

Pluralism and Christianity's Troublesome Claim
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Well, as Larry said, we're kind of coming into the home stretch with the Defender series. We're going to look at a few potentially difficult issues. Today in particular we're going to be looking at the issue of plurality; that's the idea that there's more than one way to God. And in order to do so we are going to go into Acts chapters 4, and then in 10 and 11. Ok? We're going to be hopping around Acts today.

Ok, so plurality; plurality is the idea that there can't be just one right way to God. There can't be just one right faith. There's gotta be multiple ways to God. You know, you can get to Him this way or that way, whatever way works for you to connect to the spiritual reality that exists, whatever way works for you...that's great, it works for you! And there will be other ways that work for other people. That's basically the idea of plurality, that there is...there are plural ways to God. That's not exactly what Christianity claims, ok? And so that's what we're going to look at today, is this claim or this challenge that is sometimes raised to Christianity.

And we're gonna do this by starting off...we're gonna look in Acts 4. Now in Acts 4 the basic situation is this. We've been through this in the past year so this may sound familiar, but the basic situation is that Jesus has come, He's died, He's been resurrected, His disciples had the Holy Spirit come upon them and empower them as they gave witness to the fact that Jesus Christ came back from the dead. And so the church has begun building and growing, and more and more people are coming to know Jesus. They're coming to believe in Him and follow Him.

Well, Peter and John...they were out and about one day telling people about Jesus, and they healed a man. This didn't make the officials too happy because they were tired of this idea of Jesus coming back from the dead spreading. And so they go ahead and they have Peter and John arrested, and they call them in and they start giving them commands to give an account for their actions and what they're saying. And Paul says something here...excuse me...Peter says something here in Acts 4. In verse 12 he says this. He says

And there is salvation in no one else [talking about Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Now this is basically Christianity's troublesome claim. Ok? This is Christianity's troublesome claim. The reason that I say that is in Peter's day it would have been fine with the Roman officials and in the Roman Empire, even in Jerusalem, if these guys, if these gentlemen, the disciples, if they had simply said Jesus is a way to God. Ok? If they had said he was a way—'If it works for you, that's fine.'—nobody would have really gotten their hair stood up on end on the back of their neck; they wouldn't have gotten upset; nobody would have fussed about it. In the same way in our culture today, people don't mind if you say Jesus is a way to God. It doesn't matter. 'Ok, if Jesus is a way for you to get to God, that's great; it works for you.' The real problem comes when you say that there is no other way. There is *no other way*, there is *no one else*, there is *no other name* by which, if people are going to be saved, they are going to know God. *There is no other way to do it.* And that's where we start running into trouble. That's Christianity's troublesome claim.

Well, the basic reason that this causes so much trouble is because of the viewpoint in pluralism. You see, pluralism has this idea that claiming that there is only one way to God is arrogant and it's exclusive, because religion is just a matter of your personal preference. That's all—religion is just a matter of personal preference. And so for you to say there is only one way, your way is right, that's arrogant, and it's exclusive. You're cutting people out. Now arrogance and exclusivity are almost like two curse words in our culture today. Ok? They are. If you are exclusive and you cut people out, or if you were labeled arrogant, now all of a sudden you start getting labeled with things like being a bigot or being close-minded, or being all these things. Why? Because you aren't just willing to accept just anything and everything.

I will make a disclaimer here. There are many people who go by the name of Christian, who call the name of Christ their own, who are arrogant and exclusive in a non-biblical, non-Christian way. I admit it, there are. That's one of the sad things about human nature, and it is that we like to feel good about ourselves; and when we feel we have some sort of knowledge or something that we know, something that makes us special, we start looking down on other people. That's kind of our natural tendency. It's everybody's natural tendency. We have to fight against it. Some people fight against it more than others. The problem is in a situation like religion that can only serve to

amplify the problem. Why? Because 'I've got the inside track with God.' And so if people aren't careful—yes, even people who call themselves by the name of Christian—they can be arrogant and exclusive in a unchristian way. I go ahead and say that disclaimer up front. However, biblical Christianity will not be so.

Now, before you get upset with me about saying Christianity is not exclusive, just hear me out and we'll get there, ok? Because it is. But here's what we're going to do. We're gonna start looking at the idea that biblical Christianity is arrogant, ok? We're gonna look at this piece of it first. And some of this will probably sound familiar to you. We've covered pieces of this sort of thought process in the past as we've been going through Mark or Acts, or different issues. But sometimes how this idea is presented is with an analogy similar to this one. There is an idea that...the analogy given is this. There is an elephant, and it's standing here. And then we have six blind men, and they're walking along. All of a sudden the six blind men bump into the elephant. One grabs—he touches the side of the elephant and he thinks that he's touching a wall. The second wraps his hands around the tail and thinks that he's holding onto a rope. The third holds onto the legs, thinks he's holding onto a tree trunk. The fourth touches the ears, thinking it's a fan. The fifth holds onto the tusks and thinks that he's holding onto a spear. And the sixth is absolutely convinced that he is wrestling for his life against this snake, because he's wrapped around the trunk.

And this sort of analogy is presented to communicate this—these blind men, they're all blind. They don't realize that it's just an elephant. What they think they are interacting with is true from their personal perspective, but that's just their perspective. They don't see the whole, big picture. And we all, all of us people, we're all blind. We don't all see the whole, big picture. We don't see the whole answer. We only see a part of the puzzle from our little perspective. And so, just like those blind men, it would be arrogant for us to insist that we have the corner on truth, because we've just a little piece from our perspective. And that's true from our perspective, but we aren't seeing the whole, big picture. So if you claim to see the whole, big picture, if you insist that 'no, this is what it is; I am right, my perspective is right,' that's arrogant because you don't see the whole, big picture. Ok?

That's...people make this analogy and say it's the same way with religion. Ok? 'Christianity...that's just your perspective on God. That's just your perspective on the ultimate reality. That's just a little piece of the puzzle that you see. Somebody else—a Daoist, a Buddhist, someone who is a Hindu or a Muslim—all these different religions, they just see a little piece of the puzzle. And so it would be arrogant for any religion to say that they know the truth, because they're sharing truth just from their own perspective.' Make sense? Following me? Ok. See, there's a problem with this. First of all, it's logically flawed, because if you just look at these religions they make mutually exclusive claims. Ok? I'm sorry, but the idea of nirvana—of the ultimate reality where everything ceases to exist as an individual is absorbed into it and ceases to exist—is completely different than the idea of heaven. Ok? They are mutually exclusive claims. Religions make mutually exclusive claims.

Also, the problem with this is that all of these six blind men are wrong. Ok? They are all wrong. None of them are right. It's not that they all have a little piece of truth; they're all one hundred percent wrong. Ok? The only way that they could not be wrong is if all of a sudden the elephant started to turn around they start feeling different pieces of the elephant and they realize 'Oh, I'm dealing with an elephant.' I think that's what happens with Christianity. I'll explain that in a minute.

But there's another problem with this analogy. It's basically this—pluralism, I genuinely think 'cause I've interacted with people who hold to a pluralist position, they genuinely do so because they want to be humble. They are not trying to be arrogant people. They genuinely want to be humble, so they don't want to say they have the corner on truth. But there's a problem with pluralism. In fact, it is very unintentionally arrogant. It is. Why do I say that? Because ultimately what you are saying is 'listen, all of you people, everyone in the whole world, you're all blind. You're blind and you're only seeing a little piece of the puzzle.' But how would you know that these blind men were all wrong and they're all feeling different parts of the same thing unless you can personally see the whole elephant? If we were blind too, then we would just think these six blind men were grabbing hold of six different things. The simple fact that you can claim that you're only seeing things from your little perspective, and you're only true from your perspective, means that you are claiming to see the whole, big picture. So a pluralist is saying, 'listen, all these religions...Christians, what you believe is true from your perspective, that you both have a little piece of the puzzle. You Muslims, what you believe is true, but only from your perspective. You're only seeing a little piece of the puzzle.' What you are claiming if you make that claim is that you can actually see, that you actually know and understand everything that there is to understand about God and ultimate reality. You, alone, have that perspective. That's the implication. That's kind of an arrogant position to be in.

Biblical Christianity doesn't respond that way, ok? We're gonna look at Peter's response here. I love Peter 'cause he's just...he's a pretty cool guy. He's mellow, calm...well, not mellow. He's the opposite of mellow. But he's just kind of...what you see is what you get. Ok?

These officials, elders, as they were questioning Peter and John, they look at 'em and verse 13 of Acts 4 they see that John and Peter are bold, and they perceive that they were uneducated, common men. Ok, they were fishermen. They were just commercial fishermen; that's what they did. They didn't have all the school training; they didn't have all the degrees; they weren't the powerful, political elite; they weren't part of the religious establishment. They were simply just your run-of-the-mill, normal, everyday, commercial fishermen. They were uneducated, common men. Ok? And here's what Peter says. And in response to some questions that were asked, in verse 10 and then in verse 20, he says this. He says, 'Hey, it's the name of Jesus Christ...'

...of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead...

'...that gives us this power. He's the One that we're talking about.' And then he goes on and he says, 'Listen, we can't speak of anything other than what we have seen and heard.'

Now here is why I point this out. This is why I look at this very insightful response—because this is what Peter and John are claiming. They're saying 'Listen, it's not that we're so smart. Ok? You can see we're common, uneducated men. We don't have all the degrees, we don't have all the knowledge, we don't have all the training, we aren't part of the political or religious elite. We aren't. Ok? It's not that we are smarter; it's not that we somehow see the whole elephant, so to speak. We aren't claiming to be able to see all these things that nobody else can see, just because we're so smart and know better than everybody else.' Instead what they're claiming is 'Listen, it's just Jesus Christ. We're blind too; it's just that Jesus Christ has revealed God to us.' That's what they're explaining. They aren't claiming to be better than everybody else, or smarter. It's just that Jesus Christ has revealed God. What they're saying is this. They say, 'Look, you killed Him. He came back alive. You tried to make Him dead, and it didn't stick. Ok? It didn't. He came back alive. So if He comes back alive and he says "Listen, I am God, and I am gonna tell you about God, and I'm gonna tell you how you can know God," I believe Him. Ok? You might get upset with me all you want. It's not that I'm smarter, it's not that I'm better; it's just that He came back alive. You can't keep Him dead. And so I believe Him when He tells me that this is who God is.' That's how they respond. They simply say, 'Listen, we can't tell you all these religious proofs and all these things. All we can tell you is what we've seen and heard. And we know that you killed Him, and we know that He is alive again. And He has told us that He is God, and He is the way and He is the truth, He is the life, and nobody comes except through Him. So if you can't keep Him dead, that's what He says. Sorry, I'm on His team. I'm goin' with Him.'

That's basically what they respond. That's actually a very, very humble position to take. We aren't resting on our own sense of intelligence or wisdom, or anything else. We're resting on Jesus Christ and simply saying that we take Him at His word.

Let's look at this second part of the issue. Is biblical Christianity exclusive? My short answer—yes, it is. There are people...Christianity teaches that there are people who are accepted by God and there are people who are not, in terms of their right-standing with God. There are people whose sins have been forgiven and there are people whose sins have not. Christianity teaches that it does...Christianity is exclusive. But I would follow up with this statement. It is exclusive, *but it is the most inclusive exclusivity in the world.* Ok? It is the most inclusive exclusivity in the world.

What do I mean by this? First of all, everyone is exclusive in one way or another. We all are. Ok? We all have this mental checklist of things that we evaluate people on. Sometimes we make it more formal than other times, ok? But we have this checklist, and when we meet someone, when we interact with them, when we find out things about them, we're sitting here and even on a subconscious level we're checking off things. Is it part of the "good list" or part of the "bad list"? And depending on how heavily they weigh on the "bad list" and how heavily they weigh on the "good list" we determine how acceptable that person is to us, whether we like spending time with them, whether or not they are "worthy" of our time, whether or not they are someone that we will agree with or associate with. We evaluate on things like political stance. We evaluate on things like free time, hobbies, how we spend that. Looks...outlooks on the family. We evaluate on things like religion. We evaluate on things like education and how someone communicates. We evaluate on how somebody dresses, or what race or ethnicity they are. We evaluate on this whole list of things, and everyone has this different, arbitrary little list that you, whether you know it or not, have come up with and you evaluate everyone by.

Everyone is exclusive. Every single religion is exclusive. But there's a big difference between every other religion and biblical Christianity. Every other religion is based upon the same sort of thing that our little check lists are based upon. It's all on what someone does. D...o... That's how it's spelled. Every other religion is spelled d...o...do. It's what you do that counts. Do you live up to the standards that have been set? Do you measure up

to them? Do you follow the “five pillars” well enough? Do you walk the eight-fold path well enough? Ok? It’s this idea that you have to somehow measure up to the standard, and until you do you will not be accepted. It’s all on your shoulders.

Christianity is totally different. It’s spelled d...o...n...e...done. It’s all about what has been done. It’s done; you can’t do anything. Everything that has to be done *has* been done by Jesus Christ, and Him alone. We look at this and we see this in Acts chapters 10 and 11. If you flip over there we’ll look at just a few verses.

Basic background is this. Peter, ok, Peter again—fun guy—he still doesn’t get it. Ok? He still does not get the fact that the gospel is open to everybody. Ok? He’s got the idea that ‘Ok, I have to just speak about what I see, and I’m gonna give witness to the reality of Christ.’ And he understands that part. He’s got that part down. But now God is going to give him like a gospel...a remedial gospel class. Ok? That’s what He’s doing in Acts chapter 10 and 11. It’s like He’s giving Peter this remedial gospel class; it’s Gospel 099, ok? ‘Cause he isn’t even quite there to Gospel 101 yet. And so what He’s going to do is He has Peter interact with someone that Peter thinks should be excluded—Cornelius. He’s a Gentile. He’s someone who’s uncircumcised; he’s unclean; he hasn’t been...he hasn’t performed the right ceremonial...just rituals, and everything else to become accepted. He is not...he doesn’t follow the right dietary laws. He’s not the right race and ethnicity. And Peter looks at him and he’s like, ‘Ok, he’s like...’ He would be somebody that Peter excludes.

Well, what happens in Acts chapter 20...God ends up having Peter go and talk to Cornelius. Ok? He has him talk to him and share the gospel with him, telling about Jesus kind of doing the part that Peter has down really well, testifying about the reality of Jesus. So what he does, in verse 44 and 46...Peter’s telling him, and while he’s still saying these things, while he’s still telling Cornelius about Jesus, all of a sudden the Holy Spirit falls on everyone who hears the Word, on all the people in Cornelius’ house. And Peter and those who came with him, these other Jewish believers, were hearing these people speaking in tongues and praising God! Now this is a really cool thing, because what you have to understand is prior to that, when Peter first got to Cornelius’ house it tells a lot about his mentality when he’s going into Peter’s [Cornelius’] house, when he walks into the classroom, so to speak. Because in verse 28 what he says is, he tells Cornelius, ‘Listen, you know that I’m a Jewish man, and it is forbidden for me to come and associate with you, much less visit you.’ How is that for a welcome as you enter somebody’s house as their guest? You say, ‘You know what?’ Basically, you know, typically, ‘I’m going to come visit you, but God told me I had to come, so I’m here because you know, basically you’re racially unclean and I shouldn’t be in your presence, even to be near you, much less coming to visit you. It’s just going to really make me unclean.’ That’s Peter’s response! That’s what he says to Cornelius! According to the next statement, Cornelius accepts him in, Peter starts saying all of this, telling about Jesus. And all of a sudden the Holy Spirit pours out.

And then when Peter goes back to Jerusalem, in chapter 11 verse 3, he gets back there and these people in Jerusalem, these other believers, they hear about it, and they say, ‘What in the world were you doing! You went and visited these people! What were you thinking?! They’re unclean! They’re uncircumcised! Not only that, you ate with them! What were you thinking?!’ And I love Peter’s response, because now it’s like the light bulb is finally come on and he gets it. In verse 17 of chapter 11, what he says is, ‘Look, I didn’t give an invitation, ok? God told me I had to go and just give witness to the reality of Jesus. So I was doin’ that. I was doin’ that I know how to do. I didn’t give an invitation; I didn’t tell ‘em “Oh, you have to do this; you have to do that.” As I’m still talking, all of a sudden God pours the Holy Spirit out on these guys, on this whole house, all these people. All of a sudden the Holy Spirit is poured out on them, and it was just like what happened to us on Pentecost! And so if God has accepted them, if God has poured out the Holy Spirit on these people, even though they don’t match up to what I think they should be like, even though they aren’t the race I think they should be, even though they don’t eat the way I think they should eat, even though they don’t have the culture I think they should have, or dress the way I think they should dress, or say the things I think they should say, none of that matters. If God has accepted them, who am I to stand in the way?’ See, that is biblical Christianity. That is biblical Christianity.

That’s why I say is biblical Christianity exclusive—yes! But it is the most inclusive exclusivity in the world. Why? Because there are no prerequisites. There are no requirements that you have to meet before you will be accepted. There are no...there’s no checklist of things that you have to do before God is willing to accept you. There’s not a standard that you have to live up to. You don’t have to get your life straight. It’s available and open to everybody, regardless of how you dress, how you live, what you do...everything. The question is whether or not you are entering into a relationship with God; whether or not you are willing to accept the fact that Jesus Christ, and He alone, paid for your sins; and you’re willing to just throw your arms open wide and turn over your life to Him. That’s the only question—am I willing to go on this journey with Him, realizing that I can’t do anything for the journey...it’s all been done by Jesus.

That's why it's the most inclusive exclusivity in the world, because everybody's exclusive, but Christianity says, 'You know what? I don't care whether or not you measure up to my mental checklist of who's acceptable and who's not.' God is willing to accept anyone...anyone.

The bottom line is basically this—it's not that Christians are better or smarter; it's not that they're any more intelligent. It's just that we believe, kind of using that analogy, that the elephant—yes, I'm blind, but the elephant all of a sudden started turning around and I was holdin' onto its tail, but then it kind of bumped me with its leg and I felt that, and I felt up along the side, and it moved around and grabbed me with its trunk and flipped me around over here, kind of had me brush up against its tusks and everything else, and started making elephant noises. And I realized, 'Wow! Wait a second. I thought this is the way things were, but the elephant...now I'm dealing with an elephant.' Christians simply believe that 'You know what? I'm not smart enough to figure out God, but God knew that and so He came down and revealed Himself to me.' And this is not a matter of personal preference. It's not that this is the way that I am choosing to be.

I went to a conference a couple months ago, in April/May, with Kevin Maxwell in our church. We had a fun time, great trip, but I tell you, he is the king of the exit row. Ok? On airplanes he loves getting the exit row. If he can get the exit row he'll get it. Why? Because he had more leg room. So here's a question. You know, the flight attendant...they come and they ask us 'Hey, do you know all that you need to do? You understand how to open it and how to direct people out, proper way to exit?' 'Yeah, sure, no problem. I got leg room. It's all good.' Here's a question—if we did not get the exit row on the flight, does it matter what Kevin's personal preference is? I mean, after they give their little in-flight safety briefing, you know—the exits are here, there, wherever—would it make any sense and would anybody take Kevin seriously if he stood up and said, 'Listen, I know that that's what the flight attendant said, but that's her personal perspective and that's her personal preference. I am sitting here, and I prefer the exit row. And so if our plane has an emergency, please direct yourself to my little row here, and I will direct you out the exit.' I'm sorry, but no matter what Kevin's personal preference is, nobody's fitting out that little window that's like this big and does not even roll down. Ok? Nobody's doin' it. It doesn't matter what his personal preference is. So the question is this—if God really exists...see it would be silly...no, Kevin doesn't stand up and do that. I don't stand up and do that. Why? Because we realize it's not a matter of personal preference. It's just a recognition of reality. There is a certain way the plane was designed; there was a certain way that it was built; there is a certain way that, if we acknowledge reality, if we wanna get out of that plane in an emergency, there is a proper way to exit the plane.

If God really exists, God is not a matter of our personal preference. He exists or He doesn't. He is the way He is, or He doesn't exist. And so if God comes and reveals Himself to us and says, 'Listen, this is who I am. Not only is this who I am, but this is the way you have to approach Me if you want to know Me.'—if God comes and does that, it's not a matter of personal preference. It's a matter of just recognizing reality. That's why I would just simply ask the question—is Jesus someone you can trust? He claimed this in multiple ways, multiple times, different wordings, everything. What He says, John 14:6—'I am *the way, the truth, the life*; no one comes to God the Father unless you come through Me.' That's what He says.

As we're wrapping it up here, just a thought. C. S. Lewis...I love this quote, because he basically summarizes this question—can we trust Jesus, yes or no? A lot of people say Jesus was just a good and moral teacher. I'm sorry, Jesus didn't leave that option open, and C. S. Lewis explains why. He says, 'Listen, you have to make your choice. You can either...this man, He either was and is the Son of God, or else He was a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit out and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any of this patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He did not intend to.' What he is saying is this: there are only three options, that's it. Three options. Jesus is a certifiable lunatic, ok? He is a nut job who belongs in a rubber room in a straight jacket. Ok? That is option one. Because He really thinks that He is God, but He's not. If somebody really thinks that they're God and they aren't, somethin'...a screw's loose. Ok? It would be like I thought I was a poached egg, to use C. S. Lewis' example. If I thought I was a poached egg, and I'm not, there's a problem. Ok? I belong somewhere safe where I won't hurt myself or others. And Jesus is the same way. Ok?

Second option is that He's a liar. He's someone who is intentionally misleading people in order for His own personal gain. He's misleading people to think that He is God and even, if necessary, die on His behalf for his own personal gain. That's not somebody that we hold up as a moral role model. That's what we call a psychotic cult leader who leads people to drink tainted lemonade, ok? Those are the first two options. Either Jesus was certifiably crazy or He was a liar.

Or the third option is that He actually was who He said He was. He's God. If that's the case, all of a sudden He elevates way beyond just a good, moral teacher, and we actually have to take Him seriously for what He says.

Sometimes people try and come up with a fourth option. Richard Dawkins does this and says, 'Well, maybe Jesus was just honestly mistaken.' I'm sorry; this is not a fourth option. If somebody is honestly...if I'm honestly mistaken because I honestly think, sincerely, that I'm a poached egg, I'm still crazy. Ok? If Jesus was honestly mistaken about being God, I'm sorry; He's still a lunatic.

That's why I simply come back to this question. Ask yourself—can I trust Jesus? My challenge to you is to do this. Read through the gospels. Read through the gospel; as you look at Jesus, ask yourself, "Can I trust this man?" Yes or no? If yes, then we have to accept the fact that if He says He is God, if you want to know God you come through Him. There is no other way.

Let's stand.

We're going to close with a song of prayer. It's a song of prayer; Joel wrote it. He actually based it on Acts 4, the situation and circumstance where Peter and John were giving witness to the reality of Christ, where they were saying, 'Listen, I don't have all the theological degrees; I'm not the most academically intelligent person. I don't know all these things. I'm just a common, uneducated person. All I can do is talk about the reality of Jesus Christ that I know.' And that's what we're going to pray for here today, is that in every circumstance and every situation we will simply give voice to the reality of Christ that we've experienced in our lives. So let's sing it.

[Congregation sings prayer song and is dismissed.]