

Is GOD an IDOLATER?

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TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICA embodies and embraces ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. Our neighbors, our friends and our co-workers hail from various regions around the globe. Our Bill of Rights guarantees our free exercise of religion and, as citizens of a democratic society, we value tolerance, especially tolerance of religious expression.

When we were younger, *tolerance* meant *putting up with someone else's values, beliefs or practices, regardless of the degree you found them untrue, offensive or distasteful*. In recent years, though, the meaning of this word has evolved to reflect disturbing trends in our American culture favoring individual expression over objective truth. Today's cultural brand of tolerance connotes not only an endurance of others' opinions, but also demands that disparate views be considered equally valid: "what's true for you may not be true for me."

Christianity is exclusivist: it claims that there is but *one* true God, and that the way of salvation is *only* through Jesus Christ. Most people today accept the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth, the single, most influential figure ever to walk the earth. But who was He really? Some say that He was a prophet. Some suggest that He was a great teacher. Others recognize Him as a good man, a moral example.

But what did *He* claim? *Jesus claimed that He was God*. And His claim is confirmed in God's inspired Word by the record of prophecy, by His miracles, and by His resurrection. Yet many today flatly deny his deity.

C.S. Lewis, the renowned Christian apologist, penned these now famous words about this Jesus:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who is merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us

not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (Mere Christianity [New York: Touchstone, 1996] 56).

The Bible's exclusive claims place Christianity directly at odds with a world that denies the reality of objective truth. Christianity is thus branded a religion of intolerance and offense, and is accorded an inferior position among the world's *great religions*, which extol man's virtue, which find good in false gods, or which "*call evil good, and good evil*" (Isaiah 5:20).

IN OUR OWN IMAGE

Even in Christian circles there is a tremendous temptation to make of this Jesus what we would like him to be — to craft for our pleasure a god that makes us comfortable: one who is all love, forgiveness and pleasure, and no wrath, judgment or pain; one that requires little of us, and exists to serve and please us. But we have neither the power nor the authority to dictate who God is or what He requires. Only He does.

Is it possible that our cultural brand of tolerance has made inroads into God's church? Is it possible that our fear of being labeled *intolerant* guides even our formulation of doctrinal positions? Is it possible that Satan would use such a subtle weapon to weaken the gospel message and to rob God of His glory? Is it possible that we would compromise the truth for our own emotional comfort, or for political correctness?

We who are schooled in the doctrine of election have no difficulty with God's sovereignty in choosing a people unto salvation — until, that is, we consider the present reality of His discriminating love, where it becomes uncomfortably personal. Are there people on earth *today* whom God doesn't love? Are there those whom He *hates*? Are there any among my acquaintances that will eternally perish? These thoughts cut across

our cultural sensibilities, don't they? They offend our reason, because *we would never create a god like that!*

It is precisely this offended sense which incubates the notion that man can be saved without faith in Christ. Known in theological circles as *inclusivism*, this theory claims that while one religion may be explicitly true, all others are implicitly true; that God accepts an implicit faith in lieu of explicit faith in Jesus Christ; that while there is no salvation apart from Christ, God extends mercy to many who may have no knowledge of Him in this present life.

Of a truth, it comforts our human hearts to think that a child of God can be a sincere Hindu or devout Buddhist, or even be born again and not know God at all. This gives us great compassion and hope for those who do not trust in Christ. It gives us hope that even our own family members who may never have evidenced godliness may one day stand in heaven. But can this idea of *anonymous Christianity* pass the test of Scripture? Does God have orphaned children?

EXCLUSIVE CLAIMS

God's Word makes some astonishing and very exclusive claims about Jesus:

- "*If God were your Father, ye would love me...*" (John 8:42a).
- "*I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life*" (John 8:12).
- "*He that hath seen me hath seen the Father*" (John 14:9).
- "*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12).
- "*I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst*" (John 6:35).
- "*I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*" (John 14:6).

The testimony of Scripture is clear: only in

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Christ do we have eternal life and only through Him are we drawn to the Father. Jesus is not *a* light, but *the* Light of the world; He is not *a* way to the Father, but *the* Way to the Father; He is not *a* truth, but *the* Truth. These are indeed exclusive claims. And they make us squirm, don't they? Our culture frowns upon such exclusivity as politically incorrect. Isn't there truth in *every* religion? Doesn't God have children worshiping Allah — those who have been born of His Spirit, but who because they happen not to have been born in privilege have never heard the *true* gospel? How could we dare suggest that those who sincerely worship their own god in their own way may not be saved?

Consider the exclusivity of this revered statement of the Master Himself: *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"* (John 10:27). That's a pretty straightforward claim, isn't it? Take just the last phrase: *"They follow me."* Who are *they*? *My sheep*. Is that *some* of the sheep, or is it *all* of them? As verses 28 and 29 affirm, it's *all* of them.

What do they do? They *follow*. This indicates positive action on the part of the sheep, and presupposes a relationship with the Shepherd: they see their Shepherd, they know His voice, and they respond by accompanying Him where He leads. When the Sovereign Shepherd speaks life into the heart of one of His sheep, that one is forever changed, predisposed against sin and toward Christ. *He has eternal life*, God's most precious gift for undeserving sinners, which Christ Himself defined: *"And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent"* (John 17:3).

Whom do the sheep follow? They follow *me*, the Great Shepherd. They follow the true God of the Bible, now revealed in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. They don't follow some nebulous god-concept, or a god in crystals and trees. They don't follow Buddha; they don't follow Mohammed; they don't follow Joseph Smith; they don't follow one of the millions of Hindu gods. They are effectually called by the One *True* God, and they follow *Him*.

IS GOD AN IDOLATER?

God does not reveal Himself to His children so that He might be dethroned as King. Were this the case, would not God Himself have become an idolater? Were God to place faith in the heart of His child then allow that faith to find its trust in a false god, could we

not say that God would be pleased to share His glory with idols? Yes! God would in fact be condemned as a transgressor of His Own first commandment: *"Thou shalt have no other gods before me"* (Exodus 20:3).

Is God an idolater? Will He have His people bowing before false gods? Of course not! He is both the Author and Object of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). As the single most self-absorbed Being in the universe (and the *only* One *rightly* so), God's chief goal is for the increase of His Own glory. He delights in receiving the worship of His people and will not tolerate the glory due Him being deflected in any other direction.

Isaiah records these powerful words of a God stingy of His glory: *"I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images"* (Isaiah 42:8). Are these words consistent with the popular notion that we can all worship God in our own way and according to our own concept of him (or her)? Do these words support the idea that one can worship an idol so long as they are sincere?

FLEE IDOLATRY

The proclamation of one true God and the defeat of idolatry were paramount to the Apostle Paul. Paul commended the brethren at Thessalonica for their having *"turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God"* (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Moved with compassion, he stood at Mars Hill before the Athens elite (who had erected monuments to their gods) and boldly proclaimed that God was the *only* God, who *"now commandeth all men every where to repent"* (Acts 17:30). And the brethren at Corinth he admonished, *"Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry"* (1 Corinthians 10:14).

At a minimum, it seems, God is displeased with idolatry. But Paul goes even further in Galatians 5, where he contrasts the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, etc.) with the works of the flesh, *"which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry...and such like: of the which I tell you... they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God"* (Galatians 5:20b-21). These are pointed words to be sure, but Paul offered them without apology.

The Apostle John would in his first epistle powerfully underscore Paul's refrain, relating the *One True God* theme specifically to the Person of Jesus Christ: *"Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son, the*

same hath not the Father: [but] he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also" (2:22-23). He continues later that *"this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life"* (1 John 5:11-12). John concludes his letter this way: *"...that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen"* (1 John 5:20b-21).



To those committed to inclusivism and tolerance above truth and reason, Jesus' claims are unpalatable: they much prefer the gods of their own imaginations. But the God we serve is infinitely superior to imagined gods: Scripture declares that *Jesus* is the name above every name.

If our culture is right, then Jesus was wrong. If our culture is right, then one god is just as good as another. If our culture is right, then experience is more important than revelation and it really doesn't matter what one believes so long as he is sincere and tolerant of others. If we could simply "live and let live," then everyone could define *God* and *truth* by their own standards; we would alienate and offend no one. If we could believe that Jesus was one light among many, one way among many, one truth among many, then we would be considered a tolerant and inclusive church community. If we could ignore the exclusive claims of Jesus, life in the church and in the world would be much more pleasant and inoffensive.

But we cannot. To reject the revelation of Jesus Christ and to discard our Lord's exclusive claims would make us little more than an unlikely assortment of uncommitted unbelievers who follow the path of least resistance. And tragically, we would become a community which *"changed the truth of God into a lie"* (Romans 1:25). But do we really have an option? Having received eternal life and peace in Christ, having been irresistibly drawn to the brightness of His glory, having been moved to delight in His every attribute, we say with Simon Peter who answered when Jesus asked the disciples if they would also go away, *"Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (John 6:68-69).

