

## ***STAND FIRM AGAINST PLURALISM***

**By Andy Manning**

**August 2, 2018**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Naaman was the general of the Aramean army, but he had a problem. He had leprosy, a horrible and incurable skin disease. But someone told him about a Jewish prophet named Elisha who could perform miracles. So Naaman traveled to see Elisha to be healed. Elisha was willing to help. He gave Naaman very clear instructions. Go to the Jordan River and dip yourself under water seven times; then you will be healed of your disease. But surprisingly, Naaman got angry. He thought Elisha's instructions were ridiculous. He didn't like Elisha's "way" of healing. Fortunately Naaman's friends talked him into following Elisha's instructions, and sure enough, Naaman was cured.

Many people are like Naaman today.

When Christians tell them that the only way to heaven is through faith in Jesus Christ, they get angry. They think that's a ridiculous idea. They don't like the Christian "way" of salvation.

Rather than rejoicing that there is a way to be saved and turning to Christ, they are offended by the Christian claim that Jesus is the only way of salvation, and they reject Christ.

Not only that, but they verbally attack and condemn Christians for believing that Christ is the only way.

Dr. RC Sproul, one of the greatest contemporary theologians and apologists, was on the hot spot. Part of the problem was that he wasn't Dr. Sproul but rather just RC Sproul, a lowly freshman in college. Another part of the problem was that he was a relatively new convert to Christianity, with neither a deep understanding of his faith nor the ability to defend it. Most of the problem was that he was being ridiculed by an angry, militant, anti-Christian professor.

Sproul was sitting innocently enough in his freshman college English class. Perhaps he was day dreaming. Right in the middle of class, the professor – a former war correspondent hostile to Christianity – looked at RC and asked, “Mr. Sproul, do you believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to God?” Now, what this had to do with Shakespeare, Joyce, T.S. Elliot, or any other greater write of English literate is anybody’s guess, but there it was – a hand grenade tossed into Sproul’s lap.

RC was shaken by the question. “I gasped,” he said of the moment, which he believes to be one of the most humiliating in his life. “I felt the weight of her question, and I knew that every eye in the room was on me. My mind raced for a way to escape my dilemma. I knew if I said yes, people would be angry. At the same time, if I said no, I would be betraying Christ.”

Sproul muttered almost inaudibly, “yes, I do.”

The teacher responded with unmitigated fury. In front of the class, with a voice as loud as a rocket launcher, she yelled at Sproul, “That is the most narrow-minded, bigoted, and arrogant statement I have ever heard in my life! You must be a supreme egotist to believe that your way of religion is the only way.”

Sproul, thoroughly embarrassed and taken aback, slouched meekly in his chair without saying another word.<sup>1</sup>

Today we’re going to talk about standing firm against pluralism, the idea that all roads or many roads to heaven.

That is the belief of many today. And If you believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven, then you are a bad person.

**Al Mohler**, President of Southern Seminary said, “In our culture of political correctness and intolerant tolerance, we are told that such a claim is simply unacceptable. There cannot be only one way of salvation. Who is to say that the

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<sup>1</sup> As told by D. James Kennedy, *Skeptics Answered*, p. 102.

religions of the world are wrong, and that Christianity alone is true?”<sup>2</sup> Many today see Christians as arrogant and imperialistic for this view.

**Kirby Godsey** is the former President of Mercer University, which was a Southern Baptist school until the Georgia Baptists decided to break away because of what the school was teaching. In 2011 Godsey wrote a book called *Is God a Christian?* He said that claims of exclusivity are immoral because such claims turn Christianity “into a self-centered, narcissistic religious system that says to the rest of the world that they must become like us if they wish to be accepted by God.”

Professor **Susannah Heschel** of Dartmouth College said, “Exclusive claims to truth and convictions that one’s own religion is the only path to salvation... have caused some of the great horrors in history.”<sup>3</sup>

**Robert Maddox** was President Jimmy Carter’s White House Faith Liaison; he also was a Southern Baptist preacher. He referenced John 14:6 where Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” **Maddox** said, “Sooner or later, the church crowd is going to wake up and realize that there are going to be a lot of people in heaven other than us Christians. I still believe Jesus is the way and the truth—for me. But it’s that last part that troubles me, the part that says ‘no man comes to the Father, except by Me’. I don’t think we can get away with saying that anymore. That might have worked in the ’50s, but it’s not going to work in the 21st century.”

**John Killenger** is a former Southern Baptist Theologian. In 2003 he wrote a book called *Ten Things I Learned Wrong From a Conservative Church*. One of the things he had to unlearn was the belief that Jesus was the only way to heaven. He wrote, “after all these years of study and scholarship,” he cannot believe that “the Jesus of history or the Christ of faith would endorse a view limiting salvation to those who have publicly confessed him as their personal savior.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Al Mohler, *Is This Evangelicalism’s Terminal Generation?* June 23, 2005

<sup>3</sup> <https://albertmohler.com/2004/06/21/religious-progressives-mobilize-for-political-action/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://albertmohler.com/2003/12/05/how-to-abandon-historic-christianity-in-ten-easy-lessons-2/>

**John C. Richards** in an article in Christianity today wrote, “When it comes to religion, the word exclusive is synonymous with bigot. Even worse, Christians who communicate the exclusivity of their faith are castigated and dismissed.”<sup>5</sup>

This is why the President of my seminary, **Dr. Paige Patterson** said that the doctrine of exclusivity is the most hated doctrine in the world. **He said**, “The message of Jesus was not particularly popular among some people [of his day]. The princes didn't like it, the politicians didn't care for it, the preachers were offended by it, the priests certainly didn't like it, the professors were dubious about it, the philosophers thought they had a better way, and so they all in one accord rejected it. It is, in fact, the most hated doctrine in all of the world today that Jesus came preaching the exclusivity of Christ in salvation.”<sup>6</sup>

Because this doctrine is so hated, and because the message constantly being preached through the cultural airwaves today is that of pluralism, many Christians have abandoned the doctrine of exclusivity.

Almost 80 percent of Americans believe that there's more than one way to heaven.

91 percent of Catholics believe that. And 69 percent of Evangelical Protestants believe that a good person who is of a different religious faith will still go to heaven.<sup>7</sup>

It's not an easy time to believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven. You are in the minority; you will face mockery, criticism, rejection, and even persecution.

**Persecution? In America? Yes.** Shortly after the election President Trump nominated Russell T. Vought to be his assistant budget director. Senator Bernie Sanders opposed him. Why? As **Andrew Taylor** reported for the Associated Press, “Sen. Bernie Sanders said Wednesday that he'll oppose Donald Trump's

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<sup>5</sup> John C. Richards, One-Path Evangelism: The Scandalizing Exclusivity of Jesus, Christianity Today, May 12, 2017

<sup>6</sup> Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. June 13, 2004, SBC Annual Pastor's Conference

<sup>7</sup> Newsweek/Beliefnet National Poll; *The 10 Most Common Objections to Christianity*, p. 147, Alex McFarland

pick to be deputy White House budget director over a blog post last year that says Muslims ‘stand condemned’ because they have rejected Jesus Christ.” Sanders said that Vought’s comments were Islamophobic, and that Vought “is not someone who is what this country is supposed to be about.” What’s this about? A year before Vought wrote on a blog site, defending his alma mater, Wheaton College, who fired a professor for saying that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. **He wrote**, “Muslims do not simply have a deficient theology. They do not know God because they have rejected Jesus Christ his Son, and they stand condemned.” Vought was simply stating the classic orthodox teaching of exclusivity. But this view is so out of step with current cultural trends and political correctness that a senator and former presidential candidate felt that his belief in the exclusivity of Christ made him unfit to serve the country.

This is not an easy belief to hold on to. So in this sermon I want to help you stand firm against pluralism.

## II. REVIEW

But first, let’s do a little review.

The focus of this sermon series is standing firm.

Our theme verse for this series is **1 Corinthians 16:13**.<sup>8</sup> “Be alert, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong.”

**What does it mean to stand firm in the faith? It means five things at least:**

1. Hold on to sound doctrine, no matter what.
2. Stay active in church, no matter what.
3. Maintain an intimate love relationship with God, no matter what.
4. Keep serving God, no matter what.
5. Keep pursuing righteousness, no matter what.

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<sup>8</sup> Unless noted, all Bible verses are from the Christian Standard Bible, 2017.

In this series we are looking specifically at **five destructive lies** that have the potential to pull you away from God:

1. Evolution: People are not a special act of creation by God; they evolved naturally from monkeys.
2. Atheism: God does not exist; the material world is all there is.
3. Pluralism: There are many paths to heaven; Jesus is not the only way.
4. Annihilationism: Some people go to heaven, and those that don't just cease to exist; there is no such thing as eternal hell.
5. Sexual Liberation: The Bible's restrictions on sex are harmful; happiness can only be found through total sexual freedom.

So far we've looked at the lies of evolution and atheism.

### **III. WHAT IS PLURALISM?**

So let's talk about pluralism.

To understand pluralism, it's best to begin with a clear explanation of what Christians believe.

First of all, Christians don't just believe that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven. Christians believe in a lot of "onlys".

Christians believe that there is only one true God. Allah is a false God. The 300,000 million gods of Hinduism are false gods. The only true God is the triune God of the Bible.

Christians believe there is only one way to worship the triune God, in spirit and in truth. The use of idols and icons and images in worship is forbidden in the Ten Commandments.

As well, Christians believe there is only one holy book; there is only one inspired book – the Bible. The Koran is a lie. The Book of Mormon is a lie. The Pearl of Great Price is a lie.

Also, Christians believe there is only one correct interpretation of the Bible. The doesn't mean what you want it to mean. It means what it means. It doesn't matter what it means to you or to me. All that matters is what it means. What did God intend for it to mean when He first authored it?

We also believe that there is only one people of God – Israel – and all those who have faith in Jesus have been grafted into Israel.

We also believe that there is only one Savior – Jesus Christ. And we believe that there is only one way to be saved – through faith in the one Savior.

So just to be clear, Christians are probably much more exclusivist than critics of our exclusivism realize.

**Let's start with our church's statement of faith.** If you go online to read our church's essential beliefs, this is what it says about salvation. "Only by trusting in Jesus Christ as God's offer of forgiveness can man be saved from sin's penalty."

This is called the doctrine of exclusivity; or the exclusivity of the gospel; or the exclusivity of Christ.

### **Where does the doctrine of exclusivity come from?**

First it is clearly stated in several verses, the most classic being **John 14:6**. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Let's take a moment to digest this verse.

First of all, notice that these are the words of Jesus Himself.

Many people say that Christians are not being very Christ-like when we claim exclusivity, but it is Christ Himself who taught it. We would actually be contradicting Christ if we rejected exclusivity.

Second, notice that Jesus claimed exclusivity in three different ways in this verse.

**First, He said I am *the way, the truth, and the life*.** He didn't claim to be *a way, or one way, or a good way, or even the best way*. He claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life.

**Second, He said *no one can be saved apart from Him*.** Not atheists. Not Muslims. Not Hindus. Not Jews. Not Buddhists. Not really good unbelievers. Not people who have never heard the gospel. No one can be saved apart from Christ.

**And third, Jesus said *no one comes to the Father except through me*.** Jesus couldn't be clearer. There's only one way to heaven, and it is Him. There's only one way to be saved, and it is Him. There is only one way to God, and it is through Him.

Not only are there several verses such as John 14:6 that explicitly teach exclusivity, but the message of the entire Bible points to exclusivity. In other words, we're not just taking a few verses and using them out of context to make the claim of exclusivity. Instead, verses like John 14:6 state explicitly what the entire Bible teaches implicitly, that there is only one way to be saved, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Robert M. Bowman of the Institute of Religious Research points out several big ideas in the Bible that point to exclusivity.<sup>9</sup>

#### IV. 6 BIG IDEAS IN THE BIBLE THAT POINT TO EXCLUSIVITY

1. **Not everyone will be saved.** We'll talk about hell in more detail next Sunday, but it is very clearly taught in the Bible that not everyone will be saved and go to heaven. Jesus said in **Matthew 7:21**, "Not everyone who

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<sup>9</sup> Robert M. Bowman, Jr., "Is Jesus the Only Way?" Essay found in the HCSB Study Bible, p. 1836. The last point, number 6, is my own.



says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

2. **People will be judged by their works.** **2 Corinthians 5:10** says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." Whether or not you go to heaven will depend on your works on earth. Then, your degree of reward in heaven or punishment in hell will also depend upon your works.
3. **None of us can be saved by doing good works.** No one is good enough to make it to heaven by their performance. **Romans 3:20, 23** says, "For no one will be justified in his sight by the works of the law... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The implication here is that everyone needs a Savior.
4. **Jesus is the only Savior available.** Only Jesus died to save us from our sins. That's the main reason He came to earth. **Luke 19:10** says, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost."
5. **Those who reject Jesus will be lost.** **John 3:36** says, "The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him."
6. **The only prescription for salvation is faith in Jesus.** If there was any other way to be saved, then surely the Bible would have mentioned it. But the Bible only gives us one way to be saved. **John 3:16** says, "For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."

When you put all of these teachings together, you can only come to one conclusion. There's only one way to heaven.

**Gregory Alan Thornbury**, the former President of the King's College in New York City said, "The Bible plainly teaches only those who personally, consciously and

explicitly confess Jesus Christ as Lord possess eternal life. All others will face the holy and just wrath of God in hell throughout eternity.”<sup>10</sup>

Now let's talk about the lie of pluralism. There are **three different types of pluralism.**

**Classical pluralism** says that there are many paths to heaven; Jesus is not the only way.

Theologian **Bruce Ware** said, “The pluralist (e.g., John Hick) believes that there are many paths to God, Jesus being only one of them. Since salvation can come through other religions and religious leaders, it surely follows that people do not have to believe in Christ to be saved.”

**Inclusivism** says that there is only one Savior and provision for man's sin, Jesus Christ, but you don't have to have faith in Him in order to be saved. Instead, if you sincerely follow your religion, whether that is Judaism or Islam or Buddhism, Christ will save you.

Inclusivism doesn't mean that everyone will be saved; it essentially means that good people who sincerely follow their religion will go to heaven.

**Universalism** says that in the end, everyone will go to heaven, regardless of their beliefs or actions.

## **V. 9 PROBLEMS WITH PLURALISM**

It is very tempting to reject exclusivity and accept pluralism because of the pressures of society. But there are 9 problems with pluralism that you have to consider.

### **1. You reject the Bible as your highest authority.**

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<sup>10</sup> *If God Made the Universe, Who Made God?* p. 193

There's no way to get around it. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus is the only way. Let's look at some verses. **John 14:6** says, Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." **1 Timothy 2:5** says, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus." **1 John 5:11-12** says, "11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 The one who has the Son has life. The one who does not have the Son of God does not have life." **Acts 4:12** says, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved."

**James Montgomery Boice** commented on Acts 4:12, "Oh, how the world hates such statements! If you want to be laughed at, scorned, hated, even persecuted, testify to the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Say that Jesus is the only Savior, that only by believing in him can one escape hell. The world will fight you to the death, because nothing is so offensive to the natural man as teaching that we cannot save ourselves, that we cannot choose our own way of salvation, and that if we are going to be saved it must be by God in the way he has appointed."

It's very clear that the Bible teaches the exclusivity of Christ for salvation. So if you accept pluralism, you are rejecting the Bible as your highest authority. Instead of letting the Bible tell you what to believe, you are placing yourself above the Bible and telling the Bible what you are going to believe.

## **2. You inevitably end up with performance-based religion.**

There are really only two religions in the world: Christianity, in which you go to heaven by faith in Jesus Christ, and performance-based religions, in which you go to heaven by being a good person.

If you believe in pluralism, then what you believe is that ultimately it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are a good person.

But the Bible clearly teaches against performance-based religion. **Ephesians 2:8-9** says, "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift— 9 not from works, so that no one can boast."

## **3. You break the Ten Commandments.**

If you believe in pluralism, then you believe that it is okay if you worship other gods – gods other than Yahweh, the God of the Bible.

But the Bible makes it clear not only that there is only one God, but that God demands that we only worship the true God. God is greatly offended when people worship other gods.

It says in the Ten Commandments, in **Exodus 20:3**, “Do not have other gods besides me.”

#### **4. You make Christ's cross meaningless.**

In order to save us Christ had to be punished in our place.

**Isaiah 53:5-6** says, “But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds. 6 We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the Lord has punished him for the iniquity of us all.”

But if there are many paths to God, if Jesus isn't the only way, then why did Jesus come to earth and die?

Why did He endure the excruciating pain and suffering of the cross?

Why did He allow nails to pierce his hands and his feet?

Why did He allow the Romans to whip, and flog, and scourge him?

Why did He allow them to beat Him up and mock Him?

Why did He carry that heavy cross to Calvary? If there are other ways to heaven, the Christ's cross was pointless. It was unnecessary. It was meaningless. Rather than the greatest love story ever told, it's a story about a man who suffered greatly for nothing.

#### **5. You insult the sacrifice of countless martyrs and missionaries.**

In **Matthew 28:19** Jesus commanded His followers, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations....”

Thus ever since the book of Acts Christian missionaries have been leaving the comfort and safety of home and embracing a life of suffering, hardship, and persecution in order to get the gospel to the unreached people groups of the world. Why? Because without faith in Christ these people will die for their sins and spend eternity in hell. This is why many Christians have even given their lives for the spread of the gospel.

But if you don't need Jesus for salvation, then the efforts and sacrifices of all the missionaries throughout history were for nothing.

## **6. You violate logic.**

To believe in pluralism is to be illogical.

One of the fundamental laws of logic is the law of non-contradiction. “A” cannot be “A” and “non-A” at the same time. If you  $2+2=4$ , then it can't also equal five. It is one or the other.

But pluralism believes that different religions that contradict each other can both be right at the same time.

That doesn't make sense.

Christianity believes that Jesus is God in the flesh, the only way to heaven.

Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet, but not even as great as Muhammad.

Many Jews don't even believe that He was a prophet. So how can these religions all be right when they completely contradict each other.

Pluralism essentially says that all of the world's religions are basically the same. But that's simply a very ignorant statement.

**Paul Copan**, the author of *True for You But Not For Me*, said, "... people who say all religions essentially are alike haven't studied religions very deeply; they differ dramatically. A Christian scientist will deny the reality of evil, sin, sickness, and death. An orthodox Christian will readily acknowledge these inescapable aspects of our fallen world. A Muslim will deny that Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross to redeem us from darkness. If you're a theist, you believe that a Creator exists; not so if you're a Buddhist. As the Dalai Lam has put it, 'Among spiritual faiths, there are many different philosophies, some just opposite to each other on certain points. Buddhists do not accept a creator; Christians base their philosophy on that theory' .... Certain Hindus hold to reincarnation followed by ultimate personal extinction; by contrast, the Christian's view of the afterlife involves death, judgment, and then union with (or separation from )God.... Actually, the one thing all religions have in common is that they differ radically from one another."<sup>11</sup>

## **7. You trivialize devotion to Christ.**

Jesus Christ commands your wholehearted devotion.

He said the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. He said eat His flesh and drink His blood. Lose your life for His sake. Take up your cross daily and follow Him. Love Him more than your own family.

Why would you devote yourself wholeheartedly to Christ if He is not the only way, if His death wasn't necessary, if He is not the only god?

If all that really matters is that you be a good person, then suddenly centering my life around Christ and being fully devoted to Him is not that important.

## **8. You decrease the importance of evangelism.**

In **Acts 1:8** Jesus tells us, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

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<sup>11</sup> *True for You But Not For Me*, 114

The task we've been given is to take the gospel and share it with as many people as possible so that they can believe if they want to. But why evangelize if people don't need Christ for heaven?

Pluralism makes evangelism pointless.

## **9. You abandon love.**

Finally, if you embrace pluralism you abandon love.

People say that it is unloving to claim that Jesus is the only way to heaven.

But what if it is true? If it is true that Jesus is the only way to heaven, then telling people about the exclusivity of Christ is the most loving thing you can do.

But when you decide to stop claiming exclusivity because you don't want to offend people, you aren't being loving; you are being cruel.

You are neglecting to tell people how to escape the fires of eternal hell. That's not loving.

Some people might be offended when you tell them about Jesus, but some will believe and be saved because of your witness.

Imagine that you are in a burning building, and a fireman goes in to get you and says, follow me, there's only one way out.

Would you consider that a mean thing to say?

No! You would be eternally grateful to him, and you would immediately follow him to safety. When you tell people, "Follow Jesus. He's the only way to heaven," you are not being mean; you are being loving.

## **CONCLUSION**

Believing that Jesus is the only way to heaven is the most hated doctrine in all of the world today.

But it's true.

There's no escaping the words of Jesus in **John 14:6**. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." So stand firm in the faith. Keep believing. And keep witnessing. Everybody needs Jesus, because Jesus is the only way.