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IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY?

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The year was 1893. The place was Chicago. Buddhists, Bahà'ís, and Bhakti Yogis had arrived from the East to attend the inaugural World's Parliament of Religions. While their contingent was sizable, they were vastly outnumbered by Bible believers from the West. Despite the disparity in numbers, however, the impact of the Eastern contingent was monumental.

Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of the self-proclaimed "god-man" Sri Ramakrishna, used the Parliament to skillfully sow the seeds for a new global spirituality. Personifying tolerance and tact, he persuasively proclaimed the fundamental unity of all the world's religions.

One hundred years later — at the centennial celebration of the original Parliament (August 1993)— the impact of Vivekananda's message could be seen in living color. Buddhists outnumbered Baptists, and saffron robes were much more common than Christian clerical clothing.

The swami's message of unification and universalism had undergone a metamorphosis as well. Almost imperceptibly, it had evolved into a sinister creed: The fundamental unity of all religions except one — historic Christianity. With alarming fanaticism orthodox Christianity was denounced as the obstacle to harmonizing the world's religions.

In a session titled "Voices of Spirit and Tradition," the director dogmatically declared that people must be weaned from the divisive doctrine that only their own religion is true. During a plenary performance titled "The Truth Spin Dance," the very idea of objective truth was mercilessly mocked. Loud laughter erupted at the mere mention of "the Gospel truth."

As the Parliament progressed, I was asked to defend the tenets of historic Christianity on a nationally syndicated radio broadcast. Within minutes the phone lines were jammed with callers dogmatically denouncing the notion of objective truth as intolerant and bigoted.

In reply I demonstrated that tolerance in personal relationships is a virtue but tolerance in truth is a travesty. Two plus two doesn't equal 17. It equals four. If this truth is circumvented in calculus, the inevitable result is chaos. Likewise, to compromise the claims of Christ can only lead to calamity.

Despite my response, the host of the show joined in the fray. "I can accept most of what you say," he enjoined. "But what I can't accept is your assertion that there is only one way to God."

"That's not my assertion," I responded. "That's what Christ said. His opinion is infinitely more noteworthy than yours or mine because He is the Creator and we are but creatures."

I was afraid my host would end the conversation right there. Instead he seemed intrigued. For the better part of an hour, he afforded his listening audience an opportunity to raise objections to the notion that Jesus is "the only way."

Immediately, calls began to pour in. Some callers appeared to be obscurantists, Like many of the 6,500 delegates gathered at the Parliament of the World's Religions, they simply did not want to be confused with the facts. Others, however, seemed genuinely open-minded. While their questions were packaged in a variety of ways, they always revolved around three basic issues.

Resurrection: Fact or Fantasy? First and perhaps most fundamental was the question of Christ's deity. If He is truly God, His claim to be the only way must be taken seriously. If, on the other hand, He is merely one more person in a pantheon of pretenders, His proclamations can easily be pushed aside.

In response, I focused on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through the Resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that He does not stand in a line of peers with Buddha, Muhammad, or any other founder of a world religion. They died and are still dead, but Christ is risen.

The Resurrection is an irrefutable fact of history. Indeed. I would go so far as to say that no one can examine the Resurrection with an open mind without becoming convinced of its authenticity. And that is not just evangelical rhetoric.

Dr. Simon Greenleaf, the greatest authority on legal evidences in the 19th century, came to this very conclusion after a thorough examination of the historical record. The essence of his verdict, as the famous Royall professor of law at Harvard, was that any unbiased jury openly examining the evidence would inevitably come to the conclusion that Christ had risen from the dead. Greenleaf suggested that any cross-examination of the eyewitness testimonies recorded in Scripture would result in an undoubting conviction of their integrity, ability, and truth.¹

A primary fact supporting the Resurrection is the empty tomb. Even the enemies of Christ had to concede this point. The record attests that they went so far as to bribe the guards to say the body had been stolen (Matt. 28:1 1-15). While many variations of this myth have been concocted over the years, the fact of the empty tomb has never been successfully refuted.

The fact of the Resurrection is supported by the post-resurrection appearances of Christ as well. On one occasion He appeared to more than 500 eyewitnesses at a single time (1 Cor. 15:6). He also appeared to numerous others, providing "many convincing proofs" of His resurrection (Acts 1:3).

The appearances of Christ resulted in a radical transformation in the lives of His followers. Before the Resurrection, they could best be characterized as cowards. After the Resurrection, however, they were transformed into lions of the faith. Despite the threat of torture and termination, they remained immovable in their testimony. While it is conceivable that one might die for what one believes to be the truth, it is inconceivable that multitudes would die for what they know to be a lie.

As Greenleaf put it, "If it were morally possible for them to have been deceived in this matter, every human motive operated to lead them to discover and avow their error....If, then, their testimony was not true, there was no possible motive for this fabrication."²

The Bible: Human or Divine? The next question raised during the broadcast concerned the reliability of Scripture. Over and over it was dogmatically asserted that the Bible has been scientifically and historically discredited. Thus it was concluded that Christ's declaration, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6), need not be taken seriously.

My response was to demonstrate that the Bible is divine rather than human in origin. I began by pointing to the manuscripts from which the Bible is derived. Since we don't have the autographa (the original manuscripts), the question is, "How good are the copies we have?" The answer is that the manuscript copies supporting Scripture are far better than those supporting such classical literature as Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Caesar, and Tacitus.

Archaeology testifies to the reliability of the Bible as well. It is telling that an archaeologist as noteworthy as Sir William Ramsey was converted to Christ as a direct result of his digs. And he is not alone. Many skeptics have bowed before the majesty of Scripture after an examination of archeological evidence.

As a case in point, skeptics who once ridiculed the Bible for declaring Belshazzar to be a king of Babylon have had to eat their words. Archaeological research has confirmed that Belshazzar indeed reigned as co-regent with Nabonidus, who was off waging war abroad. That, incidentally, explains why Belshazzar offered to make Daniel the third highest ruler in the kingdom (Dan. 5:16). The first two positions were already taken!

The Bible also records thousands of fulfilled prophecies that could not have been accurately predicted through chance or keen human insight. For example, the Book of Daniel (written before 530 B.C.) accurately records the progression of kingdoms from Babylon through the Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires, including the persecution of the Jews under Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), the desecration of the temple, and the liberation of the Jews under Judas Maccabeus in 165 B.C.

Since Christ is the culmination of the Old Testament as well as the center of the New Testament, it is not surprising that predictions regarding His birth, life, death, and resurrection outnumber all others. As should be obvious, Christ could not have conspired to fulfill such incredible prophecies as His descent from David (Isa. 11:1; 2 Sam. 7:12-16), His birth in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2), His crucifixion with criminals (Isa. 53:12), the gambling for His garments (Ps. 22:18), and the burial of His remains among the rich (Isa. 53:9). It is also instructive to note that Jesus predicted both His death and resurrection.

It is statistically preposterous to suggest that these specific prophecies could have been fulfilled through good guesses or deliberate deceit. Consider that the Bible was written over a span of 1,600 years, by approximately 40 authors, in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), on hundreds of subjects, and yet with one central story line: God's redemption of humankind. Clearly, the science of statistical probability is a powerful testimony to the trustworthiness of Scripture.

What about the Person Who Has Never Heard? Perhaps the question posed with the greatest passion during my radio interview was, "What about people who have never heard of Jesus? Will God condemn them to hell for not believing in someone they never heard of?" Although this is a classic smokescreen question designed to ward off an encounter with the gospel, I responded by pointing out the problem with its premise.

People are not condemned to hell only on the occasion of not believing in Jesus; they are already condemned because of their sin. The real question, then, is not how can God send someone to hell but rather how can God condescend to save any one of us?

Furthermore, if ignorance were a ticket to heaven, the greatest evangelistic enterprise in the world would not be a Billy Graham crusade but a concerted cover-up campaign. Such a campaign would focus on ending evangelism, burning Bibles, and closing churches. Then, in a few years, no one will hear of Jesus Christ and hence everyone will be on their way to heaven. Given this scenario, Christ would not have come to seek and save those who were lost but rather to seek and lose those who were already saved.

Consider also that everyone will be judged according to the light they have been given: the light of creation (Rom. 1), the light of conscience (Rom. 2), and the light of Christ (Rom. 3). God is not capricious! Thus, we can rest assured that those who respond to light will receive more light. As the prophet Jeremiah put it, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13).

If there is one thing the Parliament of the World's Religions and my radio interview underscored above everything else, it is the urgency of being equipped to communicate not just what Christianity affirms but why. While no one can be talked into the kingdom of God, our well-reasoned answers to objections raised by skeptics and seekers can be used by the Holy Spirit to bring living water to a dry and dusty land. For those who come to know Jesus, His assertion, "I am the way and the truth and the life," is not cruel exclusivism but rather liberating truth.

-- Hank Hanegraaff

NOTES

1. See Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984).
2. *Ibid.*, 29-30.