

How Can You Say There's Only One True Faith?

John 14:6

Series: Confronting Christianity – Summer 2021

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Worship: God of Truth and Beauty

Chapter in *Confronting Christianity*: 3

Key Sentence: Jesus is too radical to be packaged with other faiths

Outline:

I. Introduction (John 14:6)

II. Six Issues with the Elephant

III. The Radical Jesus (John 8:58; John 11:25-26; Mark 2:3-12; Luke 18:31-33, Matthew 28:18-20)

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 8:56–59 Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” ⁵⁹So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

John 11:21–27 Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

Mark 2:3–12 And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. ⁴And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. ⁵And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” ⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷“Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question these things in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’?”

¹⁰But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” ¹²And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw anything like this!”

Luke 18:31–33 And taking the twelve, he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³²For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. ³³And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.”

Matthew 28:18–20 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

How Can You Say There's Only One True Faith? John 14:6

As we speak this morning, Tim Rask, Rebecca Zeek and many others are more than 24 hours into the Texas Water Safari. The winning boat usually paddles about 32 to 36 hours, depending on the water level. Most boats take longer, meaning that they spend two full nights on the river. And that second night, after you've paddled say 36 hours, is where the interesting stuff starts: dehydration, disorientation, waking dreams, hallucinations, all kinds of stuff.

So, imagine for a moment that you're following the Safari, standing on the bank of the Guadalupe River watching boats go by downstream. The first boat you see has a problem, but it's one the paddlers might not have noticed. From the back of the boat, clearing the rudder, a line extends, and something is being pulled along by the boat. You can't tell what it is, but the boat is close enough that you call out "Boat 14, you're dragging something." The three paddlers look around, but they don't appear concerned. One of them calls out "Don't worry about it, it's fine." Maybe they're doing it on purpose? It's their race.

A few minutes later another boat comes by, a mixed double, not looking too sharp. Instead of continuing down what you know is the main channel of the river, they lean left and turns into one of the many branches and bayous that flow slowly to and from the flat landscape. Again, he's close enough that you call out "Whoa, boat 105, you're going the wrong way." The man shakes his head, partly to wake up you're sure, and misses a stroke or two. He looks around. He sees you. After a moment he mumbles something, maybe "fine," and paddles off, still going the wrong way. That way can only lead to a dead end in a swamp full of logjams. It's not only off course, it's truly dangerous. So you call out louder "That's the wrong way," but they don't respond.

The difference between these two scenarios is a key component of this week's chapter in Rebecca McLaughlin's book, *Confronting Christianity*. It's chapter 3 "How Can You Say There's Only One True Faith?" Have you ever had that question from someone? Have you ever asked it yourself? Why is Christianity so exclusive? How can we say that all the other religions in the world, with billions of followers are wrong? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to say that all religions are part of one great truth, and that all ways ultimately lead to the same end? Wouldn't it make life easier if we didn't have to feel this weight, this burden, of trying to call people to the one true way? And if I don't feel that burden, is it because I don't really believe there is only one way?

McLaughlin says “To our modern ears, the idea of one religion claiming to be the truth is anathema. Most religious claims cannot be proved beyond reasonable doubt, so the idea that they are objective and universal seems like a category confusion. It is one thing to say that Christianity is true for you, but to claim that Jesus rightly demands the allegiance of every human being—regardless of one’s cultural background or current beliefs—seems offensive and absurd.”

Yet this is the claim Jesus himself made. John 14:6 is our key verse. *Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* Jesus spoke these words in the upper room the night he was betrayed. Judas had in fact just gone out into the night, to complete his betrayal. Jesus turns to the other disciples and says “Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’” He also gives the command to love one another, but Peter and the others don’t seem to notice that. They are distracted by this idea that he is going to leave them and go where they can’t come. Peter says “Where are you going?” Jesus says “You can’t go with me.” Peter says “I’ll die for you.” Jesus says “You’ll deny me.”

Then he offers his disciples this comfort, John 14:1 “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to where I am going.” Where was he going? Through death to life, or in John’s terminology, eternal life. He’s going to his Father’s house, to prepare a place for us in his Father’s house. He’s going to come again and take us, to himself.

But Thomas is not comforted. One commentator says “Thomas was utterly honest, pessimistic, and uninhibited. He did not suppress his feelings but voiced his despair.” Verse 5 “Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” As Don Carson says, Thomas and the others were not ready to come to grips with the fact that Jesus would have to die and rise again to rescue them. He’d told them plainly enough. In John 10 he had said “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” In the other Gospels he’d been even more plain and prophetic. This was where he was going so that he could obtain for believers the same relationship to his Father that he had. But they don’t get it. So in verse 6, our verse for today, he makes it even more plain. Stop looking for some path to follow, some way laid out that you can achieve. No, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

This is the truest answer to Thomas's question, to Peter's question and to the ultimate question that each of us face. If there is a way to God, if there is a way to eternal life, Jesus claims to be that way. Thomas a Kempis, the late medieval monk said it well "Without the way there is no going; without the truth there is no knowing; without the life there is no living. I am the way which you must follow; the truth which you must believe; the life for which you must hope. I am the inviolable way; the infallible truth, the never-ending life. I am the straightest way; the sovereign truth; life true, life blessed, life uncreated."

Having said this, Jesus concludes that "no one comes to the Father except through me." This makes it plain that the place he was going, through death and resurrection, was back to his Father, and that the place he has prepared for us in is the presence of his Father. Our restored relationship with God through Jesus was the goal of his life and ministry all along.

But Jesus says this in a way that excludes all other paths to the Father. He is the only way. This is where people begin to say "What? No other way? What about all the other religions? What about people of good will who never even heard about this way?" In other words, how universally should this claim by Jesus be taken? Is it just a truth for Christians, one good choice among many, or is it universal? Our opening illustration shows that, as McLaughlin says, "When questions of truth carry life-and-death consequences, we see persuasion as an act of love. But," she says, "what species of truth is religious truth? Are the various world religions making competing claims on reality, or are they simply different voicings of one truth?" "If I say, "Christianity is true, and Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism are not," is that like saying, "Stop smoking; it could kill you," or is it more like saying, "My grandmother's cooking is better than yours"?"

The view that all religions are equal paths to truth is often illustrated by a parable from an ancient Hindu text. The story tells of a group of blind men describing an elephant. One man touches its trunk and compares it to a snake. Another feels its ear and compares it to a fan. The third man places his hand on the elephant's leg and says it is like a tree trunk. A fourth pushes on the elephant's side and insists it is like a wall. The fifth man holds the tail and finds it rope-like. The last man feels a tusk and declares that the elephant is like a spear. This story reveals our individual limitations, corrects our natural arrogance and seems to be a humble approach, a framework for respecting all religions equally. But on closer inspection, the elephant paradigm creates more problems than it solves. McLaughlin identifies seven, and in doing so walks us progressively closer to affirming the universality of Jesus's controversial claim to be the only way. Jesus is too radical to be packaged with other faiths.

First, there is a problem of respect. “The story of the elephant seems respectful: religions are not right or wrong; each holds an aspect of the truth. But the tale works only because the narrator is not blind. He or she sees the whole picture and smiles indulgently at the blind believers arguing over their seemingly contradictory faiths.” To say any two religions are just two sides of the same truth coin is really to say we don’t respect others enough to take their beliefs seriously. Conversely, to say “I think you are wrong about this” need not be disrespectful or unkind. McLaughlin says “One of my wisest and gentlest seminary professors put it like this: ‘It’s often said that you should respect other people’s beliefs. But that’s wrong: what’s vital is that you respect other people.’ In fact attempting to persuade others to change their beliefs is a sign of respect. You are treating them as thinking agents with the ability to decide, not just products of their cultural environment.” She illustrates this through her friendship with a brilliant atheist. They each think the other’s belief is, in her words, “crazy.” “‘I believe the entire universe revolves around a first-century Palestinian Jew who died on a cross and was supposedly raised from the dead.’ The atheist admits to thinking that’s crazy. But “his scientific atheism, particularly when coupled with his belief in universal human equality, required him to believe some crazy things too.” They remain friends because they respect each other.

The second problem with the elephant is that of truth. The omniscient narrator of the illustration saw true truth. The blind men saw only their own truth, which is not the same thing. McLaughlin gives as an example a speech by Oprah Winfrey at a Golden Globe Awards commending the women who had spoken out in the #MeToo movement: “What I know for sure,” she declared, “is that speaking your truth is the most powerful tool we all have.” McLaughlin says “The truth of a sexual assault is undoubtedly personal: it is in an important sense ‘your truth.’ But if that truth is not also objective, it is a lie. The women who have spoken out are ultimately commended not for telling their truth but for telling the truth.” It is this reality of objective truth that has to be taken seriously when people contend that everyone finds their own way to their own version of God. If there is objective truth then God doesn’t come in versions.

This leads to the third problem, the problem of historical truth. Either something happened, or it didn’t. Both can’t be true. McLaughlin says “The central truth claim on which Christianity stands or falls is that Jesus was physically raised from the dead. There is historical evidence for this claim, outrageous as it may seem. Alternative theories are surprisingly unpersuasive. But whether we think the evidence is strong or weak, it is still a historical claim. Just as Julius Caesar either was assassinated on March 15, 44 BC, or was not, so Jesus either was raised from the dead in circa AD 33 or was not.”

Our believing or not believing in the resurrection does not change the objective reality of what took place 2000 years ago. Yet this is a question on which the three largest monotheistic religions disagree. Muslims believe Jesus did not die, but was instead taken up into heaven. Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead. Jews (and atheists, for that matter) believe Jesus died and stayed dead. These claims are mutually exclusive. Religious truth must agree with historic truth. To say all religions are equally true is to lose our grip on history.

Fourth is the problem, McLaughlin says, of conversion. She talks about her friend Praveen Sethupathy. Praveen came to Christianity after a period of careful reflection. Now a professor of genetics, he is used to evaluating evidence and forming hypotheses to fit the data. It remains his firm belief that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Much as he appreciates his Hindu heritage, he does not believe the fundamental claims of Hinduism to be true. To claim that Hinduism and Christianity are ultimately compatible is to do violence to both. In the same way, McLaughlin points out, no atheist wants to hear that Christianity and atheism are two paths to the same truth. They honestly believe that they have the truth, and we have to respect that.

Fifth, the problem of ethics. “Many who believe that all religions are equally true, or at least that no one should claim his or her own religion is the truth, also affirm universal ethical beliefs: for example, that racism is wrong, that people should have freedom of sexual expression, or that men and women should be valued equally. But if we say to our traditional Muslim friends, “We uphold your right to be a Muslim, so long as you embrace equal roles for men and women, the legitimacy of same-sex marriage, and the freedom of your teenagers to experiment sexually,” are we truly upholding their right to practice their faith? Yet few of us will consign our deepest ethical beliefs to the “true-for-me-but-not-for-you” bucket.”

Sixth, there is the problem of monotheism. In polytheism there were times when different tribes and nations could worship their own local gods, which were integrated into a larger set, as in the Greek and Roman empires. Everyone’s gods could be gods without destroying anyone’s dignity. This no longer worked after a fiercely monotheistic faith emerged. Judaism introduced a fundamental belief that Israel’s covenant God had created the heavens and the earth, a fearless assertion that this God is the only true God, and a foundational command to worship him alone. Christianity and, later, Islam built upon these foundations, asserting that there was one true, universal God, who had uniquely revealed himself, and that other so-called gods are idols. Monotheism is at its heart exclusive and universal. It proclaims that there is only one true God. This is incompatible with polytheistic religions.

Seventh, and finally, but most importantly, is what McLaughlin calls the problem of Jesus. This is so important that in my outline it's a separate third reason. The first reason why we say that there's only one true faith is that Jesus said so. The second reason is the first six issues with the elephant. To hold that all religions are equally true violates the very definition of truth. Two mutually exclusive things cannot both be true. But the third reason is that Jesus is too radical to be packaged with other faiths. McLaughlin says "While it might be possible to square some religions with each other, particularly those with multiple gods, Christianity is like a puzzle piece drawn from the wrong box: however hard we try to bend the edges, it won't fit."

The claim we started with fits perfectly in this category. Most of the "I am" statements of Jesus do. Jesus is not like any other religious leader who says "let me show you the way." Instead he says "I am the way." And of course, "I am the truth." Some other religions may be finding some parts of the truth as they touch the sides or trunk of the elephant. That's common grace. But Jesus says "I am the elephant." He's the elephant in the room, to mix the metaphor. All these other claims may be one thing, but Jesus is totally another.

For one thing, he claims to be God. He does this in words in John 8. He's disputing with the Jewish leaders and tells them that even Abraham rejoiced to see his day. The leaders say "you claim to have talked with Abraham?" And Jesus says "Before Abraham was, I am." Those two words, I am, are a translation of the personal name of God in the Old Testament. Jesus is claiming to be the eternal God. The Jewish leaders knew this because they immediately tried to stone him for blasphemy. In fact each of the seven "I Am" statements in the Gospel of John are claims by Jesus to do and be what only God is and does. If not true, these are the claims not of a good moral teacher but of a crazy person, someone whom today we would call bipolar or schizophrenic or megalomaniac or someone delusional, delusions of grandeur.

McLaughlin points this out in John 11, where Jesus interacts with Mary and Martha after their brother Lazarus dies. Listen to his interaction with Martha. John 11:21-27 *Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."* ²³*Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."* ²⁴*Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."* ²⁵*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"* ²⁷*She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."*

Who else, among all the religions has offered resurrection and eternal life? Maybe there are some. But who else has had the audacity to claim that he himself is that resurrection? No one. Who else has had the kindness or cruelty to stand there and say to a woman “your brother will rise again,” and not in some far off day” Because he’s the resurrection, he’s going to do it right now. If he can’t live up to this claim, then he is not only deluded, he is just cruel to say it to grieving woman. But he does live up to the claim when Lazarus comes forth from the tomb. He is what he says he is. And if that wasn’t enough to prove the truth of this claim, what about his own resurrection?

Jesus is too radical to be packaged with other faiths. The Jewish leaders of his day recognized this. He made it plain to them. Listen to Mark 2:3-12 *And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. ⁴And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. ⁵And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” ⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷“Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question these things in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? ¹⁰But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” ¹²And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw anything like this!”*

Jesus had already healed many people even this early in his ministry. But instead of simply healing this man, he says “Son, your sins are forgiven.” The scribes, who were masters of their religion said, rightly, “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” They saw it as a claim to deity, and they saw that this claim could not, in their way of thinking, be reconciled to the Jewish faith. Jesus responds with an outrageous question, in preparation for proving his claim: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’?” He then proved his authority to forgive sins by telling the paralyzed man to get up. He did not deny the assertion of the scribes that only God has the right to forgive sins. But he demonstrated that their conclusion was wrong: Jesus was not blaspheming. He had that right, because he was God in the flesh. This was a truth claim, that he was God, and if it was true, then any faith or religion that denies it is wrong and is not the way to God.

Jesus is too radical to be packaged with other faiths. My personal favorite example is his prophecy of his death and resurrection. It's made often in the Gospels. Luke 18:31–33 *And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³²For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. ³³And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise."* Who can do this? Anyone can say it, but to actually do it is another thing. Jesus did. Now I know what you'll say. "How can we believe these Scriptures. Weren't these miraculous things added in later, back-edited to make the story fit what the church wanted people to believe?" We're going to address the issue of the reliability of Scripture in two of our discussions this summer. But for this discussion we have to recognize that for better or for worse these are the truth claims of Scripture, of Christianity, just like every other religion has its truth claims. If we're going to take these truth claims seriously, they are exclusive of all the other truth claims. It's not that everybody has a different view of the elephant, it's that Jesus is the elephant. He is the truth. And the way.

C. S. Lewis nailed this in *Mere Christianity*. He argued that this kind of teaching was not that of a good man, one among many great moral teachers. When someone says things like these we call him crazy or cruel. Lewis says "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic, on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. 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 with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

McLaughlin says "Time and again, the Gospels record Jesus doing outrageous things only God can do: commanding the wind, forgiving sins, feeding multitudes, raising the dead. His universal claim is finally rammed home in his parting words to his disciples." Matthew 28:18-20: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.* In an echo of Lewis's argument, she says of this passage "Jesus claims rule over all of heaven and earth. He presents himself not as one possible path to God, but as God himself. We may choose to disbelieve him. But he cannot be one truth among many. He has not left us that option."