

The Particularity of Christianity and the Problem of Miracles

“How could there be only one true faith?” asked Blair, a twenty year old woman living in Manhattan. “It’s arrogant to say your religion is superior and to try to convert everyone else to it. Surely all of the religions are equally good and valid meeting the needs of their particular followers.”¹

We can thank Blair for telling us what Postmoderns think about Christianity and telling us why this is a problem for them. This of course is part of their making ‘tolerance’ one of their virtues as well as their being intolerant of Christianity because of the particularity of Christ. In session IX of *“Developing a Christian Mind,”* we will ask ourselves: 1) ‘What is Christian particularity and where did it come from?’; 2) Just what did Jesus mean when he said, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* (John 14:6)?; 3) Does it make any difference that he said, *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day.”* (John 6:44)?; and 4) What do Jesus’ statements tell us about the uniqueness of Jesus and therefore about the uniqueness of Christianity?

In addressing this very thing in his day, the Apostle Paul wrote: *“While Jews clamor for miraculous demonstrations and Greeks go in for philosophical wisdom, we go right on proclaiming Christ, the Crucified. Jews treat this like an anti-miracle—Greeks pass it off as absurd. But to us who are personally called by God himself—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God’s ultimate miracle and wisdom wrapped up in one. Human wisdom is so tiny, so impotent, next to the seeming absurdity of God. Human strength can’t begin to compete with God’s ‘weakness’.”* (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, I Corinthians 1:22-25) We might ask ourselves, ‘Just what did he mean?’

Oh yes, and Paul mentions that Jesus himself is the *“ultimate miracle”* and the clue to understanding not only miracles, but the answer to Blair’s problem with Christianity (above).

‘What is Christian particularity and where did it come from?’

While different religions define ‘salvation’ differently, Christianity views salvation as “a possibility only on account of Jesus Christ.”² Reformed Theologian, Alister McGrath writes:

“The early Christians had no hesitation in using the term ‘savior’ (Greek: soter) to refer to Jesus Christ, despite the fact that this term was already widely used within the complex and diverse religious context in which the gospel first emerged. For the New Testament

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, (New York: Dutton, 2008) 3.

² Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 223.

writers, Jesus was the only savior of humanity... This does not, however, mean that the first Christians saw Jesus as soter offers the same soteria as others who bore this title before him. In classical Greek religion, Poseidon and Dioskouroi were all acclaimed as soters, yet the 'salvation' in question seems to have been conceived in terms of temporal deliverance from a present threat, rather than the notion of eternal salvation."

"The New Testament thus affirms the particularity of the redemptive act of God in Jesus Christ. The early Christian tradition, basing itself upon the New Testament reaffirmed this particularity. While allowing that God's revelation went far beyond Jesus Christ (in God made himself known to various extents through such means as the natural order of creation, and human conscience and civilization), the general knowledge of God was not understood to entail universal salvation... Calvin would have had no problem in allowing, for example, both Jews and Muslims to have access to a knowledge of God as creator; the particular and distinctively Christian understanding of God relates to knowing him as redeemer, rather than as creator alone... Within the Reformed tradition, the general position of Calvin has been maintained, despite the vigorous challenge of Karl Barth who insisted that no knowledge of God was available or possible outside of Christ."

"The strong tradition of natural theology within the Reformed tradition points to a belief, grounded in Scripture that God has not left himself without witnesses in the world, whether in nature itself, classical philosophy, or other religions. For example Romans 1:18-23 clearly implies that divine revelation took place in human history, culture, and experience prior to the coming of Jesus Christ, and indicates that this may be regarded as preparation for the gospel (*praeparatio evangelica*) itself."³

Granted, each religion has its own understanding of salvation, but their concept of salvation is different from that of Christianity. The Christian understanding of salvation is grounded specifically and uniquely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Although the very idea of the death of Jesus being a substitute for the sin of a world full of postmoderns, it is essential to understanding why Christians claim that Christianity is essentially different from all other religions. Theologian and church historian David F. Wells explains:

"Meaning comes from God alone. In the person of Christ, the age to come, which alone will endure for all eternity, has arrived. It arrived in his person and was made redemptively through his work on the cross."⁴

That being the case, McGrath reminds us:

³ McGrath, 223-224. McGrath point out that "In Christian understanding, factual or cognitive knowledge of God is not regarded as saving as well. As Soren Kierkegaard pointed out in his *Unscientific Postscript*, it is perfectly possible to know about the Christian understanding of God without being a Christian. Knowledge is one thing, salvation is another." (225)

⁴ David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans) 203.

*"It is perfectly legitimate for the Christian to wish to share his or her experience and hopes concerning salvation with others; to do so is not to belittle others, but to wish to share the specifically Christian experience of salvation. In the free market of ideas, the attractiveness and relevance of the Christian understanding of salvation will determine whether others wish to embrace this understanding of salvation, and by doing so become Christians."*⁵

The Uniqueness of Jesus

Christians, Muslims, and Jews disagree over the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth. Was he, as he claimed, the Son of God? (Jews and Muslims say 'no'.) Did he fulfill the promises in the Old Testament about Messiah? (The Jews say 'no'.) Did he really die on the cross? (the Koran says 'no,' that he was taken to heaven instead). Or was he, just a good man and moral teacher? The Oxford Don and later Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English literature at Cambridge, C. S. Lewis answered the question in this unforgettable way:

*"I am trying here to prevent anyone 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 good 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 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 moral teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."*⁶

It was Jesus himself who said, ***"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me."*** (John 14:6) Eugene Peterson reminds us that this is the sixth of the seven great "I AM" sayings of Jesus in John's Gospel. Yet even this well known saying of Jesus garners little serious attention in our day. "To follow Jesus implies that we enter into a way of life that is given character and shape by the one who calls us."⁷ After all, it was Jesus who developed this theme from Psalm 1 into the two ways that he speaks of in the Sermon on the Mount in which he contrasts the easy and well traveled road to death with the more demanding 'road less traveled' to life (Matthew 7:13-14). While Jesus speaking of himself is indeed a way of arriving at our *ultimate destination*, it is also a serious call to follow him in a life of discipleship. As Peterson says:

"The way in which Jesus is the Way is not a matter of style or expedience. Nor is it a generality, a vague pointing in an upward direction. Prayerfully and scripturally attentive, Jesus deliberately chose the way he would live. If we choose to follow him, we

⁵ McGrath, 236-237.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1952) 52.

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus is the Way* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, Publishers, 2007) 22.

must be just as prayerful, scripturally attentive and deliberate. The other ways are no ways."⁸

*"There is also this: Jesus is our way to God, but at the same time Jesus is God's way to us...The way we come to Jesus is the same way God comes to us. God comes to us in Jesus; we come to God in Jesus. It is the same way, the Jesus way. God comes to us in Jesus speaking the words of salvation, healing our infirmities, promising the Holy Spirit, teaching us how to live in the kingdom of God. It is in and through this same Jesus that we pray to and believe, hear and obey, love and praise God...Jesus is our way of salvation. We follow his way. The way Jesus does it is the way we do it. Jesus is the way we come to God. Period. End of discussion."*⁹

The Grand Miracle

There are those who would find Christianity more to their liking if they could just do away with the miraculous part of the Bible. Thomas Jefferson did exactly that. He cut out all of the miracles from the New Testament and pasted the rest back together as his Bible. He was indeed a product of the time in which he lived, a true child of the Enlightenment.¹⁰

Left only to our human reason, it is hard to fathom how the supernatural parts of the Bible, such as miracles could really be true. Even the Incarnation itself becomes suspect. C.S. Lewis wrote:

"The Christian story is the story of one grand miracle, the Christian assertion being that what is beyond all space and time, what is uncreated, eternal, came into nature, into human nature, descended into his own universe, and rose again, bringing up nature with Him. It is precisely one great miracle. If you take that away there is essentially nothing specifically Christian left. There may be many admirable things Christianity shares with all other systems of the world, but there would be nothing specifically Christian. Conversely once you have accepted that, then you will see that all other well-established Christian miracles—are part of it.. that they all either prepare for, or exhibit, or result from the Incarnation."

Lewis goes on to argue that something can be true and a part of history even if it happens only once, rather than saying something is only true if it happens over and over again and can be proven by statistical probability.

"It is by its very nature to have happened only once. But then it is of the very nature of the history of this world to have happened only once; and if the Incarnation happened at all, it is the central chapter of that history. It is improbable in the same way in which the

⁸ Peterson, 28.

⁹ Peterson, 37.

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *The Thomas Jefferson Bible: The Life And Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. The Jefferson Bible begins with an account of Jesus' birth without references to angels, genealogy, or prophecy. Miracles, references to the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, and Jesus' resurrection are also absent from the Jefferson Bible.^[2] The work ends with the words: "Now, in the place where he was crucified, there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulcher, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus. And rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed." These words correspond to the ending of John 19 in the Bible.

whole history of nature is improbable, because it is only there once. So one must apply to it a quite different standard.”

“I think we are rather in this position. Supposing you had before you a manuscript of some great work, either a symphony or a novel. Then there comes to you a person saying, ‘Here is a new bit of the manuscript that I found; it is the central chapter of that novel.’ The text is incomplete without it. I have got the missing passage which is really the center of the whole work.’ The only thing you could do would be to put this new piece of the manuscript in that central position., and then see how it reacted on the whole of the rest of the work. If it constantly brought out new meanings from the whole of the rest of the work, if it made you notice things in the rest of the work which you had not noticed before, then I think you would decide it was authentic. On the other hand if it failed to do that, then, however attractive it was in itself, you would reject it.”

“Now, what is the missing chapter in this case, the chapter which Christians are offering? The story of the Incarnation is the story of decent and resurrection...everyone will see at once how it is imitated and echoed by the principles of the natural world...the descent of the seed into the soil and the rising again in the plants...”¹¹

“One other thing. We, with our modern democratic and arithmetical presuppositions would have liked and expected all men to start equal in their search for God. One has the picture of great centripetal roads coming from all directions, with well-disposed people, all meaning the same thing, and getting closer and closer together. How shockingly opposite to that is the Christian story! One people picked out of the whole earth; that people purged and proved again and again. Some are lost in the desert before they reach Palestine; some stay in Babylon; some become indifferent. The whole thing narrows and narrows, until at last it comes down to a little point, small as the point of a spear—a Jewish girl at her prayers. That is what the whole human nature has narrowed down to before the Incarnation takes place. Very unlike what we expected, but, of course, not in the least unlike what seems in general shown in nature, to be God’s way of working. The universe is quite a shockingly selective, undemocratic place out of apparently infinite space, a relatively tiny proportion occupied by matter of any kind...The people who are selected are, in a sense, unfairly selected for a supreme honor; but it is also a supreme burden. The people of Israel come to realize that it is their woes which are saving the world... In the Incarnation we get, of course, this idea of vicariousness of one person profiting by the earning of another person. In its highest form this is the very center of Christianity... When you think it out, nearly every good thing in nature comes from vicariousness... It will not in any way, allow me to be an exploiter, to act as a parasite on other people; yet it will not allow me any dream of living on my own. It will teach me to accept with glad humility the enormous sacrifices that others make on my behalf, as well as to make sacrifices for others.”

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, “The Grand Miracle” in *God in the Dock* edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishers, 1970) 80-81. This is also a chapter in Lewis’ 1947 (revised 1960) book, entitled *Miracles*.

"That is why I think this Grand Miracle is the missing chapter in this novel, the chapter on which the whole plot turns.; that is why I believe God has really dived into the bottom of creation, and come up with bringing the whole redeemed nature on his shoulder."¹²

¹² Lewis, 86-88.