

Neighborly Apologetics

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Only One Way

I Am the Way, I Am the Door

(Thumbnail Sketch from Del Tackett's Webinar, [October 12, 2024](#))

Is Jesus the only way? That question sits underneath almost every conversation about religion in the neighborhood. A neighbor may not put it in those words. She may say that all religions are basically the same, that it does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere, or that it sounds arrogant to claim a lock on truth. The heart of the objection is still the same. Christianity says there is one way, and that the way is Jesus.

Del Tackett takes up that claim in the neighborly apologetics series, not as a debate tactic and not as ammunition for thumping the person across the street. The name of the work comes from the royal law: love your neighbor. The vision he keeps casting is that God has entrusted the primary work of the kingdom to the ordinary Christian family. That family belongs to a royal priesthood, and the priesthood is exercised in the place where God has set them. The work is a deep and trusted relationship, fervent intercessory prayer, and then, as God opens the door, a conversation that can actually answer a real question. If Mrs. Smith across the street is troubled that Jesus is said to be the only way, the aim is not to win a point. The aim is to help her see what is true, and to do it in love.

Three ways of talking about religion

Religious pluralism is the belief that every religion is true and that each has provided a valid path to God. Religious relativism is its near cousin. Relativism does not say that every religion is true. It says there is no objective truth in religion at all. If you believe it, it is true for you. Islam is true for the Muslim, Christianity for the Christian, and nothing is true in itself. A family does not need a seminar on the difference. They only need to hear which claim the neighbor is actually making. Both stand over against a third position, religious exclusivism: only one way is true, and the others are false.

That third claim can grate even on a believer. Tackett does not soften it. This is Christianity. Jesus is the only way, and there is no other. The session exists to say why that is so, and how to say it without contempt.

Why the claim feels cruel

The grating feeling has a history in the culture, not only in the doctrine. The prime ethic of the age is compassion, but it is a compassion unbridled by truth, wisdom, or righteousness. Tackett calls it malevolent compassion. Because it is not held by what is true and good, it will embrace and even

affirm what is evil, what Scripture calls an abomination, and what will hurt people rather than help them. Anyone who says a neighbor is wrong is heard as unkind, because wrongness would hurt feelings.

God's compassion is not like that. He is not bridled, but His compassion always comes in the form of what is true, good, and righteous. That is why He can be compassionate and still discipline. The discipline is itself compassion, because He knows what is for our good. Hebrews says that discipline trains us. Malevolent compassion will not allow the training. It recoils from any notion that someone could be wrong.

The charges, and what they assume

Three charges usually arrive with the objection.

The first is intolerance. To say Jesus is the only way is treated as intolerant, and the word is meant to end the conversation. No one wants to be called intolerant, a bully, or a bigot. The charge is a trump card. It is also uneven. Pluralists are often sharply intolerant of exclusivists. The issue is not tolerance. It is intolerance of this particular claim. Inside a trusted relationship, a Christian may be able to say, gently, that the charge itself sounds intolerant.

The second is narrow-mindedness. Pluralism is narrow in its own way. It does not make room for the person who says Jesus is the only way. And narrowness is not a defect of truth. It is nearly a definition of truth. Truth does not say the grass is green and orange at the same time, that up is down, or that good is evil.

The third is what academic apologetics calls intellectual imperialism. Exclusiveness, and even truth and meaning, get labeled fascist. The word is thrown at anyone who will not sway from the judgment that some things are wrong. Behind the label is the demand that truth be more democratic. Truth is not settled by 51 percent of the vote. Fifty-one percent of people can be wrong. When a culture walks away from God and from absolute truth, it has to find some other way to decide right and wrong, and a vote is sometimes asked to do that work. Majority practice is not a moral argument. In many Hindu settings it was once religious custom, when a man died, to burn his widow with him. A culture can follow a pattern and still be wrong.

What pluralism quietly assumes

Under the claim that Jesus cannot be the only way sit several hidden truth claims.

One is that something truly moral rises above every religion. People say that all the religions teach kindness, or that all of them want love. That is an a priori moral absolute. It also conflicts with the naturalism on which much pluralism rests. Naturalism discounts the miracles of Jesus, the resurrection, and anything supernatural. Yet the same position reaches into the religions and pulls out moral absolutes. A neighbor who holds both may be helped by a question that lets her see the strain.

Another assumption is that the world is religiously ambiguous, which means the truth cannot really be known. The religions are all different, and at the same time they are said to lead to the same place. The stated reason they differ is that no one can know. Dialogue then becomes the only path to truth, and survey classes are offered so that people will become tolerant. Tolerance matters in

Christianity. It belongs to kindness. It does not require anyone to deny what is true, and love is not unbridled.

A third assumption is that relativism is true. That claim defeats itself. To say there is no truth, and to say it as if it were absolutely true, is to assert an absolute in the act of denying absolutes.

The practical questions follow. What is the basis for the truth claim that all religions are the same? That sentence is itself a truth claim, and it is fair to ask where it came from. If the both-and is true, and an either-or is refused, the law of non-contradiction is set aside. Square circles and one-way streets that run both ways are not available to us. The world we inhabit does not work that way. Hindu pantheism and Christian theism exclude each other. A fundamental essence of Hinduism is pantheism. A fundamental essence of Christianity is its view of God. Islam denies that Jesus died and rose. Christianity proclaims it, and the resurrection is the key apologetic of the faith. Those two cannot both be true on that point. A conversation can begin there, without scorn: do you think Islam and Christianity are the same?

The hard question, and the easy way out

The big question, treated earlier in the series, is whether Jesus is God in the flesh, and whether He Himself said so. The claim was not invented by later admirers. The hard question is whether He is the only way. It is hard because of the names attached to it, and because of the culture those names come from. A neighbor may ask how anyone can assert that Jesus is the only way to God, how Christians can be so sure they are right and everyone else is wrong, whether good Buddhists are bound for hell, what to make of an atheist neighbor who is a faithful husband and a good father, or what becomes of a man who grows up far from any gospel preaching and never hears the name of Jesus. Those are not trick questions in most cases. People feel them. They should not be brushed aside.

The easy escape is to say, "I am not saying Jesus is the only way." The names stop. The pressure lifts. That is not what Christians hold, and it is not what Jesus taught.

It is also not new. Early Christians were not thrown to the arena because they believed in Jesus. They were hated because they would not accept the other gods, because they said Jesus was the only way. The pressure now is social more often than imperial. A person can be shunned, pushed out of polite company, and, increasingly, hurt economically. The world does not want Jesus called the way. It wants Him called a way.

Tim Keller, writing in *The Reason for God* about nearly two decades in New York, said that when he asked people their biggest problem with Christianity, one of the most frequent answers came down to a single word: exclusivity. Mahatma Gandhi, informed by Christianity and still pluralist, said the soul of religion is one, encased in a multitude of forms. A line attributed in the session to President Obama, that Jesus is the only way for him but that he was not in a position to judge others, is relativism in a softer voice. The Second Vatican Council, in *Lumen Gentium* 16, taught that those who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive to do His will as known through conscience, can attain salvation. Tackett reads that as a pluralist claim that Jesus is not the only way. After September 11, Charles Gibson asked President George W. Bush whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Bush answered that he thought they do, and that there are different routes to the Almighty. Asked whether Christians, non-Christians, and Muslims go to heaven in his mind, he said yes, by

different routes. In Rome, confessing the other gods as equally valid could spare a person the pit. The same kind of confession spares a person the names now.

Do you think any of these are wrong?

Coexist stickers gather the religions into one friendly word. The list behind the sticker is longer than the major faiths. It runs through Dianic witchcraft, occult practice, demonology, and groups a neighbor has never considered religions at all. The accusation is that, with so many, it is arrogant to think only one is right.

A useful question, asked when the relationship can bear it, is whether any of them are wrong. If demonology is wrong, or the worship of Satan is wrong, then the blanket claim has already failed. Not all religions are true. Not all are right and good. That is a starting point, not a closing argument.

Reality is already exclusive

It does not logically hold that contradictory roads arrive at the same God. Lee Strobel puts the problem in ordinary speech. It makes no sense that God would tell one part of the world that He is triune, that Jesus is His Son, and that people come by repentance and faith as a gift of grace, then tell another part that His name is Allah, that He has no Son, that He is distant, and that the way is works, and then tell a third part something else again. A God who did that would be schizophrenic. There is a reality about who God is. Revelation is how it is known. Contradictory accounts are not all true.

The world we already live in is full of one-way things. A driver does not tell the officer that the one-way sign is bigotry. A hundred-dollar bill is valid in one form, and counterfeits are rejected. A gallon is not whatever a station owner prefers. A pound is a pound. Water flows down. Pluralism feels spacious until it is asked to describe money, measures, or gravity. Exclusivity fits the world we inhabit. Pluralism does not fit it as easily.

Families need that conversation among themselves before they need it with Mrs. Smith. Christians feel the pressure too. The topic is for the household, not only for the neighbor.

The argument is with Jesus

The more important point is that Christians did not invent the exclusivity. Jesus did. Greg Koukl's counsel is to say so plainly. This was not your idea. You may not even be comfortable with it. Jesus said it, repeatedly, and the people He trained said the same thing. If you follow Him, you say what He said. Anyone upset by the claim has to take it up with Him. It is easy to dismiss a neighbor. It is harder to dismiss Jesus of Nazareth, whom most people still claim to like. The question that changes the room is a simple one: do you think He was wrong?

He was not ambiguous. In Matthew 11, all things have been handed over to Him by the Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. In John 6, the Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and Jesus will raise them up at the last day. In Matthew 10, the one who acknowledges Him before men, He will acknowledge before the Father; the one who denies Him, He will deny. In John 14 He says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 3 is usually cut off before the exclusivity becomes explicit. As Moses lifted up the serpent, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. God did not send the Son to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. Whoever believes is not condemned. Whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

He also named the other ways as false. The man who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in another way, is a thief and a robber. "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved." That saying would not survive a modern panel. It is still what He said. False prophets come in sheep's clothing and are ravenous wolves. Many will arise and lead many astray. False christs and false prophets will show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect. He does not say they have another valid route. He says they lead astray.

The apostles did not misunderstand Him. Paul writes that even if there are so-called gods in heaven or on earth, for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist (1 Corinthians 8:5-6). Peter, answering for a healed man, says there is salvation in no one else, "for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Early Christians went to the fire rather than unsay that.

Why the cross, if there are many ways

Part of the struggle is that we think too little of Jesus and of what He did, and too much of ourselves. No other major religion claims the atonement Christians claim, that Jesus died for sins. If He is only one of many ways, what other way satisfies the wrath of a holy God? And if many easier ways exist, why did the Father send the Son to be scourged, beaten, nailed to a cross, and killed? The cross is an odd expenditure if sincerity along any road would have done.

Stock replies can be met with questions rather than speeches. If all roads lead to the same place, ask what that place is. If all major religions teach the same thing and worship the same God, ask to be told about that God. If exclusivity was only a later power move by the disciples, open the statements and read them. If each religion sees part of the truth and none sees the whole, ask how anyone knows what the whole is. If all belief is only a social construct, then the claim itself is only the product of a social construct, and cannot be true in the sense the speaker needs. If it is arrogant to say one religion is right and to call others to it, the denial is a claim of the same kind. If there cannot be only one absolute way, the world of gallons, road signs, and gravity is already an answer.

The big question answers the hard one

Whether Jesus is the only way depends on who He is. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." God says there is no other. The plural pronouns of creation, "let us make man in our image," belong to the Christian confession that God is a socially complex being. Jesus is that God in the flesh.

Scale decides the question. If Jesus is merely a man, He is one of billions. If He is a prophet, He is one of dozens. If He is a founder, He is one of many. If He is a good man among deities, He joins a pantheon. If there is one God, and Jesus is that God, and He says He is the only way, then there is no other. The higher one sees Jesus, the more the only way makes sense. The lower one sees Him, the less it makes sense. There is no middle ground that leaves Him admirable and His claim disposable.

If we are treated as the authors of the exclusivity, we are an insufficient answer, and He is made a liar. If He claimed to be God, and the resurrection stands behind the claim, the authority is His.

The question remains costly in public. A televised conversation, of the sort associated with Oprah, shows how quickly the claim is heard as a lie against kind people who never heard the name. One voice in that exchange, drawing on Marianne Williamson's *A Return to Love* and Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael*, argued that there are millions of ways to be human and many paths to God, and that love and kindness bring a person to the same place whether or not the name was known. Another voice answered that there is one way, and only one way, and that it is through Jesus. Tackett does not pretend the exchange is easy. He does locate the real conversation somewhere else.

Not the set, the living room

The royal law does not send the family onto a soundstage. It sends them into a relationship already marked by care, with prayer underneath it. If Mrs. Smith says all roads lead to Rome, a literal answer is available and useful. Many roads do not lead to Rome. Interstate 80 does not. Iceland's Route 1 is a circle. A person can drive it for a lifetime and never arrive. The proverb is pleasant and false. The destinations in view are not neighboring cities. They are as far apart as Rome and the Mariana Trench, or Rome and the moon.

Jesus said there is one way. The resurrection is the proof He offered for who He is. The statements are on the page. Even the softer claim, that the other religions at least share a destination, has to exempt Christianity, because Christianity does not lead where they lead. A long list of religions is not a set of parallel roads. They are not headed the same direction.

Exclusivity is poorly received in this culture. That is why the royal law matters. These things are handled less in the public square than in a trusted relationship, with deep and fervent prayer behind the conversation, and with the love Jesus requires. The knowledge is for helping, not for thumping.

Number three in the series ends there. The next category is faith and reason.

NOTE

Scripture in this article follows the passages read in the session: Matthew 10:32–33; Matthew 11:27; Matthew 7:15; Matthew 24:11, 24; John 3:14–18; John 6:40; John 10:1, 9; John 14:6; Acts 4:8–12; 1 Corinthians 8:5–6. Quotations of public figures are given as presented in the webinar and should be checked against the original sources before they are cited as standalone quotations.

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Only One Way & Religious Pluralism

I Am the Way, I Am the Door

(Thumbnail Sketch from Del Tackett's Webinar, [October 12, 2024](#))

Is Jesus the only way? Most of us have heard the softer version. All religions lead to God. It does not matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere. It sounds arrogant to say there is only one path.

That question came up in a recent Neighborly Apologetics session with Del Tackett. He did not treat it as a debate topic. He treated it as something a neighbor may really feel. The good Buddhist. The kind atheist next door who is a faithful husband and a good father. The person who grew up far from any preaching of the gospel and never heard the name of Jesus. Those are not trick questions. People ask them because they weigh on them.

The easy answer is to say, "I am not claiming Jesus is the only way." The tension drops. No one calls you narrow. Tackett's point is that this is not what Christians hold, and it is not what Jesus taught. Early believers were not hated simply because they believed in Jesus. They were hated because they would not confess the other gods. The pressure now is usually social rather than an arena, but the demand is the same. The world will accept Jesus as a way. It does not want Him called the way.

We did not invent that claim. In John 14:6 Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He says He is the door, and that the person who climbs in some other way is a thief and a robber. Peter, speaking of the name by which a lame man had been healed, says there is salvation in no one else, "for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). If that bothers us, the argument is with Jesus, not with a later church that tightened His words.

It also sits poorly beside the cross. If many easier roads reach God, why did the Father send the Son to be scourged and killed? No other major religion claims that Jesus died for sins. Sincerity along any path would have made that death unnecessary.

This is not a license to thump the person across the street. Tackett keeps returning to the royal law: love your neighbor. The setting for this conversation is a trusted relationship, with prayer under it. If someone says all roads lead to the same place, we can ask what that place is. If someone says every religion is true, we can ask whether any of them are wrong. Truth has always been narrow. The grass is not green and orange at once. Our calling is to say what Jesus said, and to say it as people who care.

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