

“Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith” Series
(based on Brian McLaren’s book, *A New Kind of Christianity*)
Question 9: “How do Followers of Jesus Relate to People of Other
Religions?”

June 13th, 2010

When I began attending a Lutheran church in 1976, I didn’t know anything about Lutherans, but I saw the “ALC” that was on the church sign, and was informed that it meant, American Lutheran Church, and that there was a church from the Lutheran Church in America up the road. It was explained to me that different ethnic groups had formed the various church denominations.

In 1988, three of those denominations came together to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. At that time, I heard a bishop’s assistant share a good reason to come together. He said that the LCA did a great job of fulfilling Jesus’ words in Luke 4, when Jesus says that he came to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. (Luke 4:18) The LCA had a history of doing great social ministries in Jesus’ name.

And the ALC had a great history of fulfilling Jesus’ words at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matt.28:19-20) So the ELCA became a helpful merger of both aspects of the Gospel: reaching out to meet the spiritual and the physical needs of people in Jesus’ name.

We have both of these mandates as a part of the Gospel: Jesus clearly reached out to people who were suffering physically, and he shared spiritual good news, the good news of forgiveness of sins and a right relationship with God. We have a biblical mandate to do both.

But as Brian McLaren points out in his chapter on our relationship with other religions, Christianity has a mixed record when it comes to encountering people of other religions. There have been many people around the world who have joyfully embraced the good news of Jesus, but Christianity also has a record of forced conversions at sword point; we have the history of the Spanish Inquisition, when believers accused of heresy were tortured; we have the history of the 30 years War between Protestants and Catholics. We have the history of bringing European culture to other peoples along with the Gospel, with the implication that anything about their culture was inferior and they needed to give up their culture in order to accept the Gospel.

So in a religiously pluralistic country, where more and more people of other religions are our neighbors, how should followers of Jesus relate to people of other religions? We could begin by looking at some Scripture that might broaden the scope of “who gets in”. John says in John 1:9- “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” Will *everyone* eventually be enlightened? In John 3:17, Jesus says, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Does God want to eventually save everybody? Jesus says in John 12:32: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth (and he means on the cross) will draw all people to myself.” Does he mean there will be salvation for everybody, as that implies?

At the end of John’s Gospel, Jesus makes a prediction about what will happen to Peter at the end of his life. Peter looks at John and says, What about him? And Jesus says, What is that to you? You follow me!” (John 21:22) Is that meant for us too? We could look around and say, Lord, what about those people in other religions? And maybe Jesus is saying to us, What is that to you? Your job is to follow me. And God will be the judge of everybody.

In the passage we heard from Romans chapter 2 several moments ago, Paul makes it clear that people are never judged based on knowledge they don't have, but based on what is written in their hearts. Paul says in Romans 2:7, "To those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. There will be "glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good." (2:10) Does Paul really mean that God will give eternal life to everyone who does good?

The writer of 1 John says this- "Everyone who does what is right has been born of God." (1 John 2:29). Notice the order- John doesn't say, If you've been born of God you'll do what is right, but if you are doing what is right, you are born of God. There are people who don't claim Christ, but are doing God's will. And at the end of time, Jesus will be the judge.

When Paul is in Athens, speaking to the Greeks about the gospel of Jesus, he says this, "The God who made the world and everything in it....made all nations to inhabit the whole earth; he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "in him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." (Acts 17:24-28)

Notice that Paul doesn't have an "us" v. "them" mentality here. He says God is at work in *every* language, culture, and religion. And in Genesis 12, when God calls Abraham, God doesn't call Abraham to the exclusion of others, God calls Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to be a blessing to others.

When we consider how to relate to people of other religions, we might want to consider what Jesus said in the Sermon on the

Mount, the little verse we call the Golden Rule- “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Matthew 7:12)

So how would we want people of other religions to treat us? Well, we'd like them to treat us with respect, to show interest in our faith and learn about it, not to constantly attack it, to find areas they agree with, and to respectfully disagree where they need to. We wouldn't want them to pressure us to convert. Jesus says, Do to others as you want them to do to you. So why wouldn't we treat people of other religions the same way: we can listen to their story, agree where we can and disagree where we need to, we wouldn't attack their faith, but show an interest in it and learn about it.

But, you say, what about that Gospel we read earlier this morning? Didn't Jesus say that he was the way, the truth, and the life, and the only way to the Father? It's interesting that we pull this verse out of our ammo belt, and ignore all the other passages that might suggest that God wants to save all people, that God has a bigger plan in mind.

Brian McLaren suggests that the way we interpret the text sounds like this: “You should be very troubled, because if you believe in God but not in me, you will be shut out of my Father's house in heaven, where there are a few small rooms for the few who have correct belief....Then Thomas said to him, “Lord, but what about people of other religions or no religion at all? Will they go to heaven after they die? Jesus said to him, I am the only way to heaven, and confessing the truth about me is the only truth that will get you to life after death. No one will go to heaven unless they a) personally understand and believe a clearly defined message about me b) personally and consciously ask me to come into their heart c) disavow any other religious affiliation and d) affiliate with the new religion I'm starting and naming after myself. None can come to God unless they get by me first.” (*not* John 14:1-6)

That is generally the way we have interpreted this passage. But I always say to you that we need to look at the context of a passage. When Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life, he is not answering the question , What about people of other religions? or Is Jesus the only way to heaven? Actually, the question is a very practical, down-to-earth question- “Jesus, where are you going?”

This passage is in the middle of a long conversation with his followers. This happens just before the crucifixion. He is telling them he is going somewhere they cannot go, and that is troubling, because they are his followers, and they want to follow (John 13:33) He says, You cannot follow me, but here’s what I want you to do. He gives them a new commandment, that they love one another just as he loved them (John 13:34). He is distilling all of Moses’ commandments into one: Love each other as I have loved you. Remember that he had just washed the feet of his followers. He did the menial task of the servant. Love each other like that, he says.

Peter interrupts him and asks, Lord, where are you going? Jesus says, You can’t follow me now, but you will follow afterward. Peter says, I will lay down my life for you. And Jesus answers, Will you lay down your life for me? Before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

That’s the context of this passage. The disciples need reassurance. So this is why he says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:1-3)

In my Father’s house, Jesus says. We have interpreted “my Father’s house” to mean heaven. In fact, we use this at funerals as

a comforting text. And yes, god does have a place prepared for us in heaven! But before we make the assumption that that's what my Father's house means, we need to realize that earlier in John's Gospel, when Jesus uses the phrase "my Father's house," he is talking about the temple. When he overturned the moneychangers' tables in the temple, and drove out all the animals for sale, he said, "Take these things out of here! Stop making *my Father's house* a marketplace! In John 2, my Father's house doesn't mean heaven; it means the temple down here on earth. And shortly after that text, he says, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The religious authorities think he means the earthly temple, but John says he was speaking about the temple of his body (John 2:21). The earthly temple will soon be irrelevant; in fact, it will be destroyed 40 years later. Jesus' body will become the new temple.

So when Jesus says in John 14, In my Father's house are many rooms, could he have his own body in mind? God dwells in me, Jesus is saying. I am the Father's house. I am the new temple, where God is located. This temple, my body, is about to be destroyed on the cross, but then it will be raised again. And the new temple will be the body of Christ in this world. Peter says we are all living stones being built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5)

So, yes, there will be a place for us in heaven, but that may not be what Jesus is referring to here. He is saying that after the resurrection, there will be a place for his followers in his body, the body of Christ. Jesus will be preparing the way for the people-of-God-as-temple. So here's another interpretation of what this passage could mean: "Don't be worried, my friends, even though I've told you I'm leaving. Trust God, and trust me. By going away I'm going to make it possible for you to be with me again where I am now at this moment: dwelling in the presence of God, living in the kingdom of God, bearing the presence of God to this world. There's plenty of room for you in this venture! So don't worry. You know the way to the place I'm going." (McLaren, p. 220)

I'm going through death, into resurrection, to be present in a new way with you. Thomas still doesn't get it. So he says, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5) Thomas is not asking about Buddhists, or Hindus, or Zoroastrians, or atheists or skeptics. He is saying, How can *we* know the way? *We* are your disciples, and we want to follow you! And Jesus replies with the oft-quoted text, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know the Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (14:6-7)

Jesus is saying to Thomas and the other disciples, This is how you're going to get from my crucifixion through the resurrection to the other side, where you will be with me in a new way. It's not separate from me, Thomas. The way I have lived is the way, the truth and the life.

Then Philip leaps in with, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." (14:8-9) Jesus says, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. And what did people see when they saw Jesus? Compassion, healing, acceptance, forgiveness, concern for the stranger and the outsider, love from beginning to end. So where you see that in someone, you see Jesus. And when you see Jesus, you see the love of God.

When we baptize adults, or when we ask young people or adults to affirm their baptism, as we did the last several Sundays, we ask them to say they believe in certain doctrines. That is a statement of faith. But we also ask them to live out the Gospel: to love and serve our neighbor in need in word and in deed, and to work for justice and peace, following the example of Jesus. We ask them to live out the life of Jesus. And there are people in this world who

are doing that, who don't claim the name of Jesus. But they are living out the kingdom of God.

I don't believe Jesus is saying here, Unless you believe in certain doctrines about me, you will be damned. He is saying, If you've seen me, seen the way I live and love and serve and forgive, then you've seen what God is like. And there are people living Jesus' way who do not call themselves Christians. And Jesus will be the judge of all of us.

How should we relate to people of other religions? Jesus sends us out with Christ-like love to serve all people, and that includes people of other religions and no religion. Jesus calls us to go out and to share the Gospel in word and in deed, to go out with humility and respect, to try to understand and serve all people- and to let God be God. Amen.