

Road Blocks to Faith

Exclusivism – John 14:1-6

My therapist tells me I shouldn't bottle things up. Apparently I shouldn't repress my thoughts and emotions. I should express myself. Get things off my chest. Not sure if she meant to do that in public or not. But here goes.

You Christians. Are narrow minded. There I said it. You say you know better than everyone else. You say....You've got the truth. But what about the billions of people who disagree with you? What about them? Are you saying they're all wrong? You Christians are narrow minded. You're narrow minded...and you're arrogant as well. Ted Bullpit on Kingswood Country used to say I'm right you're wrong I'm smart you're dumb and I'm the king of the castle. And that's pretty much what you're saying. You're narrow minded. You're arrogant. And not only that. You're intolerant as well.

I mean how are we meant to ever have peace on earth when you want to insist on your articles of religion? And I'm just getting warmed up. To take a set of beliefs and thrust them on the world – who do you think you are? Have you ever heard of live and let live? Religion is responsible for all sorts of conflict and bloodshed in this world. You're Narrow minded, you're arrogant, and you're intolerant.

And one more thing. One word actually. Science. Science has proved you wrong. Yet you insist on your prehistoric supernatural beliefs. You are unenlightened. So why don't you just get with the times? That's my rant.

Now just in case I was too convincing. That's my caricature of a particular criticism of the Christian faith. And not necessarily just the Christian faith it has to be said. It's pretty much the same argument that can be used against any faith system or religion that makes claims about the truth of things.

It's the claim that to hold to a set of beliefs. Is exclusive. And there's something bad there's something that's just not right about this exclusivity. It's inherently intolerant and arrogant. Those are the claims.

And you can see I hope.....there's a great big roadblock right there. There's a roadblock to faith. If that's the tape playing in your head. (or dvd or mp3) You're going to have some problems with Christianity.

And in our individualistic western culture. In a multicultural, multi-faith country. This is a big big issue. And I'd go so far as to say – this is one of the big silencers of the church and christians in our country. The charge of exclusivity and arrogance.

And so that's what we're looking at this morning. This is roadblock to faith issue number 2. Last week we looked at the issue of Hell and God's judgment. This week we're tackling the things I've just raised. And they stem from this issue of exclusivity.

And if you read the words of Jesus in John 14. It's pretty hard to deny. Jesus says I am the way. Which is an existential claim to be THE PERSON, to be THE LINK...between God and man, between time and eternity. It's me. Jesus says. I am the way. And there's no other way. I'm the sole agent of salvation. Sounds like an exclusive statement to me.

I am the way. And the truth. Claim to absolute knowledge. Actually, more than that. He claims to be the truth. Somehow all things that can be known are somehow embodied in him. Including life itself. I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

So let's just get one thing out of the way right at the start. If you perceive that there's an exclusive element to following Jesus, you'd be right. We need to catch that ball and run with it because it is what it is. And you can understand why people would want to play down those words of Jesus. You can understand why some would rather stick to his principles of niceness instead. But there's something questionable about that approach. There's a bit of a misrepresentation going on there. The Jesus who said do unto others also said the words we have here. And at times you read about it in the gospels. At times. People walk away – when they hear him talk like this. If you want a bigger fan base....better to stick with the Dalai Lama who says it doesn't matter, just be kind to people, and be happy.

But Jesus is drawing a line in the sand...and he's saying to his disciples who've been with him day in day out. He's saying to them and he's saying to you. He's saying.

That's my claim. What are you going to do about it? Are you with me or not? At which point as CS Lewis so helpfully points out. If you want to have some intellectual integrity you can't just smooth it out and say it doesn't matter. He's either blatantly lying, in which case. I don't know about you, but I'm outta here. He's either lying. Or he's deluded. Which isn't any better. He's lying, or he's deluded.....Or..... it's true. And he is in fact, the way, and the truth and the life.

And to believe that...is to draw a line in the sand - is to say. I'm with Jesus. And that's necessarily exclusive. You can't say something's true, without denying something else. You can say you are. But you're not really. Lots of Jesus followers were put to death....are still being put to death. Because they believe, because they stand by those exclusive claims of Jesus.

So that's our starting point. Christianity does in fact make statements of fact. God's words in the bible, and particularly in the person of Jesus make claims that are inherently exclusive, purely because of the fact that they rule other statements to be false. And Christianity isn't alone in that. The major world religions all do the same thing. Jesus can't be God, and not God at the same time. Christians are the only ones who believe he is. There can't be one God, and many gods at the one time, as in Hinduism. They're contradictory, exclusive statements or beliefs by their nature.

Is it a bad bad thing?

But the question is – is that a bad thing? Is it narrow? Is it intolerant? Is it arrogant? Is that a good reason to discard it as a viable world view. Or to somehow shrink back from it? Be a bit embarrassed about it?

We'll have a look at those claims.

And let me just give you the findings up front. I'm going to say predictably. That not only is it not arrogant or intolerant. It's the exact opposite. I want to say that when you understand the gospel in all of its sparkling depth and truth, that the very thing that seems to be a roadblock is in fact a precious and worthwhile thing to believe, and to live for, and to be proud of. But not arrogant about. I want to say with the apostle Paul

Romans 1:16 ¹⁶ I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes:

But I just want to make a general statement as we move through. I want you to notice that most of these objections suffer a fatal flaw. See if you can pick it up.

So let's go to the first objection. You say Christians are arrogant. I'm right you're wrong, I'm smart you're dumb, I'm the king of the castle.

Now at one level, at an individual level, there's some truth to that. Because Christians can and have been and will from time to time be arrogant in their attitudes. Unfortunately it's a human condition that we're trying to overcome. But that doesn't mean it's arrogant to simply hold to the truths of Jesus.

Let's face it. Anyone who holds an opinion about something by default consigns everyone else to error. That's just how it is. I think facebook is evil (computers are wonderful things), you don't. Or maybe you do. But is it arrogant to hold an opinion? It may well be divisive...but is it arrogant?

You've heard the story of the Emperor's new clothes. Where the tricksters take the vain king's money in exchange for a garment of magical splendour, which can only be seen by the extremely intelligent. But in reality. It's a load of baloney and the king parades up the street in his underwear. And while everyone else is too scared or embarrassed to admit they can't see the gown. One little boy starts laughing and he says – look the king's got no clothes. And his naïve truthful statement points out everyone's error. Is that arrogant?

The mathematics of arrogance

Let's have a quick look at the mathematics of arrogance. Let's start with Atheism. Athiests say there's no God there's no spiritual reality in the universe. Now that view's held by a very small minority worldwide. Something like 2.5%. That means atheists think 97.5% of the people on the planet are living by a false belief. That's a fairly big call.

By comparison, Islam, one of the largest of the worldwide religions at about 19% says 81% of the world is wrong. And Christianity even less than that. Just because there's a greater percentage of Christians. So purely on the numbers you could say christianity's the least pretentious of the world religions because it consigns less than the rest to error. And atheism's the most arrogant. Now I don't want to

push that too far. Because numbers aren't everything. I just make that point because when people make the claim of arrogance about christianity, you'll probably find they're doing exactly the same thing themselves in some way, even if it's not immediately obvious. Because hidden under the criticism of what the world religions do..is a set of alternate beliefs, a set of their own beliefs... that pretty much do the exact same thing.

Behind the criticisms

Let's take the example of someone who would say I don't like this exclusive religion stuff. Someone who stands back and says - You're all arrogant. I just believe that at base, all religions are the same. On the surface they might be different but they all come down to the same essence, something like love or kindness or something like that. That's what God's really like. You might quote the words of the great Dalai Lama who says my religion is very simple. My religion is kindness. Now that approach sounds inclusive doesn't it. Let's all just accept each other's beliefs as being equal truths. That'll be inclusive. That'll be unifying. It'll solve our differences.

But when you look at it carefully. That statement..... is just another cleverly disguised exclusive truth claim. In the car park of world religions. They've just pulled up with their own bus. They've just added one more truth claim into the mix. And it's possibly the most arrogant of them all. Because when you say that, when you think that. You're saying. I alone know what the truth is. I alone know what God is like. The pluralist points at anyone and everyone who holds to a

particular set of beliefs about God and the world, and says YOU'RE ALL WRONG. And just think about this - if you say it's wrong to make statements of absolute truth because you can't know the whole truth, that itself is an absolute truth statement. So your breaking your own rule.

And lets ask the question. What's your authority for that claim? You say that essentially all religions are the same? How do you know this truth of all truths? And you say it's the solution to disunity. But that only works. If everyone gives up central truths of what they believe, to join you in yours! The world would be a better place if everyone just agreed with me!. That's what you're saying. Stop being so exclusive and get on my bus. It's subtle. But that's as exclusive a truth claim as they come.

There's an illustration of an elephant and some blind men. There's some blind men walking along and they come across an elephant. And one of them feels the trunk and says it's long and flexible like a snake. Another one says no it's like a tree trunk and he's feeling its leg. Another one says no it's large and flat because he's at its side. And the point is. None of them can see the full picture. They've each got the truth. But only part of it. And that's what the world religions are like. They've all got a part of the truth.

And it's a nice story. But here's the fatal flaw. The story's told from the perspective of a sighted person who can see the whole elephant. And that's exactly what you're claiming. If you want to say that all religions have some truth in them. You're calling every one of them blind, and you're saying you're the only

one who can see the whole elephant. You're the only one who can see the whole truth. Now how could you possibly know that no religion can see the whole truth unless you yourself have the superior comprehensive knowledge of spiritual reality you just claimed none of the religions have? It's a self defeating argument.

Objection #2 - Intolerance

Lets move on to the claim of intolerance. Your exclusive truth claim is dangerous, because it leads to division and ultimately violence and bloodshed. That's the accusation. And that's a reasonable claim to respond to because religions have definitely played a part in wars and violence in the world. Take September eleven for example. But again. To put forward a view that you say is tolerant. Ends up being no different to any other religion. If you say everyone should abandon the key tenets of their faith. To promote tolerance. You've got to condemn any unmovable doctrinal statements. And you've just made one yourself. We must abandon doctrinal statements. That's a doctrinal statement. So there's an inherent contradiction in the argument.

John Dickson's written a number of books that address different apologetic issues. One called If I were God I'd make myself clearer. And he tackles this issue in this book. And John points out that tolerance is a bit of a myth anyway.

He notes that in modern usage tolerance is taken to mean "to accept as valid another person's point of view." Which sounds reasonable. But in reality it means the Muslim – who believes you live once according to the Koran - the Muslim accepts the Buddhist teaching as valid- in other words, another viable, acceptable

truth, that we experience many lives. Not just one. They're both valid – so we have no disagreement. So that's one solution to the perceived intolerance of religion. Pretend our differences aren't different.

But tolerance by definition involves the awareness of something contrary. The latin root of the word tolerate is about enduring opposition. So tolerance in reality isn't just accepting another person's truth along with mine. Which is a pretence anyway. It's the more admirable ability to treat with respect someone with whom I deeply disagree. True tolerance doesn't obliterate difference. And so the true test of your system of beliefs about the world when it comes to tolerance. Is how well does it do that? How well does it treat with respect someone with whom I deeply disagree?

There's been a few other notable attempts to overcome the problem of religious differences. Get rid of that intolerant violent problem. Communism's one. Get rid of religion. And we'll create the utopian society....now let me ask you. How'd it go? Would anyone describe Communism as being tolerant and non-violent? I don't think so.

The other big one is science. Technological advancement was supposed to take the place of that unenlightened religious rubbish. Problem solved. But the exact opposite has happened. Religion and different spiritualities are on the rise, not the decline. Science hasn't obliterated different systems of faith at all.

So why is there this underlying idea around that all religions are just the same? That any group of people who make exclusive claims are arrogant and intolerant?

John Dickson makes the point and I think it's a good one. He says. In a culture like ours. That's so well off. That's so multi-cultural.....It's just the lazy option. It's just easier to say religions are all the same. It's like when my kids fight about wanting to be first. So I just say – stop fighting – you both came first.

It's utter rubbish. And when my kids get older I won't be able to use that line. It's not true. But it's the easy option. And if it comes to having to actually investigate the truth claims of different religions...its just easier to say they're both true in their own way. Especially when I just want to do what I just want to do. And I'd really rather truth not get in the way of that.

Conclusion.

Number one. It's worth just de-constructing people's arguments about exclusivity. Because they tend to do themselves exactly what they say exclusive beliefs do. Don't be fooled.

Number two. Take the time to examine the claims of Jesus. And don't let them be a road block to faith. And don't draw back from them. And don't be ashamed. Because authentic Christianity. Real Christianity says we are saved by a loving gracious act of God. And not by what we do. And if you've got that right. It's hard to look down your nose at other people. And the teaching of the bible says that ought to be our attitude. Philippians 2 says your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Who in very nature God....stepped down to humble himself to become a man. And even humbled himself to death for us. Before God raised him back to his rightful place.

Now if that's the basis for our faith. And we're called to be like Him...then arrogance should never be a valid criticism of true followers of Jesus. Jesus humility says no to arrogance. And no to intolerance on our part.

Now in the end. The truth is the truth is the truth. But the truth of the Gospel of Jesus. Which is backed up by the words of the bible. By evidence, historical data. Geography, by experience of life, by the evidence for the resurrection. By a whole heap of legitimate lines of evidence. The exclusive truth claim of the gospel is that the one who is the way and the truth and the life wants you to come to him and find the way to real life. And to really live life the way the one who gave life intended us to. And that's a precious and worthwhile thing.