

Good News for All

(Digest of a sermon given at Exeter Chapel by Philip H. Curtis, October 12, 2003)

Introduction

An editorial by a local Jewish rabbi recently appeared in the *Providence Journal*: “Trying to Climb the Mountain of Faith.” The article promotes the cause of religious diversity, what the author calls “tolerant religious pluralism.” Using the figure of a mountain, he pictures people of different faiths all climbing toward the peak, which represents “truth.” None of us is ever able to reach the top, says the rabbi, but we are all fellow-climbers, following our diverse religious traditions and reaching toward the same goal.

The rabbi is expressing in metaphor a dominant viewpoint of our time: all religions are equally valid. None has an exclusive corner on the truth. In the face of such thinking, evangelical Christians are increasingly considered to be narrow-minded and intolerant. Why? Because we make (or rather, Jesus and his apostles make) exclusive-sounding truth claims. For example, in John 14:6 Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (English Standard Version throughout). Similarly, speaking of Jesus Christ, the apostle Peter claims: “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” (Acts 4:12). And the apostle Paul asserts: “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

It may be that these exclusive-sounding truth claims have been a factor in holding you back from becoming a Christian. Is Christianity intolerant? Is the gospel exclusive? Let’s seek an answer to these questions by focusing our attention on a passage in the New Testament, 1 Timothy 2:1-7.

These verses form part of a letter penned by the first century Christian missionary, Paul, to his younger coworker, Timothy, who was serving the church at Ephesus (a city on the west coast of modern-day Turkey). In this section of his letter, Paul is giving some instructions on public worship, especially the role of prayer. In addressing this subject, he makes some statements that will help us answer the question: Is the gospel exclusive? In approaching this main question, let’s consider several related questions that are suggested by our text.

For whom should Christians pray?

Paul writes: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made *for all people*, for kings and all who are in high positions...” (vv. 1-2a). Paul urges that all kinds of prayer be made for all kinds of people, including kings and others in positions of authority. Christian prayer is to be inclusive. Kings and other officials were a class of people that early Christians might have been reluctant to pray for, at least sympathetically. First century Christians were often persecuted for their faith by both Jewish and Roman officials. Nero, who was Roman emperor at the time of Paul’s letter, became notorious for his intolerant treatment of Christians. Yet, Paul urges that prayer, including “thanksgivings,” be made for all these governing authorities.

Now granted, the stated goal of such prayer is “that we [Christians] may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (v. 2b). But a peaceful society benefits not only Christians but all citizens as well. And in other passages (e.g., Romans 13) Paul urges Christians to respect and obey all governing authorities. Such respect is the exact opposite of an attitude of intolerance.

Applying this teaching on prayer to our own day, Christians should pray for George Bush, Tony Blair, Saddam Hussein, Yassar Arafat, Osama bin Laden, and, in a previous generation, for Roosevelt, Churchill, Hitler, and Stalin (notice in v. 1 that “kings” is plural). Such prayer, inclusive in its scope, “is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior” (1 Tim. 2:3).

Is Christianity intolerant? Is the gospel exclusive? For whom should Christians pray? According to verse 1 of our text, “for all people.” For all people without regard to rank, social class, race, color, national origin, religion, gender, lifestyle, etc. Christian prayer is inclusive.

Whom does God desire to be saved?

“God our Savior . . . desires *all people* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (v. 4). Notice: The “all people” of verse 1, who are the focus of Christian prayers, are also the “all people” of verse 4, the object of God’s saving desire. (In biblical terms to be “saved” means to be rescued from sin and its consequences, to be delivered from death, both spiritual and eternal.) This inclusive saving desire of God is not an isolated teaching in Scripture. In the prophet Ezekiel, God says “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? . . . For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live” (Ezek. 18:23, 32). Similarly, Peter writes that “the Lord . . . is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). God desires all people to be saved.

Not only does God desire all people to be saved, but he also desires “all people . . . to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). In the rabbi’s terms, God desires all people to reach the top of the mountain. In other words God wants all people to know the answers to the really big questions of life: Is there a God? What is God like? Has God revealed himself? Who am I? How did I get here? Where am I going? How can I be saved? God desires all people to know the answers to such ultimate questions.

Is Christianity intolerant? Is the gospel exclusive? Whom does God desire to be saved? Whom does he desire to know the truth? All people: kings and ordinary citizens, young and old, male and female, rich and poor, slave and free. God’s saving desire is inclusive.

For whom did Christ die?

“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom *for all*” (1 Tim. 2:5-6a). A mediator is one who serves as an intermediary, especially to reconcile differences between opposing parties. In this case the parties in opposition are God and man. But Christ Jesus came into the world as mediator to reconcile these two parties.

In acting as mediator, Jesus didn’t just sit down at a negotiating table and talk to the opponents. No, the work of mediation in this case proved to be much more costly. First, it was necessary for Christ, who always existed “in the form of God,” to make “himself nothing, taking the form of a servant,” to come in “human form” (Phil. 2:5-7). Our text, 1 Timothy 2:5, emphasizes the humanity of Christ: The mediator between God and man is the *man* Christ Jesus. Every good mediator must represent both parties equally. In this case the Son of God had to humble himself and become man in order that he might serve as mediator between both God and man.

In addition, Christ “gave himself as a ransom” (1 Tim. 2:6). The cause of the hostility between God and man was our sin. Sin held us captive, in a terrible bondage leading to death. Voluntarily, Christ gave his own life on the cross as a ransom, paying the price to set us free from sin and death, thereby reconciling us to God.

But for whom did Christ die? For whom did he pay this ransom? He “gave himself as a ransom *for all*.” The “all people” of verse 1 for whom Christians should pray, the “all people” of verse 4 whom God desires to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth—for all these people, Christ gave himself as a ransom. According to Revelation 5:14, Jesus was slain and by his blood “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” Christ’s death is a sufficient ransom payment for them all.

Is Christianity intolerant? Is the gospel exclusive? For whom did Christ die? He gave himself as a ransom for all. Christ’s death on the cross is inclusive.

To whom should Christians proclaim the gospel?

To whom should Christians announce the good news that Christ gave himself as a ransom for all? Paul answers this question by his own example: “For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of *the Gentiles* in faith and truth” (1 Tim. 2:7). “Gentiles” means the non-Jewish peoples of the world. Here Paul, formerly an intolerant, narrow-minded Jewish Pharisee, informs us that he was appointed by God to herald the Christian gospel primarily to the Gentiles, a fact so extraordinary he has to assure us that he is not lying! And Paul was but the first in a long line of Christian missionaries who have taken the good news of Christ to virtually every tribe, language, people, and nation on earth.

Is Christianity intolerant? Is the gospel exclusive? Christians are to preach the gospel to every nation, every people group on earth. The proclamation of the gospel is inclusive.

Conclusion

Is the gospel exclusive? The answer to this question is both yes and no. Yes, the gospel is exclusive in the same way that all truth is exclusive. The mathematical problem $2 + 2 = ?$ has but one exclusive answer: 4. Likewise, the Bible teaches “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” These are exclusive truth claims. There is one mountain peak of truth and there is only one way to reach the top. (Actually, because of our sin, we are unable to climb to the top of the mountain. Therefore, the Truth came down to us, revealed God to us, and gave himself as a ransom for our sin. The Truth is Jesus Christ [John 14:6]).

On the other hand, the gospel is also inclusive. Christianity is not an exclusive club, barring certain classes of people from joining or participating. The gospel is freely offered to all people. Christians are urged to pray for all people, God desires the salvation of all people, Christ died as a ransom for all people, and Christian missionaries are taking the gospel to all people. In fact, it is the very exclusiveness of the gospel message that makes it, at the same time, so inclusive. Since there is but one God, he is the God of all people on earth—and desires to be recognized as such. Since there is but one mediator, Christ Jesus, he is the mediator for all people on earth—and his ransom is a sufficient payment for all.

The fact that the gospel is both exclusive and inclusive is seen also in the Old Testament, in God’s stirring call to the nations found in Isaiah 45:22: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” Here is the inclusiveness of the gospel: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!” Here is the exclusiveness of the gospel: “For I am God, and there is no other.” Now the nations must decide. Now each individual must decide: Will you respond to God’s call, turn to him and be saved?