

# **Let the Nations be Glad: Week 6 Is Jesus the Only Way to God?**

## **I. Introduction**

### **A. Story of high school friend Brian and graduation:**

#### **Say something like this:**

It was yet another Friday night after a high school football game, and once again I was hanging out with friends in the parking lot of the neighborhood Taco Bell. After all, fans of both teams knew that the Taco Bell parking lot was where all the post-game action would take place. I was only a junior in high school, but I had already witnessed enough of these evenings to predict what would happen next. It wasn't long before one attention-starved kid from my school had picked a fight with his counterpart from the other school, precipitating a general brawl which scattered at the first sound of a distant police siren. It was on this particular evening that I fully realized how badly I wanted to graduate from high school. It was a fuller, more interesting, more abundant life that I craved, and I looked forward to that distant time when I would begin to pursue that life at college.

A classmate of mine named Brian had more serious concerns than I did. He had the grave misfortune of being born without kidneys. Three times a week, Brian would check out of school at lunch to make a trip to a downtown hospital, where he would receive dialysis treatment. Brian never missed an appointment, for he simply couldn't afford to allow the poisonous wastes to build up in his blood. Brian's very survival directly depended upon his faithfulness in routinely visiting the hospital. By implication, so did his graduation from high school, though I doubt this connection really crossed the mind of those very close to him.

### **B. The Christian Claim of Exclusivity:**

#### **Say something like this:**

Now it is very unlikely that too many people unduly fretted about the riddle of Brian's graduation being dependent upon regular visits to a certain place. Those who knew him didn't see it as a riddle at all and probably didn't go out of the way to share this riddle with others. On the other hand, many secular people have heard a manifold rumor that at first glance seems to link two unrelated things.

We're talking about the Christian claim to exclusivity that says that only those who know Jesus will be saved, that Christianity is objectively right and other religions wrong in their conception of truth and that people will not reach God through other religions or by being good people, but only through faith in Jesus.

Christians are quick to quote the words of Jesus in John 14:6:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

### **C. The Secular Person's Objections:**

#### **Say something like this:**

Do we understand how extravagant the Christian claim seems to secular people, that only people who know Jesus will spend eternity with God? Far from believing it themselves, they struggle to even understand how anyone else could. Do Christians really view the marketplace of religions in this pluralistic world as some kind of cosmic lottery? Do they imagine a giant spinning wheel in the sky that will eventually come to rest

on the name Jesus? And finally, on what grounds do Christians base their claim that those in possession of the winning ticket will be rewarded with everlasting life, while those not clever enough to calculate the final outcome will be sentenced to an everlasting torment? Surely this picture offends our egalitarian sensibilities. Surely it should.

**Ask:**

Have any of you encountered these kinds of sentiments when you talk to people about this? What have you said? What is the best way to approach this question?

**D. The Objective Reality of Brian's Illness**

**Say something like this:**

I think the best way to think about this is to go back to the analogy with which I started the lesson.

Brian was forced to make regular visits to the hospital because of one crucial objective fact; he was living without kidneys and could not physically survive by relying on the strength of his own body alone. Eventually, the poisons in his blood would overwhelm and kill him. Given Brian's grave condition, he would not benefit from an exercise therapist who told him that he was just a little out of shape and would get better again if he followed a strict exercise regimen. He should not be comforted by a well-meaning philosopher whose counsel is to embrace his terrible suffering and train himself even to desire it. Most certainly, the advice of a friend who told him he really wasn't sick would not be helpful. Finally, a parent who told Brian that it didn't matter whether he went to the doctor or the exercise therapist would be utterly irresponsible.

**Ask:**

Do we see a parallel between this analogy and the Christian faith?

**E. In the same way, Christians believe that all men have a grave problem in that they are separated from God because of their sin. They, like Brian are objectively sick.**

People are not punished merely for being mistaken and for failing to recognize Jesus as God's Son. They are punished for their sinful ways and their rebellion against God.

This is perhaps no more clearly illustrated than in Romans 3:10-20

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. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. **Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin.**”

**Say something like this:**

I don't mean this to be a petty Ah Ha the secular argument is wrong. My team is now ahead. Anyone who hears it this way won't understand a word I'm saying. Romans 3:20 is not just the secular person's ruin, it's our own! No one, none of us will be declared righteous in God's sight by obeying the law.

Again, I cannot emphasize more strongly that the Christian understands all people to be objectively sick. This illness is just as real and just as terminal as is cancer or AIDS, but it is even more terrifying because it is spiritual and has eternal consequences. Understandably, this is not a popular message in our age of building self-esteem. After all, we don't want to let the burden of guilt interfere with our own positive self-image.

## **F. A starting point which will be assumed in this lesson is that unrighteous men are deserving of eternal punishment and separation from God.**

### **Say something like this:**

Once we understand the holy character of God and the wickedness of men, we gain a new perspective. No longer is heaven, or eternity with God, a right that we can claim. It is not something we inherently deserve on the basis of what we have done. On the contrary, we deserve punishment. In the book of John, Jesus affirms this by saying that he did not come to the world to condemn the world but to save the world. "The world stands condemned already."

There are many questions of fairness and this teaching calls forth deep emotive reactions from some of us. That was covered last week (Have copies available). For this lesson, this is assumed. Sinful men deserve eternal punishment.

## **II. So how are people saved?**

Short answer: Acts 4:12

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved:

**Note: Draw out the universal implications for under heaven and among men**

### **A. The inadequacy of other religions to forgive sin**

#### **Say something like this:**

Jesus is recorded in the Gospels as saying, "However you treat the least of these, so also you treat me". In other words, each time we defile our own bodies or hurt another human being created in the image of God, it is as if we treat God in this way. David, an Old Testament king, understood this crucial fact. On one occasion he committed adultery with a woman named Bathsheba and then compounded his sin by conspiring to murder her husband Uriah. However much he had exploited and ravaged these subjects entrusted to His care— and the pain he caused was great— David realizes in his lament recorded in Psalm 51, that ultimately his sin was against God. "Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge."

#### **Ask:**

If you committed a sin against Andy, could I say, "I forgive you for that?"

#### **Say something like this:**

Far from forgiving others their sins, a mere man must die for his own, and no other religious leader claimed to be anything more than a man. If it is true that man is objectively guilty before God, then there can be no reconciliation apart from God, and again this reconciliation is found uniquely in Christ.

Christians believe that Jesus is the only way to God not only because definitionally they believe Him to be God but also because of what He uniquely did in forgiving sin. The key point to recognize in this

discussion is that because the diagnoses of different religions vary so widely, it doesn't make sense to talk about all religions providing the same solution. Discussion of a solution implies an agreement as to the nature of the problem. As discussed earlier, the objective, absolute diagnosis of Christianity is that the human heart is desperately sick, in rebellion against God.

If the Christian view that man is utterly hopeless before God is true, then it follows that if an answer is to be found, it will be found uniquely in Christianity. If man does have a debt before God that only God can repay, then how does Hinduism or Islam or Buddhism purport to address this problem? How can a religion or a philosophy be the answer to a question it doesn't even recognize or acknowledge? "It's not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick," Jesus is recorded as saying in the Gospels. Only those who recognize their illness will seek to find a cure for it.

## **B. The Sufficiency of Christ for the Forgiveness of Sins**

Being God, Christ could forgive sins against God. He did this by paying the penalty for these sins through His death on the cross. Just as sin and death came into the world through one man Adam, life comes into the world through one man: Christ. There is bountiful Scriptural evidence for this:

For if, by the trespasses of one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through one man, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:17)

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:21)

There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all (1 Timothy 2:5)

Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth. (Revelation 5:9-10)

**Note: Mention that earlier in Revelation 5, no one else was found worthy**

**Ask:**

On what unique basis could Christ forgive sins?

**Answer:** His identity as God, His living a perfect life, and His subsequent death on the cross

## **III. Can people be saved through Christ without realizing it is Christ who saves them?**

C.S. Lewis quote:

We know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him. But in the meantime, if you are worried about the people outside, the most unreasonable thing you can do is remain outside yourself.

**Ask:**

This is a nice thought and all. What do we think? Does a person need to know Christ in order to be saved by Him? Does faith need to be conscious? Does it need to have cognitive content centered on Christ?

### **A. The Inclusivist View Represented by Clark Pinnock:**

Friedrich Schleiermacher, father of modern liberal theology, said he believed that faith was crucial, but what he meant by faith was not what Christians had traditionally understood the Bible to mean. Schleiermacher de-cognitized faith, that is he took the statements about what it's saying and he kept the experience of believing something. defining it as "nothing but the incipient experience of the satisfaction of our spiritual need by Christ." Thus faith in Schleiermacher, Ritschl and the later liberal tradition was understood to be more a matter of psychology and consciousness, of experiencing harmony and inner satisfaction, even going on to de-couple this faith from Christ, to speak of faith as just some religious stuff that was in us by nature.

### **Clark Pinnock's faith principle**

"According to the Bible, there . . . exists among the nations religious faith . . . neither Jewish nor Christian, which is nonetheless noble, uplifting, and sound," (92).

"Faith is what pleases God. The fact that different kinds of believers are accepted by God proves that the issue for God is not the content of theology but the reality of faith," (105).

"What God really cares about is faith and not theology, trust and not orthodoxy," (112).

"The issue God cares about is the direction of the heart, not the content of theology,"

#### **Ask:**

What do we make of the kinds of arguments made here? We can understand his wishfulness, but is it true that this is what faith is?

Appreciate what's good. Experience is important. We don't want dry, desecated theology

Most importantly, is this view of faith Biblical?

### **B. The Unknown God (Acts 17:23, 30)**

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. (Acts 17:23)

#### **Ask:**

Was it possible that those in Athens were worshipping the true God unknowingly? Could this happen today?

In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all men to repent. (Acts 17:30)

**Christ must be the object of conscious saving faith. Paul doesn't say they're OK worshipping unknown God. He preaches Christ and calls for repentance**

### **C. Is there a present-day analog to those who had faith in the Old Testament?**

#### **Say something like this:**

All right then, what about this other idea, that there could be some kind of saving belief apart from knowing the particulars of Christ? I mean, after all, aren't there examples of this in the Bible? What about the Jews who lived before Jesus was born?

Three observations

1. we are in no position to say how little they knew,  
given the fact that in John 8, Jesus referred to Abraham rejoicing at  
the thought of seeing his day,  
given the fact that Moses and Elijah were at the Transfiguration

- given the fact that Heb. 11 refers to Moses as choosing to suffer disgrace for the sake of Christ  
 given all the prophecies in the OT
2. they were in the stream of God's special revelation of God making Himself known extraordinarily
  3. there has, according to Acts 17, Romans 16, Ephesians 3, been a shift in the ages with the coming of Christ, which has had cosmic significance. Therefore the situations of the OT saints should not thought to be exactly replicated today.

#### **D. What about Cornelius?**

##### **Say something like this:**

Others, then bring up the example of the god-fearing Gentiles, and particularly of Cornelius, as we find him in Acts 10 & 11. He is described there in Acts 10:2 as follows "He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly." Then in v34-35 Peter says

"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

Surely Cornelius then is an example of someone who is simply trusting God according to whatever he knows of God, and God is finding that sufficient.

But it seems, if you look at 11:14 that the angel who had appeared to Cornelius had told him that he should send for Peter who will

"bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved."

Talk of implications! That would seem to clearly imply that before receiving that message they were NOT saved. Indeed, if anything, this story seems to show what great lengths God will go to to include people in His great plan. (Describe miraculous visions etc.) For whatever reason, God seems clearly have committed Himself to use US to bear the message, and it is through that message, that His Spirit will bring people to Himself. Cornelius was saved not by disposition of faith but by a human preaching the Gospel to Him.

#### **E. Romans 10**

If you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trust in Him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." **How, then** can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news."

Reinforce logic:

Belief precondition for faith

Hearing precondition for believing

Someone telling them is precondition for hearing (rules out people meeting Christ apart from messenger).

#### **F. Paul's Assumption that the Gentiles were Lost**

One example:

Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. (Eph 2:12)

Paul's basic assumption is that those who are apart from Christ have **no hope** at all.

## **G. The Basic Argument of the Inclusivists**

### **Say something like this:**

Pinnock's faith is reduced to its lowest common denominator in human experience because it is reasoned, and here's really his reasoning. If faith is essential for salvation, which he grants, and if everyone must be able to be saved in order for God's gracious and universally loving character to be sustained, well then, this saving faith must be something which is accessible to all regardless of circumstances. Pinnock says as much: "Faith is always a possibility because of the prevenient grace of God,"

### **Ask:**

Does our information about God come through revelation or through what seems reasonable to us?

### **Ask:**

Is it our job to make God more loving or merciful than He has revealed? Does he need to conform to our ideas of what he should be like?

## **IV. The Charge of Narrowness**

### **A. The Charge**

#### **Ask:**

What about the person who has never heard? I think Scripture demonstrates that he will be punished for his sins because he has not trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Is this incredibly narrow and unfair?

#### **Say something like this:**

Carey: God formerly suffered all nations to walk in their own ways, but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.

Brahman: Indeed, I think God should repent for not sending us the gospel sooner.

Carey's answer? That God waited for idolatry to become so deeply rooted, he will be all the more glorified when His Gospel triumphs in that place.

We can understand this objection of narrowness. Illustration of man crossing half way around the world on a perilous journey to a deserted island and rescuing only one of two inhabitants. Though he's under no obligation to rescue either, why rescue only one. We don't know?

Please don't misunderstand this teaching for a narrowness of Spirit. But we not here to consider in the abstract what God MIGHT have done; that is, what is within the scope of His power and His ability. In that sense, we're not asking what God CAN do; we're asking what He HAS done. We're not inquiring after His ability and trying to limit His sovereign mercy; we're simply asking after what He has said He will do, and are trying to prevent distorting this according to what we desire to be the case.

Now God is a sovereign God, and if I get to Heaven and am surprised to find agnostic journalists and earnest Muslims there, I, for one, am certainly not going to appeal to the manager and say that there must have been some mistake!

In the end, we must trust in God and His purposes which we can be sure are just. We do not have a right to question God's fairness.

“Though Justice be thy plea, consider this, That in the course of justice none of us  
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy. . . .” (Shakespeare: Shylock to Portia in Merchant of Venice)

## **B. The Answer**

### **Say something like this:**

Again, in the midst of our questions, we must rest upon the character of God revealed fully in Christ is one of almost incomprehensible, unimaginable, self-giving love. The more you understand the God according to Scripture, and I think the more you understand yourself, the more you see this. This enables me, this causes me to trust Him—

### **Christianity is incredibly inclusive:**

#### **Say something like this: (This can definitely be skipped if we're running out of time)**

With Christ's coming came a movement that was and remains today passionately and impulsively inclusive. Biblical Christianity has always been actively initiatory in its desire to reach people with a life saving message. It begins with the Incarnation, as the Creator God humbles Himself and takes upon Himself human flesh with all its frailties (The Bible records Jesus as being weary from time to time and in need of periodic times of solitary refreshment). As God incarnate, Jesus came not as a king, outwardly adorned in richness and splendor, but as a servant who washed His disciples' feet. Not only did God take on human likeness, not only did He come as a servant, but He then proceeded to suffer the ultimate humiliation, being sentenced to an execution alongside common criminals. We see Him hours before His crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane, agonizing over the hell He would soon experience on the cross, yet even this He endured for the sake of fallen man. At the cross, we see most clearly God's consistent and unending love for His creatures, and His radical initiative in reclaiming them. At the cross, we see God's long arm reaching down to reclaim those who could not possibly reach up to Him.

The spirit of inclusion that Christ introduced was not lost after He left the earthly theater. After His triumphant resurrection, the book of Acts records that Jesus' final command to His disciples before He ascended into heaven was to go out into all nations and make disciples. It seems that this was exactly what the early Christians did, at great risk to their own well being and personal comfort. Their general motivation was very simply formulated. "We have seen God incarnate," they testified. "He lived with us, walked with us, and had His being among us. With our own eyes we saw His terrible death and His incredible resurrection. In His death, He provided forgiveness for your sins and mine, and He has been raised that we might also be raised with Him." Most of the apostles died far away from their homeland, though there was no other logical reason for them to leave Palestine. All cheerfully endured beatings, torture, and all but John eventually suffered martyr's deaths in order to proclaim the good news to the widest possible audience. The apostle Paul undertook four perilous missionary journeys through Turkey, Greece, and all the way to Rome in which he was shipwrecked, beaten, tortured, and eventually executed. Like Jesus, the early Christians actively sought to include others at great cost to themselves.

So we see that centuries before this postmodern age of multiculturalism, Christianity as a movement was already by nature inclusive. It has been more than merely a passive inclusiveness in the way a homeless shelter might be. A homeless shelter is open to all who would on their own initiative recognize their need and seek shelter. Christianity goes further, displaying an active, passionate, initiatory inclusiveness. The Bible makes clear that it is God's desire to reach all nations with His message of salvation. It is incumbent upon His followers to take part in the mission. The book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, contains many visions of people from every tribe, nation, people, and language worshiping God together. The multicultural ideal of unity through diversity is here realized, in a way that it cannot be realized apart from God. The Christian vision for unity through diversity revolves not around the vague ideal of unity itself but around one glorious particular, namely the one true Creator God of the universe. It is a picture of people

from all tribes and nationalities, raising their voices in unison, singing praises in their own languages, in their own dialects, in their own particular styles, to the same God who has suffered and died for all of them.

It is clear that Christianity does not discriminate on the basis of intelligence, strength, or one's ability to obey a list of moral precepts or perform a certain ceremony. Yet, it is exclusive in the sense that it does discriminate between those who are repulsed by their own depravity and trust in Christ alone for their forgiveness, and those who don't. In this sense, it is discriminatory in the same way any offer of a free gift is. Some will accept the gift gladly, while others will refuse it. While coming to grips with the possibility that we all might be guilty before God who is real can be a major stumbling block for many people, those who overcome this hurdle will find a Savior waiting with open arms. It matters not what someone has done, where they've been, how far they have strayed. Christ's free offer of forgiveness is open to all who would repent and believe.

Therefore, Christianity is much more inclusive than any works-based religion in which men and women must attempt to fulfill a set of responsibilities in order to justify themselves before God. Under any man-centered paradigm, the essential outcome is that the good reach God and the bad don't. Christ's unconditional call is to all men, none of whom are good.

**Ask:**

If this is the only good news, does this mean that it isn't good news?

**Say something like this? (Don't skip this)**

To go back to our original analogy, there was not always such thing as dialysis. People in the past would have died immediately were they born without kidneys. While Brian might despair at his current condition, I don't think he complains that there exists only one cure for it. I'm sure he doesn't insist that other people who share in his condition can make themselves well by whipping themselves into shape at the local exercise club. While he may be saddened that not everyone has access to dialysis, He doesn't refuse to go because of this. Rather, he clings to that one cure as his only source of hope and is greatly thankful that it exists at all. A man who encounters a great chasm between his current location and his desired location will not complain if there is only one bridge, especially if that bridge was constructed at great cost. Christians believe that God has unilaterally reached down to a rebellious people and built this bridge of reconciliation at great cost to Himself.

One may fairly ask if the Creator of the universe would go as far as to take on flesh and humble Himself to the point of death on a cross if there were any other way to satisfy His own demand for justice. To assert that there is any other way to God is essentially to say that His great act of humility, while nice, was essentially unnecessary. It is not our place to tell God how he must save us. It bespeaks a great arrogance and a presumption on the part of human beings to assume that we are owed or in any way deserve a way to God.

## **V. The Relationship to Missions**

**Ask:**

What does our understanding that Jesus is the only way to salvation imply as far as the urgency with which we view missions

**Answer:**

An abandonment of the universal necessity of hearing the gospel for salvation does cut a nerve for missionary motivation

**Ask:**

What should be our primary motivation for missions? Is it a concern for the lost?

**Answer:**

A desire to see God glorified r.e. last week.