

# “I WANT TO BELIEVE, BUT...”

## *Why is Christ the only way?*

by Steve Hixon



### Looking at Current Issues from a Biblical Perspective

During the Jesus movement of the 1960's, an upraised index finger did not mean "We're number one!"; it meant "Jesus is the one way to God". Today that may be considered an obscene gesture in our relativistic culture. The idea that any one belief has a monopoly on truth is the most offensive stance in our politically-correct society. With shows like Oprah and Phil dominating the afternoon airwaves, about the only opinion considered to be wrong is the idea that there is some source of absolute truth. In [The Day America Told the Truth](#), a book which polled Americans in the early 1990's, the authors found that 82% of US believe in an afterlife of heaven & hell, 45 % believe in ghosts, 31% believe some people have magical powers, 28% practice witchcraft, black magic, or voodoo, and 5% participate in satanism or some witchcraft ritual.

#### OUR RELATIVISTIC CULTURE

Historically speaking, tolerance for other religious views was an integral part of the founding of the United States. Reacting against what they felt was an oppressive state religion in England, pilgrims left Great Britain first for Holland and then for America. They came here with a desire for religious freedom, and set up a country where pluralism reigned. (As Os Guinness says, "There's nothing wrong with pluralism. The true enemy is relativism, not pluralism.") They intended that there would be no official state religion, and that Christianity would have its chance in the spiritual marketplace. However, the founding fathers never meant to say that there was no absolute truth, only that the government would not officially endorse one denomination. Yet if someone today stands up and says that they believe their spiritual belief is exclusively true, it's like attacking baseball, hot dogs, motherhood, apple pie. How did this modern mindset happen? Why is it that people today have such an aversion to the idea of a truth that applies to everyone? As Haddon Robinson puts it, "If someone appears on Jay Leno and says, "I've been married to the same woman for 42 years", the audience will applaud. But if that same person were to continue, "And I believe lifelong monogamy is the biblical standard that God has for all married people", they will boo him off the stage! The prevailing attitude of society is, "If that's your ethic, fine. But don't impose it on us."

In [Modern Times](#), a history of the 20th century, author Paul Johnson claims that the combination of Marx, Freud, and Einstein all unknowingly contributed to a sense that no truths were nailed down, whether in the areas of social order, psychology or physics. He states: "The modern world began on May 29, 1919 when photographs of a solar eclipse (taken on the island of Principe off West Africa and also in Brazil) confirmed the truth of a new theory of the universe." (This experiment shot holes in Newton's physics, Galileo's

astronomy, and Euclid's geometry.)

However, society slowly extrapolated the idea of relativism in the area of physics (from Einstein's theories) into a general sense that all truth was relative. "Marx, Freud & Einstein all conveyed the same message to the 1920's: the world was not what it seemed. The impression people derived from Einstein, of a universe in which all measurements of value were relative, served to confirm a vision of moral anarchy... At the beginning of the 1920's the belief began to circulate, for the first time at a popular level, that there were no longer any absolutes: of time and space, of good and evil, of knowledge, and above all, of value. Mistakenly relativity became confused with relativism."

"Tolerance has become the queen of the virtues."

Cliffe Knechtle

Naturally the idea of the Bible as a source of absolute truth came under attack. Johnson concludes: "The decline and ultimately the collapse of the religious impulse left a huge vacuum. The history of modern times is in great part the history of how that vacuum has been filled."

This is why, for instance, in Bill Moyers' new book on the song *Amazing Grace*, the nine-page introduction, written by Judy Collins, never mentions Christ, says God is an unknown he or she, and tells us that the explicitly Christian hymn transcends religions.

Let's look at some commonly - and often honestly - asked questions.

#### **1. AREN'T ALL RELIGIONS TEACHING BASICALLY THE SAME THING?**

The only way to answer "Yes" to this question is to 1) ignore the obvious differences in religious beliefs or 2) deny those differences.

About a hundred years ago scholars began to write a lot about comparative religions, and they increasingly used the term "essence of religion", which they often defined as the "universal fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man." In other words, all religions can be boiled down to the idea that all people are God's children and are therefore spiritual brothers and sisters. (Note Jesus' attitude towards this teaching. He was speaking to the Jewish religious leaders in John 8 when he made the following remarks: "You are doing the things your own father does." "We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself." Jesus said, "You belong to your father, the devil...")

German theologians of the higher criticism school were also attacking the Bible's miracles and saying that Scripture was just a book of ethics. The result of all this could be described using the "Mountain analogy" - that all people live at the base of the same spiritual mountain, with God on the top, and although we may take different paths (ie, religions), one path is as good as another because we're all going to end up in the same place when we reach the top. This philosophy even spawned a whole new religion, called Bahai, which is based on a synthesis of all other religions. My first required college course, for example, was called "Nature of Man" and one of the main goals seemed to be to instill the concept that there are many ways to God and all of them are equally legitimate. Contrast that with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:13:

*"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."*

What do other religions teach? Just a sampling - Buddhism teaches that there is no personal God; Orthodox Judaism says there is no life after death, and Islam defends the killing of infidels. Contrast those with the Christian tenets of a personal relationship with God, the resurrection, and the command to love your enemies. Clearly all religions do not teach the same thing.

## **2. WASN'T JESUS JUST A GOOD MORAL TEACHER?**

Probably the clearest treatment of this question was given by C.S. Lewis in an argument that has come to be known as the "Trilemma." It goes like this:

Jesus clearly claimed to be God. And those who heard Him clearly understood what he was claiming: *Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God." (John 10:31-33)*

Now, when someone makes such a claim, there are only three options: 1) he's wrong but doesn't know it, 2) he's wrong and does know it, or 3) he's right. In the first case he would be out of touch with reality (psychotic), in the second he would be a deceiver (sociopathic), and in the third he would be telling the truth (divine). Lewis writes:

*"I am here trying to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. 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 a 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 call Him 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 moral teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."*

## **What's so unique about Jesus?**

Buddha, Mohammed, and others saw themselves as normal human beings who became enlightened or received some special gift or message. But a number of things about Christ are unique among the pantheon of religious leaders the world has known. First, he was sinless. Second, he claimed to have the power to forgive sins. Third, he predicted his own resurrection and then proved it. And fourth, he claimed equality with God.

## **The Claims of Jesus**

As one reads the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, it becomes clear that the focal point was not simply his ethical teachings, but Christ's emphasis upon his own person. In fact, if he was supposed to be simply a good ethical teacher, his preoccupation with defining himself is almost embarrassing. No other religious leader (Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, Confucius) claimed to be God.

Listen to the words of Jesus and see if they sound like just a "good moral teacher":

✦ *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)*

✦ *"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58)*

✦ *"I and the Father are one." (John 10:30)*

✦ *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies... (John 11:25)*

✦ *Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9)*

✦ *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)*

## **3. ISN'T IT ENOUGH TO BE SINCERE? or DOESN'T GOD GRADE ON A CURVE?**

This question comes from the Peanuts comic strip where Lucy wonders about truth, and Linus says, "I don't think it matters too much what you believe, as long as you're really sincere!" A great example of someone who couldn't have been more sincerely dedicated to his belief system was Malcolm X. But even near the end of his life he was making radical changes in the content of some of his beliefs.

Another person who is universally regarded for his sincerity was Ghandi. Fifteen years before death he stated, "I must tell you in all humility that Hinduism, as I know it, entirely satisfies my soul, fills my whole being. I find a solace in the Bhagavad and Upanishads that I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount." However, just before death he remarked: "My days are numbered. I am not likely to live very long, perhaps a year or a little more. For the first time in fifty years I find myself in the slough of despond. All about me is darkness; I am praying for light."

Still, most people think of themselves as able to pass God's moral test with at least a B. There's always the Hitlers and Stalins and Idi Amins to lower the curve. But you can't bluff God. Think about the fact that people like Mother Teresa

and Billy Graham, supposedly great examples of human righteousness, claim to be sinners desperately needing . Where does that leave you and me?

*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags..." (Isaiah 64:6 )*

Most people miss a crucial distinction between Christianity and ordinary human religions. Religion is spelled D-O. It is the idea that the things I do will be able to win me a standing before God. On the other hand, Christianity is spelled D-O-N-E. It is the revolutionary idea that God came and did something for us that gives us a standing before Him that we could not have earned ourselves. Christianity teaches about an "alien" goodness - the righteousness of Christ which is bestowed as a gift upon anyone who asks for it .

*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

*(2 Corinthians 5:21)*

#### **4. HOW CAN GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL? or WHY CAN'T GOD JUST FORGIVE EVERYONE?**

Part of the reason why people ask this question is that we don't understand God's holiness. We are a society used to criticizing our leaders for their lack of ethics or morality; we have a low view of authority figures, and we tend to project that low view onto God. On top of that, we have a high view of our own morality and ethics - we don't think we're all that bad, especially when we compare ourselves with other people. But when we have to compare ourselves to God's perfect standards of righteousness, then the real question, as Josh McDowell states it, is: "How can he allow sinners into his presence?" R.C. Sproul reiterates: "The issue is not why is there only one way, but why is there any way at all." Cliffe Knechtle, in his book Give Me An Answer, addresses this question:

"God is not merely a doddering old grandfather with a white beard who sits on a throne in the sky and smiles as he lets everyone pass by. He's not hanging around saying, "Well Hitler, you murdered a few folks at Dachau, Buchenwald and Auschwitz, but I understand you're simply a product of your environment. I'm all-forgiving; enter heaven." That's not loving - that's being amoral. Instead of asking "How could a caring God allow hell to exist?", the question ought to be, "How could a caring God *not* allow a hell to exist?"

#### **5. WHAT ABOUT THE INNOCENT NATIVES IN AFRICA?**

This question often comes up. The answer, as R.C. Sproul puts it, is that all innocent people anywhere who have not heard the gospel will go straight to heaven. The only problem is that according to the Bible, there is no such thing as an innocent person. Romans 3 says that no one is innocent, because those exposed to God's law always break it, and those who haven't directly heard God's law have an internal law for themselves that they always break. Every society knows that it has an ideal code of behavior, and no society thinks that they keep that code perfectly.

In Romans 3:9-12, Paul spells this out:

*"What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."*

Some say that God will somehow bring His truth to those who have never heard, and if He wishes to do that in some supernatural way, He certainly can. But for us, we only have His revealed will in the Bible, which says that 1) there is no concrete hope extended to those without Christ, 2) people with no direct revelation disobey their own standards, 3) they will be judged by their own standards, and 4) God has asked us as Christians to go to the ends of the earth with His message of love and forgiveness through Christ.

**"The issue is not why is there only one way, but why is there any way at all."**

R.C. Sproul

#### **CONCLUSION**

Christians are not better than other people, nor are they smarter, more attractive or more inherently spiritual. As someone said, "We're simply beggars telling other beggars where to find bread."

During a prison ministry weekend that several of the men in our church attended, an incident took place that illustrates how many people think. After talking about spiritual things with a counselor, an inmate seemed unresponsive. The counselor simply wrote down the phrase "rejected Christ today" on the booklet they were discussing. The inmate exclaimed "Don't put that! I didn't reject Christ." The counselor carefully explained that there was no middle ground. Not to accept means to reject. The man later gave his life to Christ.

There will be a Final Exam of Life, it will be pass-fail, and it will only have two questions: 1. Did you live a perfectly righteous life? (To which we must all answer "no".) and 2. What did you do with my Son?

*"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*

Acts 4:12

#### **FOR FURTHER READING:**

*Give Me An Answer*, Cliffe Knechtle  
*More Than A Carpenter*, Josh McDowell  
*Set Forth Your Case*, Clark Pinnock  
*Reason to Believe*, R.C. Sproul