

Let's begin with a test. I have one cookie and two children. If I give the cookie to one of the children the other will say, "That's not _____." So, to avoid this insult, I divide the cookie. When the cookie breaks, one piece is larger than the other. The one who gets the smaller piece will complain, "That's not _____." You passed. Children come equipped with a profound sense of fairness that seems to be programmed into every human heart. It is so strong that I believe many people reject Christianity not because it seems unreasonable but because it seems so unfair. To suggest that Jesus is only one way to Heaven excludes all those who are not Christians. And that's not _____.

Today we take up the question, "Is Christianity Too Narrow?" How can we claim there is only one way to God when there are so many religions? If a religion teaches it has absolute truth then those who follow that religion are absolutely right and everyone else is wrong. You have God on your side and they don't. Leads to arrogance and the idea that you have a divine mandate for all you do. Maybe it's best to have no religion.

Is there a way to approach religion so that no one is left out? Let's consider some common statements intended to make religion more inclusive (These are lifted from Keller's *The Reason for God*):

1. "All major religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing." Nearly half of all Americans believe it doesn't really matter what you believe since all religions are basically the same. Every religion claims to possess truth about the nature of God and how we are to worship Him. It's true, there is a lot of similarity between religions; live a moral life, don't steal, don't kill, respect others. But on the other hand some truth claims cannot be reconciled. For example, Christianity teaches Jesus is God. Judaism and Islam teach that Jesus is not God. If Jesus is God then Jews and Muslims fail to worship God as He really is. That would be a pretty big deal. Buddhists don't believe that there is a god in a personal sense so they are different from the others. So those who say it doesn't matter have created their own doctrine – the doctrine that says it doesn't matter what true doctrine is. Now you have become exclusive in your particular views.

2. "Each religion sees part of spiritual truth but not all the truth." This is often supported with the story about the blind man and the elephant...all of them are partly right but none of them are all right. The problem with the story is that it is told from the perspective of someone who is NOT blind. Since all of the people in the story are blind, someone has to say, "I can see what they can't." The story actually proves the opposite of what it seems to be saying. It says that someone has the truth about God and has seen God as he really is.

3. "Religion is too cultural and historically conditioned to be true." Whatever culture you grew up in will determine your religion. If that is true, then is it equally true of the one making the claim? In other words, the person who believes religion is culturally conditioned may have been culturally conditioned to believe that. Furthermore there are some pretty impressive examples of Christianity thriving in a countercultural environment. In 1950, there were approximately one million Christians. Today there are 100-200 million Christians. Over 100 million Chinese have converted.

4. “It is arrogant to insist your religion is right and try to convert others to it.”

Unless of course you are trying to convince others of that statement! Do you see how illogical it is to say, “All truth claims are arrogant – except the one I’m making right now.” If you insist that no one can determine what is right and what is wrong then why should I believe you? We all make truth claims. Why is it OK to use persuasion in non-religious truth claims but to suggest that your religion is true is considered inappropriate, even bigoted?

The proponents of these views are guilty of the very things they condemn. All of these arguments cave in on themselves because subjective fairness replaces objective truth. But fairness divorced from truth is merely an opinion. I think we can all agree that $2 + 2 = 4$. If I get a poor grade on a test because I said $2 + 2 = 5$, I cannot claim that the teacher is unfair. The grade is fair because my answer is wrong. But here’s the rub – what if there is no wrong? We live in a society that has been taught that there is no absolute truth, no right and wrong. Truth is relative. Without a common agreement on objective truth, the only common virtue left is tolerance. In a relativistic society, tolerance trumps truth. If tolerance is defined as respect for the dignity of all persons regardless of their views, I’m in. But if it means that all truth claims are equally valid then count me out. Such a world could be described as hell.

“In the world it calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.” Dorothy Sayers

So how can we talk about these things in a way that respects the views of others while proposing an alternative reality? Fortunately we have been given an example of how to approach those of differing viewpoints about religion in Acts 17.

1. Pay attention to your feelings (17:16). Just as your inner ear helps you keep your equilibrium, your spiritual inner ear signals you when something is off balance. Paul’s spirit was “provoked” when he saw all the worship of idols.
2. Seek opportunities for dialogue. (17:17). Paul “reasoned” with Jews in synagogues and those in the marketplace. There was a multitude on the Acropolis that was Exploring God. (17:21). They were always learning but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.
3. Respect the views of those who differ. (17:22). Paul actually complements the Athenians. There are three religions mentioned by name – Jews (monotheistic), Stoics (pantheistic), Epicureans (naturalists, agnostics, atheists). It was a very pluralistic environment. The Epicureans sought truth through personal experience. They had a weird belief that is really foreign to us that the chief purpose of man was pleasure and happiness. They sought freedom from pain and just wanted everyone to love everyone. Life is all about pleasure.

The Stoics were pantheists - they worshiped all gods, because they believed that all the gods of the universe were driving toward one ultimate purpose. Therefore Stoics, wanted to align themselves with this Purpose through self-sufficiency. They emphasized personal discipline and self-control. The most important thing was to be guided by reason and avoid extremes being unmoved by inner feelings or outward circumstances. The Epicurean motto is "Enjoy life." The Stoic motto is "Endure life."

4. Look for common ground. Paul was a student of their culture. He even quotes one of the Greek philosophers Epimenides in v. 28. This led to Paul's logical conclusion: God made us in His image, so it is foolish for us to make gods in our own image! Greek religion was nothing but the manufacture and worship of gods who were patterned after men and who acted like men. Paul not only showed the folly of temples and the temple rituals, but also the folly of all idolatry. The gods of the Greeks were distant deities who did not trouble themselves with the needs of men. But the God Paul preaches is not a distant deity...vv. 24-27.

5. Tell the truth and invite a response. (17:29-31). "Repent" means change your mind. Embrace another philosophy. Repentance is a mind-altering experience. People change their minds all the time. God is calling all people everywhere to repent. What's narrow about that? Christianity is inclusive not exclusive. In Christ, God did something different than all other religions that included all people everywhere.

6. Expect the same response that Paul experienced. (17:32-34). There were three different responses to the message. Some laughed and mocked and did not take Paul's message seriously. Others were interested but wanted to hear more. A small group accepted what Paul preached, believed on Jesus Christ, and were saved. We wonder if the others who postponed their decision eventually trusted Christ. We hope they did.

Christianity is fair because Christianity is true. God invites all men everywhere to repent. What is not fair is that we would keep this truth to ourselves and not do everything in our power to get this message to others.

Pete Briscoe story (Does Everyone Have A Purpose?) about his dad's encounter with a young man in Liverpool...Shared the gospel.

"Does that make sense?"

"Well, the story makes sense but something doesn't. I don't think you really believe that."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because if you really did believe it you would have been down here before now and you wouldn't leave until all of us had agreed." And he stood up and walked out. It was a stunning moment for Stuart Briscoe.