

Answering the Tough Questions

#5 “Is Jesus Christ the Only Way” – Acts 4:2

Dr. Matt Cassidy – 5/9/2010

Good morning. We are in a series where a number of people asked questions on Resurrection Sunday so that we could look at the answers together in this series.

This week we are going to discuss the question: *Is Jesus Christ the Only Way?* In light of the nature of the question itself and also the audience I am speaking to, I thought this would be a great opportunity for me to do more than just go through the material to show you interesting and new information which could be very helpful for us but also to help you be equipped to do this with your friends and family. In other words, at Grace Covenant Church we have a saying but I have not said this much lately. Let’s see if you can get this sentence right. “I am a pastor but you are the *ministers*.” At Grace Covenant Church, our job description as pastors and elders is to equip and to train you to do ministry in your places of influence. The pastors are like player coaches. We too are out there serving people we spend our day with and we are equipping you to do the same. With that in mind, I will answer this question but I want you to also look for opportunities to do this yourself.

Interestingly, we just had the results of a survey done throughout the greater Austin area where people were randomly selected to answer a series of questions. What was fascinating was that 90% of the people from age 20 – 40 were open to a spiritual conversation. They would love to have these spiritual conversations about spiritual truths. One of the applications to the people in the audience is rather simple, that we need to have those conversations. If people are willing to do this then we need to initiate those conversations and have the courage to do that. Personally, one of the best ways to gain courage is to gain competence. So one of the things I hope we can do today is to gain competence in the area of showing the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

Difference in Degree vs. Difference in Kind

One of the things you have to understand to have this conversation on comparative religions is to understand the logical fallacy called “Difference in Degree vs. Difference in Kind”. That is a truth in Logic. I will play on the words “Difference in Degree” to illustrate it.

If you were to go to your thermostat and the air conditioning is running but it is too cold, you would change the degree from 73 to 75 degrees. It was a difference in degree.

Difference in Kind means moving the toggle switch over from air conditioner to heater. That is a whole different way of modifying climate control. So Difference in Degree vs. Difference in Kind is how

we need to look at comparative religions. Are they just different versions of the same thing? And I would say the Difference in Degree of Christianity is the difference, for example, between Presbyterians and Episcopalians; the same religion, the same kind, just a few degrees off one way or the other.

We have another figure of speech that we use because this is a common logical issue that we deal with. We will say – *This is a Red Delicious apple and this is a Granny Smith apple. We are comparing apples and oranges.* We would say – *No, you are comparing apples and oranges, two different kinds of fruit versus two different degrees of fruit.* You use this regularly and I want you to apply that now to our discussion of different religions and the uniqueness of Christ.

Now, what would you say if I told you that a bestselling author on religious studies was featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and his writings were on the cover of *Time* magazine, who is a regular contributor to *Newsweek*, *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Boston Globe*. What does he say about comparative religions? You would think he would say something like – *They are all the same.* But he didn't. Instead, he said this in a book called *God is Not One*. This is a fascinating book by Stephen Prothero because as a professor of religion at Boston University, he shows – and look at the book cover itself [displays power point of two one-way signs pointing at one another] – two one-way signs and if you follow those arrows, you collide in a head-on collision with someone else. The subtitle of the book is *The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World – and Why Their Differences Matter*.

It is a wonderful book. I want to quote something from it but I want you to know that if you are looking for a book without error, this is not that book. Every time you simplify difficult issues, you are going to make mistakes. As a matter of fact, I just simplified a difficult issue and I just made a mistake. So there are some things in there you might not like because he is trying to make the issue simple.

But here is what I do like about the book. He shows a couple of things and I will just quote from the book jacket. It is vitally important to understand the influence that religion has in global events. The second thing he wants us to understand is that religions are not the same. They are different in kind, not in degree. Here is the quote and I want you to listen for those two points.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, dizzying scientific and technological advancements, interconnected globalized economies, and even the so-called New Atheists have done nothing to change one thing: our world remains furiously religious. For good and for evil, religion is the single greatest influence in the world.

This is part two – that they are different in kind.

We accept as self-evident that competing economic systems (capitalist or communist) or clashing political parties (Republican or Democratic) propose very different solutions to our

planet's problems. So why do we pretend that the world's religious traditions are different paths to the same God?

In other words, no one compares Capitalism and Communism as different in degree. These contradict each other. So how come we do the same with religion, he says. I will put his New York Times summary of the book as an attachment to today's sermon manuscript on the web site.

I want you to look in your bulletins to see that one of the things all religions have in common is that they agree the world is broken. What they don't agree on is why the world is broken and how to fix it.

Another analogy that he uses in his introduction is that comparing religions is like comparing sports. You can say they are all athletic but they are doing different things. Just because baseball has a ball and a stick and so does golf, no one on a golf course is trying to get a home run. They have different goals, different ends, different victory lines.

What Prothero does that I think is nice - and why I put it in your bulletin - is to show you at least five of these religious values, what that religion claims is the problem with the world and the solution. You can, for example, in Islam: the problem is pride / the solution is submission.

Religious believers worldwide agree that something has gone awry. They part company, however, when it comes to stating just what has gone wrong, and they diverge sharply when they move from diagnosing the human problem to prescribing how to solve it. Christians see sin as the problem, and salvation from sin as the religious goal.

Islam:	the problem is pride / the solution is submission
Christianity:	the problem is sin / the solution is salvation
Confucianism:	the problem is chaos / the solution is social order
Buddhism:	the problem is suffering / the solution is awakening
Judaism:	the problem is exile / the solution is to return to God

Look at the second one. I bring up Christianity where the problem is sin and the solution is salvation. I am going to agree with that. The problem with the world is sin and the solution is salvation, in particular you get salvation through and need a Savior.

It is different sports with different objectives in mind.

Buddhists don't talk about salvation because they don't have sin as a primary issue in their worldview. You don't see Christians pursuing nirvana because some suffering, Christians would say, is actually beneficial in the context of their worldview, in their bigger umbrella values. So they are after different things.

As Prothero says in his book - "Religions are not different paths up the same mountain [which is often quoted - all religions are just different paths up the same mountain]. They are different mountains all together.

One of my philosophy teachers in graduate school put it this way: All the religions might be wrong but they cannot all be right.

So maybe there is no god and Atheism is a religion in itself but they can all be wrong that nothing happens and there is no supernatural anything. Okay, they are all wrong. But they can't all be right because they contradict one another. Personally, I find it delightful that this individual who writes for these various news organizations and publications and has been featured on Oprah Winfrey just comes out and says it. It is so refreshing to me that I wanted you to know about it. I will put that summary on the web site because it is helpful. We are having a conversation in difference in kind, not in degree. [In the various religions,] there are different objectives, different heroes, and different ways of being a hero.

Who Jesus Christ Is: Not Like Other Men

With that in mind over here and we will use his definition of what is wrong with the world and what we need to do about it, I will now emphasize the uniqueness of Christ in that the problem with the world is sin. What is needed for the problem of sin is salvation. I would add one more, that a Savior is required for salvation to be obtained.

Let's look at the uniqueness of Jesus the Christ to show you that He was the fulfillment of what we are diagnosing as the Christian problem, the world, that is sin.

When you look at religious leaders in the world, whether Confucius or Buddha or Jesus Christ, you will see, for example, and I will quote Huston Smith from his famous book *The World's Religions*. Smith is a humanist and one of the people who said that the religions are all the same. But he said this about religious leaders: that there were only two men in all of history and in all of the religions who lived lives that were so distinct that the followers of these men did not say "Who is he?" but "What is he?" They were so enamored with these individuals that they began to realize that they are something other than human. Those two men were Buddha and Jesus Christ.

When Buddha saw his followers approaching that conclusion, he laid down the law that he was in fact human. He said, I am merely a man. He never let them entertain the thought for very long. He was adamant against them trying to make him more than a human being.

When Jesus Christ was being accused by His followers of being God, He said: Yes, and I am not *a* god in a polytheist world of many gods. I am *the God*. I am He. – That sets Him apart in the context of who He was.

But I want you to look at more of what He said and what He did. I want you to be focusing on this author's description – the problem with the world is sin and the need for salvation and He is the Savior.

I will go through three quick verses that you might be aware of, emphasizing what needs to happen. There is a problem with the world – there is sin. Sin has a price tag on its head; there is a cost of sin. That cost must be paid for justice to prevail and God is a just God. So when Jesus comes and speaks,

John 8:24 “I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins;

The problem with the world is sin and you need a Savior.

for unless you believe that I am {He},

the sent one, the Messiah, the promised one,

you shall die in your sins.”

So in this quick, short little sentence, He says that the problem is sin and there needs to be salvation and I am the Savior to do that because someone is going to have to pay for that sin.

Another verse you might be aware of is John 11:25.

John 11:25, 26 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

If a person is struck by their sin and their grievances with God, and they are trying to figure out – How can I live in the presence of God? – He says – I am that person who will bring salvation to you.

Another thing that He said:

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.”

He is setting himself up to be uniquely the Savior, the One who provides salvation for us because the problem with the world is sin. It is what He said. He is who He was and what He said. He was working within that economy.

In addition to that what He did as a result of that is – He did not say things that other religious leaders said. For instance, Confucius' teachings said to be disciplined and to be devout to the disciplines of the teachings of Confucius. By the way, these other religious leaders said profound things and noble things and good things ... but they were not providing salvation. They never tried to. They were golfers. They didn't care about home runs. While Confucius said: try harder, Jesus said: receive My gift. Because it is a logical extension of what He is providing – *just receive the payment that I am going to make for you.*

What did Jesus Do?

What did He do to verify this?

First, Jesus did **miracles**, just countless miracles. One author says that we could fill all the books in all the libraries if we told you the full story of Jesus.

But what is important about understanding the miracles of Jesus (water to wine; walking on water; healing people of blindness or deafness or leprosy; raising people from the dead) is that they were purposeful. These miracles were to show that He was the Messiah – I am sorry, the Savior who provides salvation because the problem with the world is sin.

When John the Baptist, one of His followers and the last Old Testament prophet, said: The Savior is coming. He didn't know in fact whether Jesus was that person, Jesus responds by saying this:

Matthew 11:4-5 “Go and report to John the things which you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up.”

Jesus said that, look at the evidence, because He knew that John would be looking for a person who proved that He would be the Savior, that He would provide salvation because the problem with the world is sin.

Besides the miracles, Jesus also fulfilled **hundred of prophecies**, some of them written 2000 years before His birth and we discussed those in a previous sermon - the bell ringer, the one that mattered more than any other that, that set Him apart from other religious leaders is that **He died and was raised again**. We celebrated that just recently, Resurrection Sunday, Easter Sunday. The reason it stands in stark contrast is not just that He died and rose again and did not die again, but that it verified and proved that He in fact paid in full the cost of sin, thereby providing salvation for those who choose. In His resurrected state, by the way, it was not something that was translated in a series of mythical stories that were hopeful and exotic. Jesus came in a resurrected form, once beaten and battered, and now renewed and He showed himself to over 500 people for over a period of a month in at least eight different contexts where He talked to people who knew Him. He spent time with those people. He cooked breakfast for some of them. That is pretty earthy. People who had doubts had the opportunity to reach out and touch Him and they became believers. We have names for those guys, doubting Thomas'. I am one and I am glad that Thomas was there because Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Every sermon that came after that resurrection was focusing on that fact of that resurrection. Followers of Jesus were running around saying – Jesus rose

from the dead and He is our Savior. He has provided salvation and sin is paid for. People's hearts were ignited on fire because of the resurrection, because their sin was paid for, because the Spirit of God was now indwelling their souls, because it was washed and cleaned and was forgiven. The world was "turned upside down" and it was not because people were going to the four corners of the world saying *love thy neighbor*. The message was *we have a Savior*. They said that and people accepted it and they received intimacy with God and had meaning and purpose in life.

Careful Conclusions

Now listen, that is the message and it is in the Bible and it is verified historically. But when you talk about comparative religions, if you have had similar experiences as I have, and maybe it is just me but I doubt it, then you can talk about all the religions in the world and you can even talk about Christianity, but when you say the "J" word, things change. In an open meeting, when people are having just regular talking times at a social event, for example, and you talk about Jesus, that room gets quiet quickly.

There is opposition to Christianity like no other religion in the world. I would say one of the primary reasons is this – it does say that the problem is sin and the sin we are talking about is not generic or global; it is personal and mine. The sin we talk about in Christianity is the sin in the mirror. People don't like being confronted with the problem with the world is *them*. So while other religious teachings are helpful in negotiating life, this one says that it starts with *you*. It says that you owe a debt to God and someone is going to have to pay it. Salvation is required and therefore a Savior is needed but there is a debt. So even in the Bible it says that we stay distracted and give credit to the creatures rather than the Creator. We do whatever we can to keep from facing that fact.

There are arguments against Christianity that are notable. G. K. Chesterton said that the strongest argument against Christianity is Christians. I can appreciate that, whether it is the person down the street or historical Christians who have done deplorable things in the name of Jesus. Don't ever try to defend those. I think I mentioned before that is identity theft. They stole the identity of Jesus and doing things in His name that He would never do or ascribe doing. But it is the guy down the street who lives a duplicitous life or someone like me who seems to exaggerate all the time, every chance I get – oh, I just did it again – exaggerate all the time, every chance I get. It is difficult to live a Christ-like life because He was in fact perfect. It is easy for others to point out our flaws. But when you are talking about Christianity, when you are talking about a Savior, it is important to bring up just Jesus.

The other opposition about Christianity, besides it being personal, and attacking the idea that other Christians are bad witnesses, is the one is that people say “He is just a good moral teacher.” Jesus Christ is a moral teacher but He is not just a good moral teacher. He never allowed that to be an option for us. It was never part of the scheme of things.

When G. K. Chesterton wrote about Jesus, he said that if you look at the options available to you, you cannot say that He was a good moral teacher. If you read His teachings, He said that He was God. Any man who says that He is God and sincerely believes it has to be crazy - crazy like a person who thinks he is a poached egg. A person who thinks he is a poached egg is not a good moral teacher.

He also said that maybe Jesus was not crazy but maybe He was demonic because a good moral teacher does not say he is God and “I am the only way to salvation. Follow Me.” Because you will follow Him into hell. A moral person would not say – I am the only way to salvation – knowing quite full and well that he is leading people to hell. So, G. K. Chesterton says – call Him crazy or call Him a demon but do not call Him a good moral teacher.

C. S. Lewis, reading G. K. Chesterton, did a fabulous job of summarizing that in the book, I think, called *Mere Christianity*. Here is the quote that is notable:

You can shut Him up for a fool; you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

So if what we believe He taught is true, He has to be Lord or a liar or a lunatic. You have to choose.

What about ...?

The other question that comes up a lot when it comes to the conclusions of Christianity, you can see in the book that I recommended but also in Huston Smith’s book on comparative religions. The question is – What about ...? The question that Huston Smith puts in his book is – What about “If God is a God of love, it seems most unlikely that he would not have revealed himself to his other children as well.” In other words, if Jesus Christ is the only way, then just start doing the math. Hundreds of millions of people on earth today do not know the name of Jesus Christ. Then you do a little history and you realize that hundreds of billions of people in history did not know the name of Jesus the Christ. What about them? Huston Smith asks. That is a good question. Honest to goodness, that is a great question.

If I weren’t out of time, I would answer it. No, here are a couple of answers that I have been able to work out through the years and that have helped me to sleep because that is a good question, a true one.

The first part of it is this. I have learned that I am not going to figure out really difficult questions. I will put it this way. It is above my pay grade. The reason I say that is because while this question is true and irritating or unraveling, I have come to realize over the years as I have gotten to know God more personally and understand Him better and I am not nearly close to arriving. I have come to realize that God loves these hundreds of billions of people more than I could ever have any concept of understanding. I also know that He is a powerful God who would do anything and everything He could to reveal Himself to these people. So, I think He does. I think some people do know.

But, listen, I have understood my limitations and I understand that I cannot make decisions that other people can, just humanly speaking like I cannot make the decision to drop an atomic weapon on a civilian target where millions of people live to “save more lives.” I could not do that. I could not have given the order to drop the bomb on Hiroshima or Nagasaki. I could be a dutiful soldier. I could load that bomb and I might be able to fly that plane. Morally I might be able to throw that switch as the bombardier. I could write a paper on it, philosophically and theoretically on how that actually may have saved lives, dropping a bomb on a civilian target that wiped out two complete cities, but I could not sign the paper that gave the order. At that time, there was only one man in the world who could. That is what I mean when I say it is above my pay grade. Those are the kinds of decisions that you have to make when you start entertaining the idea of – *what about all those people*. I realize that God has to answer that question and He will and it will be loving and it will be just. As I have gotten older and understood Him more, I have become more at peace with the answer, whatever it might be. But it is not going to show up at my doorstep in this lifetime.

The second answer to the question is this. How do we know? How do you know that God isn't already doing those sorts of things the way He revealed Himself to Job, to Abraham, and quite possibly to Melchisedek, if that was a real person. That is history; those are Bible stories.

When I read the writings of Don Richardson who wrote two books that are fascinating. One is called *Peace Child* and one is called *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Both of those books talk about how God is always pursuing people to know Him ahead of any missionary showing up, naming the name of Jesus the Christ. Don Richardson has traveled the world and looked at countless civilizations, some of them quite literally stuck in the Stone Age, as described in the book *Peace Child*, living in the Stone Age in New Guinea and how they already had a story that went before him about the problem is sin and there is a need for salvation and there would be a Savior coming to do that.

God does that. We see that in the Bible, Ecclesiastes 3, it reads that God has placed eternity in our hearts.

Historically we know in the Bible that when Paul goes to Mars Hills and debates the great philosophers at that time, he walks into a polytheistic value system and worldview and says,

What is this place missing here?

Oh that is the shrine of the unknown god.

Really? Well, who built that shrine? I will tell you who gave you the thought of the unknown god.

God did because He wants to introduce Himself to you in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Augustine writes in *City of God* that the reason the west was won and most of the east was won in the early centuries was because of the predecessors, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who taught people how to think about God. When Jesus showed up, He was the fulfillment of those philosophical values. He was setting them up.

Even today, you can go to China to the Temple of Heaven now outside of Beijing. The Temple of Heaven was built during the Ming dynasty. The ritual goes like this. Once a year, the emperor comes to that temple to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people so that the gods would bless them with fertility.

Now, who would tell someone to have, for example, a high priest to meet at some shrine or sanctuary once a year to sacrifice for the sins of the people some kind of offering to appease god. Who would do that? Who would tell them how to do it? God would. He told the Jews. It is called the Day of Atonement. When the Chinese have almost the exact same ritual, you have to start to wonder if God has not gone before them.

The theme of Don Richardson's work, his whole life study is that God is at work among us. He cares more about it than you and I could ever hope to.

The natural consequence, if you follow the logic of the Christian value that is proposed in this book, the problem with the world is sin and it needs salvation and you need a Savior, it would make sense that people who have that value would do anything and everything they can to tell other people they know and people they don't know in the four corners of the world. If a church like ours has the value but did not have the application, I would say you don't have the value. You really don't think that Jesus is the only way. You don't think other cultures or other circumstances need that Savior. I would say – put up or shut up.

But here at Grace Covenant Church we do believe that. If you look at the history of Christendom you will see that hospitals and other sorts of caring stations have been set up all over the world for the very purpose of bringing Christ to those cultures.

In our church, we have given millions of dollars over the years to missionaries who go anywhere and everywhere we can send them. We have given a lot more than money. We have given some of our

best leaders. We have lost two elders in our church to missionary exploits to parts of the world that I cannot name with my microphone on. We have not just given our elders; we have given our youngers. We have given our kids, the most precious thing we have here. Do you know why we have given it? Do you know why we send them everywhere and many times into danger? Because we believe that the problem with the world is sin, personal sin, and we believe that salvation is necessary and there is a Savior. He proved Himself to be the one by who He was, what He said, and what He did. He rose from the dead. He showed that He could pay the debt.

So when we ask – What about all those other people? Those are clues to the answer but the application is pretty simple. We have to go out and tell people.

Conclusion

I have another question. It is related to this one. It is – What about you? It is not hypothetical. It is not in another culture. It is not another time in history or another part of the world. It is right here and right now. If what is said in this book that all gods are not the same, and that is true, and the Christian belief that the problem with the world is sin, if that is true, then there is need for salvation and there is a Savior.

So on this Mother's Day, 2010, here is what I want to ask you. Just a few questions.

The first one is this. Do you feel a personal, moral obligation to God, a wanting for the choices that you have made – in other words, moral indebtedness. You have gone on a immoral spending spree and the bill is coming due. Do you feel guilt? I would say that is God's work in you because the Bible says that the Spirit of God convicts people of sin. If you don't have a conviction of sin, I would say, that is fine; or I would say, ask God to show you that the problem with the world is your sin.

It comes right after that, that if you have a problem is it is sin and there is a debt that has to be paid, you will feel a strangulation of the consequences on your soul. You will soon feel a need to have that debt paid and you will come to the realization that you can't afford it. So there is a feeling of hopelessness and sometimes panic in our lives when we come to this realization. It is like – I am caught and I have no where to hide. If you have that feeling, I would say that is from God too. He is trying to put you into a box that you realize is a box of frustration and hopelessness; hopelessness is a good place to be because when you cry out and say – The teachings of Confucius or Buddha cannot be lived out in this life and it never even tries to pay the debt for sin. So I give up. Then you are ready because the Savior comes to bring salvation, not in a work out schedule, not in a list of to-do's, but in a box with a bow. He says –

take the gift. I will pay. The beatings were your fault. The death was your doing. The resurrection, that was all Me.

Today, on Mother's Day, 2010, you could receive the gift of Jesus Christ's death and His gift of righteousness in His resurrection. Let me tell you what you get with this gift and I'll be finished. When you are forgiven by God, it means that your soul is purified and cleansed with perfection. The Spirit of God has been waiting to live inside of you and has been unable to. He is picky and a bit of a perfectionist. He won't live anywhere that is not perfect. When you trust Christ to pay for your sins, the Spirit of God says – I am going to take that as an invitation to live in your soul. You get the Spirit of God. You get a conscience that hears God's voice and you get the power to fulfill God's will for your life. That is what you get.

It starts with a need that is found in sin, needing salvation and ultimately in a Savior called Jesus the Christ. If you have never made a choice in your life where you just say – I get it now. I understand the problem. I understand that it is me. I understand that it is a debt. And I cannot pay it. I understand now that Jesus Christ paid that debt and rose just to show off.

Today you could choose that. Here is what I would like to do. I would like to lead you in a prayer that sounds like you are receiving that gift, just by faith and you can join me in this today. Follow along with me if you would.

Dear heavenly Father,

Today I see that all religions are not the same. They don't even pretend to be. They don't even try to be.

I feel a heaviness on my soul like I have not before that the problem is the cost of sin. I have spent in my decisions and now the bill is due and I cannot pay it.

God, like it says in the Bible, I take the gift of Jesus Christ and His death for payment for my sin and I receive it and I want to be forgiven and I want salvation. He said- I therefore say to you that you shall die in your sins unless you believe that I am He.”

On this day, Mother's Day, 2010, I believe that He is the one that has died for my sins. I receive that forgiveness and I open my soul to the Spirit of God to live in me. I pray this now in my Savior's name, Jesus the Christ.

And all God's people said, amen.