

I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

John 14:4-6

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Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn. 14:6).

Christians are sometimes dismayed by the world's opposition to our gospel. For this reason, many Christians emphasize having a non-offensive attitude towards unbelievers and seek to use expressions that avoid giving offense. So long as we do not compromise our message or biblical standards of behavior, it is proper for believers to show such care in their dealings with non-Christians. Yet, as we do this, we will soon find that the gospel's real offense is one that we cannot easily avoid. Christianity's true offense is none other than Christ himself. This is especially true when we consider Jesus' exclusive claims as the one Lord and only Savior of mankind.

One modern critic has spouted contempt for Christianity's exclusivity in these words: "Christianity is a contentious faith which requires an all-or-nothing commitment to Jesus as the one and only incarnation of the Son of God." We can endorse this assessment, though not perhaps all that he goes on to say: "[Christians are] uncompromising, ornery, militant, rigorous, imperious and invincibly self-righteous."¹ This is not a recent opinion of our faith: Philip Ryken asserts that "For the past 2,000 years, Christianity's claims about the unique truth of Jesus Christ have aroused no end of opposition from Jews, pagans, Muslims, Communists, humanists, and atheists."²

¹ Alan Watts, *Beyond Theology* (New York: World Publishing, 1967), xii.

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Is Jesus the Only Way?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1999), 11.

We might think this opposition to have lessened with the advent of postmodernity, given its emphasis on tolerance. Instead, the opposite has happened. Postmodern unbelievers grant tolerance to every religion *except* Christianity, precisely because the gospel is seen as the ultimate intolerant creed. The gospel's message that only Jesus can save offends postmodernity's relativist mantra, since Christians insist that all other religions are false and any other route to God is a dead end. Objections to these doctrines have marked the world's hatred for Jesus ever since he spoke the words that John's Gospel continues to proclaim today: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6).

UNCOMPROMISING EXCLUSIVITY

This is the sixth of Jesus' seven famous "I Am" sayings, each of which are radically exclusive in setting Jesus apart as the one and only Savior. In each of these statements, Jesus uses the word "the" rather than "a". He is "*the* bread of life" (Jn. 6:35), not *a* bread of life: that is, Jesus is the one and only source of satisfaction for the hunger of our souls. Likewise, Jesus is "*the* light of the world" (Jn. 8:12), the only guide who can lead mankind out of darkness into the light of God. Jesus said, "I am the door" (Jn. 10:7), since through whom alone we can enter the fold of God, and "I am the good shepherd" (Jn. 10:11), who alone lays down his life for the sheep. To these, Jesus added the remarkable statement, "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn. 11:25), claiming to be the conqueror even of death – a claim that he backed up by raising Lazarus from the grave (Jn. 11:43-44). Each of these statements is radically exclusive, asserting that none but Jesus can save us from sin, bring us to God and grant us eternal life.

This same focus on the person of Jesus is seen all through this portion of John's Gospel, which centers on four questions asked by the disciples, each of which Jesus answered by directing them to himself. Peter asked, "Lord, where are you going" (Jn. 13:36). Thomas continued, "How can we know the way?" (Jn. 14:5). Philip added, "Lord, show us the Father" (Jn. 14:8), and Judas (not the betrayer), asked, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" (Jn. 14:22). These are slightly different questions and

each receive slightly different answers. But each of the answers is a variant on John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Despite the world’s disdain for John 14:6, the content of this saying tells us why we must not surrender Christ’s exclusive claims however offensive they may be. For not only is John 14:6 true, but it offers the only real answer to the great needs of the world. Man’s tragic plight is that we are alienated from God, ignorant of truth, and condemned to both physical and spiritual death. Jesus has come as the answer to sin’s dreadful predicament. He is the way for sinners to be reconciled to God, the truth God has revealed to correct our ignorance, and the life that we need to regenerate us from the power of death.

THE WAY: RECONCILIATION

There is an obvious priority to the first of Jesus’ descriptions. While Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, the context focuses on Jesus as the way. We can see this in the dialogue, going back to John 13:33. Jesus informed the disciples that he would soon depart, adding, “Where I am going you cannot come.” This was disturbing to the disciples, so Peter demanded, “Lord where are you going?” Jesus answered, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward” (Jn. 13:36). Jesus was referring to his return to the glory of heaven, and perhaps also to the cross that he would bear on the way. But Peter was not settled, insisting that he would follow Jesus even to death (Jn. 13:37). This statement prompted Jesus’ prophecy of Peter’s three denials that very evening. Then, to comfort the disciples, Jesus told them that he was going to his “Father’s house” to prepare a place for them and that he would return to get them (Jn. 14:1-3). He concluded in verse 4, “And you know the way to where I am going.” This time it was Thomas who answered: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (Jn. 14:5). He meant that if one does not know the destination, he cannot know the way there. To clarify his meaning that the disciples’ relationship to himself was the way of which he spoke, Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6).

Like Thomas, if we are to understand what Jesus means, we have to know the destination to which he was referring. Verse 6 makes clear

that Jesus is speaking of God the Father and his glorious presence in heaven. That is where Jesus was going and that is where we are to follow him. But we need also to know where we are. A “way” is the path between a starting point and an ending point. So, spiritually speaking, where does man start? In what condition does man find himself in his search for God? According to the Bible, mankind is utterly ruined. We are condemned before God for the guilt of our sin. Paul writes, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), and are thus barred from God’s holy presence and his blessing. Our need is to be reconciled to him.

So bad is our condition that there is nothing we can do to reconcile ourselves to God. Even if we should turn a new leaf and begin leading a morally upright life, we still have the guilt of our previous sins to pay for. Moreover, we are not only condemned in sin but we are utterly corrupted by sin. Therefore, we are not able to perform an adequate moral reformation. In the light of the Bible’s teaching of God’s unrelenting justice, our past haunts us, our present confounds us, and our future dismays us. For this reason, not only is it true that sinful mankind cannot come to God, but sinful mankind does not even want to come to God. Just as Adam and Eve clothed their shame with fig leaves and fled from God in the Garden, we are alienated not only by God’s justice but by our own God-loathing consciences.

We see now where the true offense of Jesus’ gospel lies. Christianity scandalizes because the gospel declares that man’s alienation from God as humanly hopeless because of sin. The gospel says that we could only be reconciled if God sent a Savior to die for our sin. Only Jesus, as God’s sinless Son, could atone for sin through his death. His way of salvation requires us to confess our sin, humble ourselves seeking pardon, and surrender our claims to self-rule: the very acts that sinful mankind refuses to do. Man hates the message that he cannot save himself! Man would come to God, but not by this way! Jesus offers only a salvation from sin, and a world that will not confess its sin takes offense in him and refuses reconciliation with the God who sent him.

Yet it remains good news that Jesus came from heaven to earth in order to reconcile sinners to God. Jesus said that he was returning to

his Father's house, and this makes us wonder why God's Son departed the glory of heaven to live in our world. The answer is given in all the Gospels, which record Jesus' explanation for why he came. Luke records, "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk. 19:10). In Matthew, Jesus explained: "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mat 20:28). John's Gospel records another of Jesus' explanations: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (Joh 10:10).

Thus when Jesus said that he is "the way," he meant that sinners may come to God only through the ministry of reconciliation for which he came. Jesus is the way because God in his grace has provided for sinners to be justified in his sight through faith in his Son. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Paul laments. But the good news is that we may be "justified by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23-24).

Skip Ryan tells of having served on a special project for the United States Department of State. The working group to which he was assigned once held a briefing at the White House. The meeting took place in the Roosevelt Room, a conference room across the hall from the Oval Office. After the meeting, the State Department official in charge asked if Ryan would like to see the Oval Office, the official working place of the President of the United States, since the President was out of town. Ryan recalls two things about that visit. The first was the awe he felt being in such a place. The second was that he could not possibly have entered the Oval Office unless he was taken there by someone authorized to bring him.³

If that is true of the office of the President of the United States, how much more true is it of the glorious presence of Almighty God in heaven? People who would never think to enter the White House simply assume that they will go to heaven after they die. But heaven is far more restricted than any high security location here on earth. Heaven is guarded by mighty angels armed with swords of divine power (Gen. 3:24). Entry into heaven is governed by the perfect and

³ Joseph "Skip" Ryan, *That You May Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 301-302.

unyielding justice of God's holy law. How much more true of heaven are the words that Psalm 24 spoke about God's temple in Jerusalem:

“Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation” (Ps. 24:3-5).

To enter heaven and approach God on your own rights requires you to present hands that have never sinned, a heart that has never known impure thoughts, and lips that have never spoken falsely. None, of course, can meet this holy standard. For us therefore, there must be someone authorized to bring us into heaven, and it was for this that Jesus came: he said, “I am the way” (Jn. 14:6). It is through his perfect life and atoning death that we may “receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation” (Ps. 24:5).

THE TRUTH: REVELATION

The second and third statements that Jesus made about himself in John 14:6 are rightly seen as subordinate to the first. Jesus is first the way, and coordinated with this is his claim to be the truth and the life. Some scholars have therefore wanted to translate the verse to read, “I am the true and living way.” But that is not what Jesus said. He said that he is the way, and that he is the truth and the life.

Man needs the revelation of truth because it was through ignorance and lies that we first fell into sin. Our first parents did not merely happen to sin but they were led into sin by Satan. The Serpent of the Garden beguiled Eve by asking, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1). God had *not* said that: they could eat of every tree in the garden except one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17). Satan's lie suggested that God's commands are not for our good and that the way for mankind to experience freedom and blessing is by breaking God's command. This lie has marked the way of sin ever since.

A great part of mankind's plight in sin is ignorance of God and blindness to God's truth. Paul explained, “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the

ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18). In order to be saved we must therefore be enlightened by the revelation of God’s truth, the fullest expression of which comes through Jesus Christ.

Most specifically, Jesus is the truth “because he embodies the supreme revelation of God – he himself ‘narrates’ God (1:18), says and does exclusively what the Father gives him to say and do,”⁴ and is himself one with God the Father as his only begotten Son. Jesus is the way to God not only by what he did for lost mankind, dying on the cross for our sins, but also in revealing the truth of God so that we might believe and come to God through faith in him.

God had been revealing the truth about himself and his salvation prior to the coming of Christ. But Jesus is *the* truth in that all that God ever revealed points to Jesus and comes into focus in him. D. A. Carson writes, “The test of whether or not Jews in Jesus’ day, and in John’s day, *really* knew God through the revelation that had already been disclosed, lay in their response to the supreme revelation from the Father, Jesus Christ himself.”⁵ This is why the writer of Hebrews said that God had previously spoken in many ways through the prophets, “but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1-2). All that God ever revealed comes into clarity, focus, and ultimate truth in the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ.

We must expand this principle beyond the realm of mere religious knowledge, for when Jesus said that he is “the truth,” he spoke of all truth. Even when men and women know things and those things are true, unless this knowledge is held through faith in Christ it is not known truly. Truth itself is known falsely if opposed to Jesus. It is out of accord with its true purpose and meaning. The great model of this falseness is Satan, who knows many truths but knows none of them truly. “There is no truth in him” (Jn. 8:44), Jesus said about Satan, for despite his great genius and vast knowledge, in rebellion to God and his Son there is no truth.

This reality explains so much of the darkness and ignorance of our well-educated times. For all of mankind’s increasing knowledge,

⁴ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 491.

⁵ *Ibid.*

unless it is held in obedience to him who is the truth, there can only be ignorance, folly, and darkness. Ultimately, as A. W. Pink wrote, “Truth is not found in a system of philosophy, but in a Person – Christ is ‘the truth’: He reveals God and exposes man. In Him are hid ‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:3).”⁶

The obvious application of this teaching is that Christians must therefore be students of Jesus, which means that we must be devoted in study of his Word in the Bible. “Heaven and earth will pass away,” Jesus said, “but my words will not pass away” (Mt. 24:35). “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,” he taught, “and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31-32). In the light of heaven Christians will wish they had read their Bibles more and newspapers or the internet less. How much more true will this be of unbelieving men and women who neglected him who is the truth and thus entered into eternity unsaved and unforgiven by God.

THE LIFE: REGENERATION

Jesus’ third claim is that he is “the life” (Jn. 14:6). “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), and man in sin has fallen under death’s power and curse. Apart from Christ we are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-3), unable to do anything spiritually for our salvation, so that life increasingly becomes a living death, without satisfaction or hope. But Jesus came “that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). John said of him at the beginning of his Gospel: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (Jn. 1:4).

Jesus is the source of eternal life for those who believe and follow him. It would not have been enough for Jesus as the way to gain our reconciliation with God, tearing down the veil by his death on the cross for our sins. It likewise would not be enough for Christ the truth to grant us a revelation of God. We would yet remain dead, morally corrupt, and spiritually disabled, so that we would never be able to follow in the way that he has made or believe the truth that he has revealed. Jesus told this to the Pharisee Nicodemus, saying, “Unless one is born again... he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3, 5). In order to be saved, we must be not only forgiven but

⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 763.

also regenerated. We must be made alive spiritually, so that we believe and are made willing and able to follow after Jesus.

Jesus is the source of the life that we need, and he conveys his power of life through his Word. Thus he called to dead Lazarus, who had been four days in the grave, “Lazarus, come out,” and “the man who had died came out” (Jn. 11:43-44). All who are saved come to Jesus by the power of life in his call through the gospel. And those who come to Jesus as the way of salvation and believe him as the revealer of God’s truth receive life in him. His is the way of truth that brings life. Jesus said, “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (Jn. 5:24). For “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (Jn. 3:36).

ONLY JESUS

Jesus’ answer to Thomas’ question was, according to James Boice, “probably the most exclusive statement ever made by anyone.”⁷

Jesus’ claims so assume deity that we must either reject Jesus or worship him as Savior and Lord. Just in case we missed his radical claim to be the exclusive and only Savior, Jesus added, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

There is little wonder that this Jesus has aroused such opposition and hatred from the world. How bold were these words on the eve of the cross! Leon Morris comments: “‘I am the Way,’ said one who would shortly hang impotent on a cross. ‘I am the Truth,’ when the lies of evil people were about to enjoy a spectacular triumph. ‘I am the Life,’ when within a matter of hours his corpse would be placed in a tomb.”⁸ How could Jesus speak so boldly when he knew what was about to happen? The answer is that Jesus also knew that he would rise from the grave, that his truth would be proclaimed with power across the world, so that multitudes who believed and followed – in the earliest times they were called followers of “the Way” (Acts 19:9, 23) – would be reconciled to God and enter into glory with him. As the bearer of resurrection life, Jesus can give eternal life to those

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 4:1076.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 570.

under death's power. As the incarnate truth, Jesus can reveal the truth amidst the errors and lies of the world. And as the only way to the Father, Jesus has the right to demand our faith and exclusive devotion, as our only Savior and Lord. No wonder the apostle Paul stated of salvation, "no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). For as Peter declared, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Since only Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, he calls us to faith in himself. Notice that when Thomas asked the way to the Father, Jesus did not hand him directions, or point out a path of good works or spiritual achievements that must be followed. He directed Thomas, and us, to himself. "I Am," he declared, and we are not saved by following a way, believing a truth, or seeking after life. We are saved by Jesus, and he is the way, the truth, and the life. We therefore do not need to discover or make a way for ourselves, but we need to trust in Jesus and follow him. We do not need to master all truth, but we need to know Jesus and then grow in his truth. We do not need to achieve the life that we desire, but we need to receive Jesus and the life that he gives.

The question may be asked what kind of life we will have if we simply trust in Jesus? The answer is that as he is the way, he will lead us to the Father and we will gain a life of love as dear children. As Jesus is the truth, he will teach us the wisdom of salvation so that our lives are freed from the darkness of ignorance and folly. As he is the life, he will grant us entry into the courts of heaven and we will know an increasing measure of life as we draw nearer to him. Apart from Jesus the world offers many things, but they are all godless, darkened, and deadly. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," Jesus said (Jn. 14:6). He presents himself to us, demanding no achievements, not waiting for our improvement, but calling us simply to receive him in trusting faith, and ready to give to us by grace all that he has and all that he is. We will never receive a better offer, and we will never have a better time to receive Jesus than now.