

7 February 2010

“No Other Name!” What about Tolerance?

Reading: Acts 4:1-22

You may not like everything that I have to say this morning! I must ask you to “hear me out” as we travel together towards a conclusion. Please reserve judgment till the end of the sermon. We are going to zero in on a single verse of Scripture. If anyone does move out during the sermon, I shall assume they are going to the washroom☺.

Nowadays the verse of which I speak is regarded as controversial and some find it to be blatantly offensive. The statement we are about to consider is even stronger in the original language than it is in English, so much so that it is almost impossible to reproduce its impact in translation. And when we try to do so, the sentence tends to be clumsy.

We all saw what reaction there was last week to the Government’s proposal that we make our national anthem gender neutral. Apparently people prefer to read “in all thy sons command” as a generic term rather than tamper with the anthem we love to hear and sing. It seemed to sound better every time we won a gold medal and the flag was hoisted. The translators of Today’s New International Version do an excellent job. They manage to use inclusive language in such a way that we hear the text as it would have been understood by the original readers.¹ But In attempting to make the statement in this verse gender neutral, they opted to eliminate a phrase that is present in the original.² I believe it should be included, because it adds additional emphasis to Peter’s statement.

I am not as presumptuous as to imagine that I can do a better job than the translators. I am giving you my own translation for two main reasons. First, it includes the phrase that is omitted from the TNIV translation. And second, I have resorted to my own translation in an attempt to reproduce the categorical nature of the statement in the original language. One way of emphasizing a truth is to move the words you want to stress to the front end of the sentence. In the verse to which we are about to refer, the crucial phrase *is* at the beginning of the sentence. Another way of emphasizing a truth is to employ a double negative. In English, a double negative equals a positive. If I say, “I didn’t do nothing,” it

¹We have to assume, for example, that when the original recipients read, “If any *man* be in Christ, he is a new creation,” they did not think the statement referred only to males (2 Cor 5:17).

²The omitted phrase is “given among men.” Presumably the translators were of the opinion that “under heaven” already established the universality of Jesus’ mediatorial role and it was therefore unnecessary to add “given among people,” or “given among men and women.”

means I did do something. Not so in Greek! The use of two negatives in close proximity strengthens a statement. My translation is admittedly clumsy. You can see why I have never been offered a job as a Bible translator. The verse under scrutiny is verse 12.

*And in no one else, absolutely no one else is salvation to be found; for there is no other name under heaven, which has been given to mankind by which we must be saved.*³

But I must immediately raise an objection: Can we seriously believe such an assertion in an age of pluralism? When religious intolerance can incite such incendiary emotions and fundamentalism, whether it is Christian or Muslim or Hindu or Satanist is an affront to us all! Look at it from the perspective of a decent, hard-working, good-neighborly, hockey-loving Canadian.⁴

I. TO PUT IT MILDLY, WE CHRISTIANS SEEM REALLY OPINIONATED

A. Religious dinosaurs

Some of us must seem like religious dinosaurs to our neighbors and work colleagues. Others of us must seem like outright bigots! Here we are completely convinced that we are right and everybody else is wrong. What makes this worse is that we don't really take the trouble to find out where *they* are coming from. We don't like it if people write us off before finding out what we believe. So how can we make sweeping assumptions about other religions?

Michael Green remarks pertinently that if we can make any of the major religions look ridiculous, it can only be because we have not understood it. To quote him: "No faith would enjoy wide currency if it did not contain much that was true."⁵ He doesn't stop there, but he certainly makes a valid point.

B. Sincerity?

Besides, there are so many sincere people who are not Christians! Doesn't God honor sincerity? Isn't he more interested in a good heart than a good head? And who has a monopoly on truth anyway?

³Alternatively, "And in no one else, no one at all, is salvation to be found; for there is no other name under heaven, which has been given to mankind by which we must be saved."

⁴I am using the term to describe a mentality rather than a theological position. Fundamentalists are often characterized by closed-mindedness, prejudice, and disdain for other positions. Ironically, fundamentalists in opposing camps probably have more in common with one another than they realize.

⁵Michael Green, *Evangelism and the Local Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), 61.

So many people have never heard the good news. They haven't had an opportunity to respond to the message concerning Jesus. Can they be blamed for not accepting him?

Aren't the various religions culturally-conditioned ways of worshipping the one true God? What if a person sincerely desires to know God and seeks him in the place where he is worshipped in her context? In her country, it happens to be a mosque or a synagogue or a temple.

C. True *for me*, but not for everyone

Isn't there a better, more tolerant way to approach these things? Is it not better to say "Jesus is *my* Savior? For *me*, this works. In my tradition, I come to know God through him. All truth is God's truth. Could it be that we have grasped some aspects of truth and they have grasped other aspects? Why don't we put it all together and get a rich, composite picture?

This doesn't prevent us from knowing and loving Jesus. It simply means that we don't discount other people's ways. "Live and let live!" Isn't this more in line with the Canadian way, the things we hold dear: respect and politeness and tolerance. And does it not fit in better with our policy of multiculturalism?

D. Reading in context

Now, we could get into a heavy, abstract discussion. It would take a substantial series to address all these related questions. Rather, let's look at the situation that gave rise to Peter's statement. That will ensure that we are not taking the statement out of context or reading more into it than we ought to. Then we can zero in on the assertion of our text and investigate a few of the misgivings I have raised about it.

II. A TESTIMONY TO THE NATION'S LEADERS

A. Called to account

Peter and John find themselves standing before the most august and intimidating council in the land. The reason for their imprisonment is that a dramatic healing has taken place and they have been telling the huge crowd that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, that he was raised from the dead, and that it is he who is responsible for the healing of the life-long cripple.

Apparently, the cripple has also been brought in. It is possible that he spent his first night as a healed man in a cell with Peter and John. (Either that or the Sanhedrin had him brought in).

B. A direct question and a forthright response

No time to beat around the bush! The members of the Sanhedrin ask directly, “By what power or what name did you do this?” I love Peter’s response. It is courteous but forthright and unapologetic. Luke remarks, significantly that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Listen to Peter’s address:

Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel. It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.’

He then cites a really significant passage. It is from Psalm 118 which was recited on feast days, especially at the Feast of Tabernacles. It refers to the salvation that God promises his people. And it contains these significant words: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Then the people would say: “O LORD, save us . . .” (Psalm 118:22-25).

Here Peter declares concerning Jesus: “*He* is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.”

And then he makes the categorical statement: *And in no one else, absolutely no one else is salvation to be found; for there is no other name under heaven, which has been given to mankind by which we must be saved.*

C. Limited to a specific audience?

The question is: When we take the context into account, is it possible to limit this statement so that it doesn’t sound so absolute and so exclusive? Peter was addressing *the Sanhedrin* and was speaking of the salvation promised *to Israel*. He is declaring Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and urging the nation to embrace him as the one who fulfills prophecy. Can we not affirm the truth of this text, but limit its meaning to Israel at that particular time? In that way, we keep our options open. We can have our cake and eat it. We can respect other people’s ways and hold on to our way, without making it obligatory for everyone else.

D. Deferring the matter

This may sound appealing to some, but I’m afraid that this only defers the matter. As I have pointed out, the statement is unequivocal. What’s more it is *purposefully*

universal: “No one else! No other name! No other name *under heaven*! No other name under heaven, *given to mankind*.”

We never base important teachings on only one verse. The New Testament starts with the statement: “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1). It concludes with the statement, “Even so, come Lord Jesus,” and the benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people” (Rev 22:20-21). Between those two bookends, we are given a unified testimony. From different perspectives, Jesus is presented as absolutely unique, as the Savior of the whole of mankind.

Listen to John: “God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son . . .” (John 3:16). Listen to Paul: [God] wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for *all* people” (1 Tim 2:4-6). And to John again: “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours but for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

So, if we don’t like it, we can’t simply excise one passage. We need to get rid of the whole New Testament. And, I would suggest, we might need to get rid of the Old Testament too, since it prepares for the climactic moment when the Savior would come.

But I’m not quite finished yet. I need to address that cluster of apprehensions and misgivings about the exclusive nature of this assertion.

III. TO DO THAT, I NEED TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT RELIGION, SOMETHING ABOUT JESUS, SOMETHING ABOUT SALVATION, AND SOMETHING ABOUT TOLERANCE.

A. Firstly, I must say something about religion.

Can we really say: “*And in no one else, absolutely no one else is salvation to be found; for there is no other name under heaven, which has been given to mankind by which we must be saved*”?

You have probably heard statements like these: “We all worship the same God. When it comes down to it, the different religions all say essentially the same thing, only from different perspectives. We can and should all learn from each other.

So the Christian can make the Buddhist a better Buddhist and the Buddhist can make the Christian a better Christian, and so on.

1. **Ill-considered syncretism**

There are a whole lot of misconceptions regarding religion. One probably hears more naïve, ill-considered statements in this field than in any other. There was a time in the study of Comparative Religion when it was assumed that one could merge religions and find a kind of highest common factor. For some this meant reducing true religion to a few basic beliefs and moral principles. To others, it meant expanding religion by adopting whatever appeared valuable from any faith, mixing and matching and creating an eclectic brand of religion.

2. **Each around its own axis**

Nowadays it is accepted by almost all scholars of Religious Studies that every religion revolves around its own axis. It is not possible to mix religions and retain the integrity of any. All you manage to do is to create a new (inferior) religion. One of the twentieth century's best known phenomenologists of religion was a man called Eric Sharpe. He was Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney, in Australia, and a visiting professor at McGill. Sharpe was all for healthy, honest inter-faith dialogue. But he was an expert in the field and recognized the profound differences between the religious world-views. He put it like this: "The worst possible dialogue would be between a Hindu pretending to be a Christian and a Christian pretending to be a Hindu. The next worst would be between a semi-secular Christian and a semi-secular Hindu in a demilitarized zone between the frontiers of the two great traditions, out of earshot of Christians and Hindus alike."

So, we can disregard some of the silly statements about religion that are treated, on the street, as though they were self evident truths. If we try to mix the Christian gospel with any other religion we are forced to remove its essential elements.

About a hundred years before Constantine embraced Christianity there was a Roman emperor by the name of Alexander Severus. During his reign, Christians were still being persecuted and there was much worse to come. But Alexander's mother had been influenced by one of the leaders of the church in North Africa. And Alexander himself became an admirer of Jesus. So much so that he had the golden rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," inscribed on the walls of his palace and on public monuments. He even had a bust of Christ together with one of Abraham set up in his domestic

chapel alongside Roman deities and the best of the Roman emperors. He wanted to build a temple in honor of Jesus but was dissuaded from it by priests of the heathen religion. Do you know who wanted that temple least of all? The Christians! They didn't want Jesus included in the Roman pantheon. That, they knew, would have been the most demeaning demotion for their Savior.

B. Secondly, this leads me naturally to say something about Jesus.

Is it so unreasonable to say: “*And through no one else, absolutely no one else is salvation to be found; for there is no other name under heaven, which has been given to mankind by which we must be saved.*”?

Let me put it this way: If Jesus was a teacher among others or a prophet among others, such a statement would be conceited and extravagant. Let me go further. If Jesus was *the most profound teacher* ever to have lived; if he was the *ultimate prophet*; if he is, to this day, the highest figure in the religious history of mankind, then such a statement would still be excessive. If his piety was so exceptional that God raised him to a position of unique honor, above every other figure in every other religion, then the claim is still unfounded, for he would be superior in degree but not in nature.

But that is not the teaching of the New Testament. There he is unique. He is one of a kind. He is unique in his person and unique in his role. No one outside of Scripture puts this better than D. A. Carson. Listen to his poem.⁶ Jesus himself is speaking.

I am the way to God: I did not come
 To light a path, to blaze a trail, that you
 May simply follow in my tracks, pursue
 My shadow like a prize that's cheaply won.
 My life reveals the life of God, the sum
 Of all he is and does. So how can you,
 The sons of night, look on me and construe
 My way as just the road for you to run?
 My path takes in Gethsemane, the Cross,
 And stark rejection draped in agony.
 My way to God embraces utmost loss:
 Your way to God is not my *way*, but *me*.

⁶D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 492-93.

Each other path is dismal swamp, or fraud.
I stand alone: I am the way to God.

I am the truth of God: I do not claim
I merely speak the truth, as though I were
A prophet (but no more), a channel, stirred
By Spirit power, of purely human frame.
Nor do I say that when I take his name
Upon my lips, my teaching cannot err
(Though that is true). A mere interpreter
I'm not, some prophet-voice of special fame.
 In timeless reaches of eternity
 The Triune God decided that the Word,
 The self-expression of the Deity,
 Would put on flesh and blood – and thus be heard.
The claim to speak the truth good men applaud.
I claim much more: I am the truth of God.

I am the resurrection life. It's not
As though I merely bear life-giving drink,
A magic elixir which (men might think)
Is cheap because though lavish it's not bought.
The price of life was fully paid: I fought
With death and black despair; for I'm the drink
Of life. The resurrection morn's the link
Between my death and endless life long sought.

 I am the firstborn from the dead; and by
 My triumph, I deal death to lusts and hates.
 My life I now extend to men, and ply
 Them with the draught that ever satiates.

Religion's page with empty boasts is rife:
But I'm the resurrection and the life.

C. Thirdly, I need to say something about salvation.

Notice the word! *“And through no one else, absolutely no one else is salvation to be found; for there is no other name under heaven, which has been given to mankind by which we must be saved.”*

If all that is necessary for our salvation is that we receive some enlightenment, or clean up our act and increase the ratio of good deeds to bad deeds, *then* Jesus is dispensable. If, in our present condition, we are able to exist in the presence of

the perfect holiness of God without fear and embarrassment, *then* Jesus is optional.

But if there is a basic deficiency; if we are in need of forgiveness and reconciliation; if God has a destiny for us that surpasses anything we can imagine, *then* we need a divine-human Savior. We need someone who can forgive us and change us from the inside out, not merely a prophet who reveals God's will or a teacher who can point to some important principles.

A. Finally, I need to say something about tolerance.

And in no one else, absolutely no one else is salvation to be found; for there is no other name under heaven, which has been given to mankind by which we must be saved.

If we have to conclude that Peter's statement means what it says, what about tolerance? Are we not right back where we started: dogmatic, exclusive, even bigoted? Not necessarily! Erwin Lutzer distinguishes between "respectful" tolerance and "uncritical" tolerance:

When we engage other religions and moral issues in the ideological marketplace, it should be with courtesy and kindness. We must live in peace with all men and women, even with those of divergent faiths, or those who have no faith at all. We don't need any more self-righteous Christians who piously judge others Tolerance, like patience, is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

[But there is also] an *uncritical tolerance* that avoids vigorous debate in the quest for truth This tolerance respects absurd ideas but will castigate anyone who believes in absolutes or who claims to have found some truth. This tolerance, someone has said, includes every point of view except those points of view that do not include every point of view. This is tolerance only for those who march in step with the tolerant crowd.⁷

In short, there is no limit to the respect we should show to others.

In the first place, we are witnesses. We are not presenting our ideas about the meaning of life. We believe that something actually happened in history and we

⁷Erwin Lutzer, *Christ among the gods* (Amersham-on-the-Hill: Scripture Press, 1994), 29-30.

have a story to tell. It is a message of hope and life. We have truth to tell. It is good news for all.

It is not our job as fallen, fallible creatures to ascend to the heights and take our position on God's judgment throne. You and I are to proclaim the good news about Jesus. We are not to extrapolate that into sweeping judgments on other people. I can safely leave that to God's ultimate wisdom and grace. We know that there will be many surprises on judgment day.

David Bosch was one of the great missiologists of the twentieth century. He was my greatly esteemed Missions Professor. Some years later, Ruth and I had the privilege of having him spend a night as a guest in our home. What struck me was his unaffected humility. I knew about his courage and was in awe of his monumental intellect, but I now encountered my erstwhile professor as an unassuming and godly Christian. He wrote a profound tome entitled *Transforming Mission*. Towards the end of that definitive work, he acknowledges:

We do not have all the answers . . . This is not an opting for agnosticism but for humility. It is, however, a bold humility—or a humble boldness. We know only in part but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure salespersons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord.⁸

Conclusion

“And in no one else, absolutely no one else is salvation to be found; for there is no other name under heaven, which has been given to mankind by which we must be saved.

When we think of the lengths to which God has gone . . . and when we think of who Jesus is, and what he has done . . . how could there be any other way? And why would we want it any other way?

⁸David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 489.