

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

44 What Is the Christian View of Other Religions?

Scripture: Romans 1:18-32

Like a circus performer riding two horses at the same time, human beings live astride two worlds. The one is temporal and there is a consciousness of the other which is invisible and eternal. To change the simile, we have the awareness of being like an acrobat on a high wire which has been stretched between the steep banks of a mighty river. From our precarious perch thoughts arise of the land behind as opposed to the land ahead which beckons us. Possessed of such sensitivities, man is a curious mixture of body and soul which makes for happiness and sorrow. As body, man is an animal. As spirit, man is no longer a creature of time and space. Thus, by nature, man is religiously inclined.

Many are the forms man's religion has taken. Paul Hutchinson, in the introduction to **The World's Great Religions**, writes, "The names of his gods and goddesses will never be completely catalogued. The rituals through which he has sought protection or blessing run the gamut from the horrible to the sublime. The explanations of his rites may fill ten thousand volumes, and many of them disagree violently. The evidence brings infinite variations, but on one thing it agrees. Man is a religious being." Now, the purpose of our study this morning has to do with the realization that at some point we must state our attitude toward religious persuasions other than our own. Last Sunday evening a sermon was preached from the pulpit of Hope Church entitled **Latter Day Delusions**. Its substance related to the fact that there are many strong warnings in Scripture concerning the presence of those who would seek to corrupt the teaching of Scripture. It occurs to me that in the future it may be necessary to speak of the error which others have come to believe and propagate. How shall this be done? What will our attitude be? What place may we give to the elements of good and truth which reside in other faiths? It is all too easy to be governed by emotion and prejudice in these matters. We do not want to do that. We would have our answers given to us from Scripture. It is the Word of God which will help us to avoid two common extremes. One unfortunate tendency is to treat other religions with disdain and contempt. It is the feeling that what others have come to believe is entirely without value and there is nothing good to be found in

their teachings. Perhaps you have witnessed this approach in action. I know that I have and it offends me.

The other extreme is to accept other religious beliefs as being equal with the Christian faith. Here we have the feeling that one religion is as good as another. It really doesn't make any difference what you believe as long as you believe in something. The interesting thing is that the various religions of the world do not claim to be good for the same thing. They do claim to be exclusive and true. They are of the conviction that it makes a difference what you believe. If one religion is as good as another, the strong missionary aspect of the Christian faith is without a base. Why seek to evangelize as long as they have some religion and believe it sincerely? I find this extreme equally unacceptable because it is unscriptural in its outlook. Therefore, let us seek for some principles from God's Word which will help us to foster a Christian attitude toward other religions.

I. CHRISTIANS SHOULD RECOGNIZE THAT SOME PEOPLE WILL NOT CHOOSE CHRIST:

Why are there so many religions in the world? This is a question which is often asked. Diversity in religion is due to the ignorance and perversity of men. We have noted that people are religiously inclined. Those who lack the knowledge of the true religion have gone beyond to invent religions of their own. These religions differ because the outlook differed among those who originated them. We understand from the Bible that creation itself reveals the Creator. Man chose not to glorify the God revealed in nature and in his thanklessness became wayward in speculating about God. His senseless heart became darkened. He changed the glory of God into gods of his own imagination. The true God gave him up to his own lusts. (Romans 1:20-24) Religion is not a spiral upward from one god to many gods. It is a gravitation downward from the one true and living God to many false gods. Worldwide confusion is further brought about through the "father of lies." We read in II Corinthians 4:3-4, *"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the eyes of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."*

II. CHRISTIANS SHOULD RECOGNIZE THE CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS RIGHTS OF OTHERS:

There is a certain respect which is due every person when bowing before his god. We may hold that his view of God lacks truth. His method of worship may be

strange and unacceptable to us, but his is the right to have the conviction and to practice it. People are entitled to follow their own conscience, even though their ideas may be defective or mistaken. Nowhere, does the New Testament sanction the formulating of efforts to discriminate against any religious group. It is true in the Old Testament under the Theocracy where God directly ruled the people, there were certain regulations which discriminated against those who were not a part of it. (Exodus 19:8, 24:3, 7) It is also true that the government has justifiably intervened in cases of polygamy, human sacrifice, and blood transfusions for the protection of human life. For instance, as recent as fifty years ago the United States sent troops into New Mexico to prevent the further shedding of blood as human beings were being offered in sacrifice in religious exercises. I believe these instances I have mentioned are rare and that the general principle Christians should follow is to enlighten, to persuade and even to warn, but not to coerce or to discriminate against, to take away from anyone the right to worship whom he please or how he pleases.

What a sad day in the history of the church it has been whenever this principle has been forgotten. Doubtless, you have heard of the Crusades. This was a series of wars undertaken by European people in the name of Christ to recover the Holy Land from Islam between the 11 and 14th centuries. Imagine people being slaughtered under the banner of the cross. This was also true of the medieval Inquisition, of the period during and after the Protestant Reformation, and of the religious wars which have taken place across Europe and other parts of the world. Whenever the church has not recognized the religious rights of others, it has always brought reproach on the name of Christ. I might just say in concluding this point that while Christians should oppose discrimination against other religions, it or they will call for the same respect. Very often this respect has not been given. Many Christians know what it is to be treated unfairly because of their testimony.

III. CHRISTIANS SHOULD SHOW CHRIST'S LOVE TO THOSE OF OTHER RELIGIONS:

At the risk of someone thinking this is a rather obvious suggestion, let me hasten to say that it is the way in which this love is able to show itself that concerns me. Love is related to truthfulness and fairness. Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers about this. He said, *"Love is patient, love is kind, is not provoked, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth."* (I Corinthians 13:4-6) One way to exhibit fairness is to consider the best representation of another

faith, as well as its worst. Just as Christianity is often stereotyped by its worst representatives, so it is so easy for us to see another religion from its most undesirable side. This is not fair. It is not the honest thing to do. Also, it is important to correctly understand the teachings of another faith before comment is made about it. It is so easy to misrepresent others. It is so easy to distort, to change just a little bit, in order that they be placed in a poorer light. When we do this we may be saying more about ourselves than we are about others. The Christian should fairly represent the beliefs that others hold.

It is also true that Christians should recognize that all religions (perhaps almost all) have some truth in them and some contribution to make to the lives of people. This is not to say that a particular belief is entirely true, that it is to be followed, or that it is scriptural. It is only to recognize that there are elements of truth in other religions. We are able to believe this through the doctrine of common grace. We believe that man was created in the image of God and given this likeness has not been left totally without truth. A residue or portion of this truth often remains while the larger part of the religious expression is marked by error. I think we have an example of this kind of recognition in the Book of Acts, chapter 17, verses 23-29. Paul, in delivering his sermon on Mars Hill, quoted from one of the Greek philosophers, Aratur, when he said, "*As certain also of your own poets have said, **For we are also his offspring.***" Paul said in effect, "I agree with this. This is a true statement which has been made. Now I would like to go on and tell you in what way it is true." Paul did not declare all of the beliefs of the Greeks to be wrong or to be right, but recognizing an element of truth, he took hold of it as a means of presenting the full truth in Jesus Christ. We should present our Lord in a positive way. This may involve recognizing whatever good can be discerned in other religions. It has often been said that one should not attempt to sell his faith by condemning the faith of others. I don't know if a salesman originated that or not. But you know how we naturally become leery of the person who has more to say about his competitor's product than he does his own. I think a stronger witness for Christ will be shown by our not reacting negatively to what others believe. What is good should be seen.

Of course, Christians are not interested in attacking people. We should not feel that it is necessary to be argumentative with people. People who hold to other religions are our loved ones, our neighbors, our friends. Our concern is with the doctrine they have embraced, rather than with the people themselves as such.

But we do feel a concern that we believe God feels for them. Our evaluation of their beliefs should be fair, respectful, theologically discerning and manifest in a way that the love of Christ may be seen in us at all times.

IV. CHRISTIANS SHOULD DISCERN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRUTH AND ERROR:

At issue here is not the right of others to believe what they want to believe. Nor is it the matter of restricting the activities of others in their attempt to proclaim their faith. What is at issue here is the feeling which so many have, the feeling that one religion is as good as another, and that it makes little difference what you believe as long as you believe in something. The fact of the matter is that not all religions are the same. Almost any amount of study will quickly reveal that the-religions of the world vary to a large degree. The world's most influential religions claim to be the repositories of truth in addition to being final and exclusive. Followers could not countenance the suggestion that one religion is as good as another. Neither can Christians. Up to this point I have stressed the tolerance Christianity holds for other religions, tolerant in that they have the right to exist and spread their beliefs. But there is a difference between tolerance and indifference. Never are we to be indifferent towards the error which other religions hold. We cannot be indifferent to teaching which is false. Oh, my dear friends, I have no heart for what has to be said, but the Scripture is so clear. We are plainly to discern and expose error. Running through Scripture is a very strong warning. Let us examine the following passages: Ezekiel 3:17-19; Jeremiah 23:16-18; Matthew 7:15; Ephesians 5:6; I Timothy 4:1-2; Philippians 3:2; II Peter 2:1-3 and I John 4:1. Over and over again comes the warning to beware of false doctrines.

This is a good place to speak of the criteria which are particularly helpful in discerning true religion from false, as well as to stress the uniqueness of Christianity. Three tests can be applied.

1. What Is the Teaching of the Religion About the Bible?

In II Timothy We are informed that the Scriptures thoroughly equip the man of God. (3:17) The Christian teaching is that **all Scripture and only Scripture** provides the basis for faith and practice. Teaching is false which adds to or detracts from what the Bible says. This is a crucial test. (Revelation 22:18-19)

2. What Is the Teaching of the Religion About Jesus Christ?

The true Christian teacher will accept and proclaim Jesus as true God and true man. True Christianity centers in Christ. That which does not exalt Jesus or is not able to be related to Him as Lord is unchristian and that which negates Him is false. He is preeminent in creation, history, the church and is supreme in individual lives. Any cult, sect, or religion which does not clearly and boldly proclaim the Christ as Lord should be rejected. (Revelation 1:8)

3. What Is the Teaching of the Religion About Salvation?

The religions of the world assume man's ability to obtain and keep God's favor by proper conduct. They often give detailed instruction and guidance. The Christian Faith teaches that sin has so ruined mankind that this is impossible. Only what Christ has done to provide salvation as a free gift can it then be enjoyed.

IV. CHRISTIANS SHOULD SEEK TO BRING OTHERS TO THE FAITH:

There is a strong missionary aspect about Christianity. Because our's is a supreme and complete revelation of the grace of God. We are therefore under divine mandate to persuade those of other faiths to consider seriously the claims of Christ and reception of Him. When a Christian stops being a missionary he stops being the Christian His Lord calls him to be. People are to be won to Christ not by coercion, ridicule and scorn. Rather, we are to seek the redemption of others by a spirit of fairness, of love, and of truth. I believe this is the Christian attitude toward those of other religions.

Alan B. Christensen, Pastor, Hope Evangelical Free Church, Wilton, CT,
November 19, 1978