

Come and See Part 6: The Low Road of Love

John 8

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Claims and Character

Jesus once said: "The truth shall set you free" and a few chapters later, Jesus clarifies what He means when He says: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

This type of claim is usually only made by power hungry narcissists. Yet, Jesus is universally respected within many cultures for His character.

There have been numerous attempts to try to have Jesus' character without respecting His claims.

Because the character is universally accepted, but the claims are seen as the most offensive thing anybody could ever say in modern civilized society.

A theologian from India, trying to make sense of Christianity there, once said: "What is foolishness, and what is a stumbling block to neighbors of other faiths, is the Christian claim that *only* in Jesus Christ has God been revealed *once-for-all* to redeem humanity."¹

The key to holding the claims of Jesus, we will see, is the *character* of Jesus. The claims need the character, and the character needs the claims.

Claim: I Am the Light of the World

John 8:12-20

Light is life. Without Sunlight, there would be no energy or life on our planet. Jesus is making a claim to be the source of all existence.

The Apostle Paul once quoted what scholars think was a worship hit in his day in Colossians 1:

¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

All of it. Created through Him. Created for Him. Held together in Him.

Light guides us in the dark.

¹ Stanley Samartha, *One Christ, Many Religions*, pg. 118

In this chapter Jesus is at the temple during Sukkot, a festival to commemorate the wilderness wanderings of Israel—when the pillar of fire lit their way in the night.

When Jesus talks about being a light in the darkness, this is what He means. Light that is *followed* through dark and terrible places, through the very shadow of the valley of death, into eternal life.

But notice the implications: if you follow Him, then you do not walk in darkness. Which means, if you don't follow Him, then you are walking in darkness.

Because Light brings revelation.

Light reveals *what is there*. Even when you don't want to see it.

The Jewish leaders hear Jesus say this and demand: give us proof. How can you make these claims about yourself.

Leslie Newbigin comments:

"Within the ordered world of human moral and political experience there is no doubt that the assertion of a man about himself needs to be tested by the evidence of others. But-...what if this ordered world of human experience is, in fact, a world turned in upon itself and therefore a world in darkness, a world whose judgments are necessarily 'according to the flesh?' In that case, the validation which is desired is--necessarily and in principle-not to be had. When the light shines in the darkness it cannot prove itself to be light except by shining."²

Jesus' claims challenged His world, and they challenge ours as well.

Claim: I Am the Truth (or No View from Nowhere)

John 8:31-38

Our society dismisses the idea of objective truth, especially that Jesus is that truth, due to an assumption that exclusive truth claims lead to violence, slavery, and the destruction of cultures.

So, 'secular society' is built on 'pluralism' to protect it from the evils of 'exclusive truth', particularly in matters that are spiritual. 'Public' life is ruled by 'facts'.

John Godfrey Saxe gave us the most popular version of pluralism's parable called "The Blind Men and the Elephant." All the worlds' religions are seen as men born blind touching an Elephant and trying to describe what they are touching and getting it wrong.³

Yes, horrible things have been done by people claiming to be Christians, in the name of exclusive truth. That's a real problem. But the solution is questionable.

² Leslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*, pg. 103.

³ See John Godfrey Saxe, "The Blind Men and the Elephant".

Mr. Saxe is inadvertently saying he knows more about God than any believer ever has. After all, he sees the elephant.

And so called 'facts' need 'values' to be interpreted.

But the immortal poet David Byrne of the Talking Heads once wrote:

Facts are simple and facts are straight
Facts are lazy, and facts are late
Facts all come with points of view
Facts don't do what I want them to
Facts just twist the truth around
Facts are living turned inside out
Facts are getting the best of them
Facts are nothing on the face of things⁴

Turns out, there's no view from nowhere. We need to believe in truth to organize our lives, which means we think we are right, and others are wrong. Even in pluralist Canada.

Character: The Way and then The Truth

So, we all live 'exclusive truths', but do they inevitably lead to violence?

Jesus made the most shocking claims to exclusive truth, but He and his disciples did not use violence to spread their message.

In Mark 5, after coming to a new land and conquering a legion of enemies in the form of demonic possession, Jesus is told by the inhabitants to leave. And He does.

Jesus never forced anything on anyone ever.

In fact, He told His disciples in Luke 22:25-27 that the servants among them are the great ones.

And then, He *showed them* what that service was like by bending down and doing the work of a slave: washing their feet. Even the feet of Judas, the one who would betray Him. Then He gave Himself on the cross for others. Most of his disciples, we're told, died the same way.

For us, examine Jesus' statement carefully: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31a-32)

Notice Jesus puts 'the Way' before 'the Truth' in His statement. The Way to the Truth is the Way of Jesus.

⁴ The Talking Heads, "Crosseyed and Painless"

Why is this so important? Brennan Manning once wrote:

“The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”⁵

When Christians have used violence of any sort to spread Jesus’ claims, they have transgressed His character. The claims of Jesus must be shared in a manner consistent with the character of Jesus.

Claim: I Am

John 8:48-59

Jesus harkens back to Exodus 3 by saying “Before Abraham was—I AM”, He is claiming to be the embodiment of Yahweh.

But the idea of ‘whoever obeys my words will not taste death’ is the harder thing to reconcile in our culture.

Because Jesus’ claims point to our final destiny being determined by Him.

Which always leads to the question: does Jesus send good people from other faiths to Hell?

Christians are usually too obsessed with Hell or avoid it altogether. We can’t escape the concept of ‘Hell’ in scripture. Jesus speaks of it more than anyone else (see Matthew 13:36-43, 25, Mark 9:42-50, Luke 16:19-31 etc.).

To answer the question about good people of other faiths, we have to consider first those who haven’t heard the good news and those who have.

Regarding those who haven’t heard the good news of Jesus, we don’t know their final destiny. Because the Bible doesn’t really talk about it.

In Romans 1:18-20, Paul does hint that people are held responsible to some standard because certain truths about God are ‘obvious’. But exactly how far that goes is unclear.

Second, what about those good people from other faiths that have heard of Jesus, but don’t follow Him, is he sending them to hell?

Rob Bell’s universalist work *Love Wins* came out of such a question. On a painting with a quote from Gandhi, a parishioner wrote ‘reality check, he’s in hell.’

If someone who the world thinks is good asked me ‘am I going to Hell?’ How would I respond?

I don’t know, but I know the judge. Would you like to follow Him.

⁵ Brennan Manning, *Ragamuffin Gospel*

Only one unnamed person is ever mentioned to be in 'Hades' (Luke 16:22). The New Testament describes hellish behavior and warns of a coming condemnation for those who don't follow Jesus. But naming specific people in Hell is not for us—see the parable of the weeds and wheat in Matthew 13.

Character: The Low Road of Love

But, Matthew 25 presents Jesus as the future judge who will send some people to Hell. Whether we make it there or not is determined by how we respond to Him.

This is an offensive claim.

But hold the claim in Jesus' loving character. The judge is the one who hung on the cross for other's sins.

To be a Christian is to trust Jesus to make just judgments in the future.

So, meeting people from other faiths, we should make them the offer to follow Jesus.

The greatest sin in a pluralistic society is proselytization.

One Christian writer was talking with a friend about evangelism in a coffee shop in Australia and a woman came and screamed at him:

"You want to convert the world, do you? How dare you!"⁶

But Jesus did want to convert the world. He made exclusive claims backed up with loving character. He is the High King of Heaven riding a donkey on the Low Road of Love.

We are invited to be like Him. But the manner of our sharing is not loud, arrogant or anxious. As someone wise once said, sharing Jesus with someone is being a beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

So, uphold Jesus' claims and His character. Ride alongside Him on the low road of love.

⁶ John Dickinson, "Danger: Proselytization" on Undeceptions.

Discussion Questions:

Open up:

Where or when have you experienced discomfort about the claims of Jesus—either within yourself or from others?

Dig In:

1. People seem to be oriented more towards either the claims of Christ or the character of Christ—emphasizing either grace or truth. Which are you? Why?
2. How do you try to reconcile Jesus' claims with the discomfort around those claims in our culture?
3. If 'tolerance' and 'pluralism' are themselves exclusive truth claims, how do you think you should respond to and interact with those of other faiths?
4. How do we respect people's God given right to choose while disagreeing with their approach to the world?
5. Where in your life do you need boldness to make the claims? Where do you need the wisdom to emulate the character?