternity. I have sought to avoid the agony of the other side of this verse through numerous exegetical and theological explorations, but could not escape what the words of John 14:6 and so many other texts in the New Testament plainly say. “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) Some people come to Christ and some do not, each decision having eternal implications. There are also pastoral implications, some joyful and some painful. How shall we deal with the painful implications?

How do you respond when a blushing bride-to-be excitedly tells you, “I’m engaged to Achmed,” and you know Achmed is Muslim? Some pastors simply refuse to perform such weddings, based on biblical prohibitions to “not be mismatched with unbelievers.” (2 Cor. 6:14) This may lead to a quick wedding performed by a justice of the peace. The pastor may feel pure and uncompromised, but the couple is now married without having been forced to wrestle with the issues. Other pastors proceed as if there is no issue to deal with, leaving the bride and groom to walk hand-in-hand into the future, blissfully unaware of the landmines ahead. I’ve seen too many marriages where serious differences of faith became painful struggles leaving scars on husbands and wives, and spiritual confusion in the children.

My own approach is to have a straightforward conversation first with the Christian person about the faith differences and the implications. Then I engage the couple as early as possible in the premarital counseling that I always require before performing a wedding. I promise them up front that I will perform their wedding if they want me to, but I will also make them wrestle with some uncomfortable issues. That way they can be open and honest, and so can I. In counseling we discuss the similarities and differences between their faiths. What do you really know about the religious faiths you claim? What do you believe about the nature of God, people, relationships, salvation, truth, right and wrong? If you have different convictions on such foundational issues, how will you build a life together? Where and how will you worship? What about religious holidays? If you are planning on having children, in what faith community will you raise them? I urge the couple to take these issues seriously because, I tell them, I’ve seen people who did not take them seriously during the early blush of love, who faced great difficulties later. I cannot stop a couple from getting married—there’s always someone else out there who will do their wedding—but I can put the real spiritual issues before them.

What do you do when you are standing before the closed casket of one who claimed to be an agnostic? This situation is personal for me, not just a pastoral situation, a circumstance we have experienced in our own family. If knowing the deceased loved Jesus brings comfort to those who grieve, a lack of Christian faith in the deceased can deepen the pain of those left behind. When tears are flowing and grief is fresh, it is not the time for a theological discussion of who is saved and who is not. That is the time to reassure hurting people that God loves them, and though they probably cannot feel God’s presence, God is certainly with them. Our God is one who knows, from firsthand experience, grief at the death of a loved one. Our God is one who is with us even “through the valley of the shadow of death” to comfort us.

What if they ask later, when the pain has subsided a bit, “Do you think my uncle is in heaven?” What do you say then? First, I ask them what they think, and listen carefully to what they say. Invariably, the reason they asked the question is that they want him to be in heaven, but they are afraid he is not. They want to find a loophole to sneak him in, maybe even broadening the heavenly gates to the happy ending of universalism. But they have heard Jesus words, “The gate is wide and the road is easy that

leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13). Do you think he’s in heaven? Many times they know the answer to the question, they feel the pain of it, and they want someone to be with them in that pain. I can be there with them. And I offer reassurance that somehow, in ways we cannot now fathom, in God’s economy it has worked out right.

What do you say or do when someone asks about a living person, “What about my friend Janis, who is Hindu? Will she go to heaven?” I reassure them that God loves Janis deeply. God took on human flesh in Jesus, lived a human life of loving service, died a human death for the sins of all humanity, and conquered death, all for Janis. God loves Janis as much as God loves any of us. But, as a Hindu, Janis has not yet accepted that most wondrous gift from God. I take the opportunity to teach the difference between Hinduism (or whatever their religious faith may be) and how it contrasts with the good news of Jesus Christ. Then I help them see how the church can partner with them in an effort to share the good news with Janis. It may involve seeking to live a more attractive and Christ-like lifestyle,

learning how to launch conversations about spiritual matters, asking Janis questions about her faith and then offering thoughts about our Christian faith, seeking nonthreatening opportunities for Janis to spend time in fellowship with other Christians, and eventually an invitation to a relevant event (perhaps Sunday worship) where Janis can hear the gospel presented in a clear and compelling way.

Some people come to Christ, some do not, and the decision carries eternal consequences. This is a truth the evangelical clings to and is the impulse behind real evangelism. This is what drove John Wesley to ride a quarter million miles on horseback, preach thousands of sermons, write and publish innumerable pages, organize new believers into classes, and train preachers for evangelistic ministry. This is why church leaders need to seriously consider minimizing obstacles of church traditions that do not communicate the gospel to non-Christians. This is why we preach Christ. This is why we invite people to a life of faith in Christ. It’s not about keeping up

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membership and attendance numbers, getting people into the church so they can help us pay for the church, or being able to call yourself a pastoral success. Real evangelism is about people coming to know and love Jesus, and thereby coming to the Father... today, tomorrow, and for eternity.

Stephen, James, Peter, Paul and thousands of others gave their lives, not for Jesus as one among many valid religious choices, but for Jesus as “the way the truth and the life,” the only way to the Father. If they were willing to suffer and even die so that others might know Jesus, I will do my best to live with the heartbreak of John 14:6 for the same reason. I will anticipate and revel in the joy of John 14:6 as well. □

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