

An Inclusive Christ

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Acts 7:44-8:1a; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

“No one comes to the Father except through me.” -- John 14:6

In all the Bible courses I teach for the Lay School, one of the first and most important points I make is that the Bible is its own best interpreter. That’s a classic truth among people who have studied the Bible seriously, with training, and in a disciplined way.

If you want to know what a particular word or phrase or sentence or narrative means, the first place you look is at the other biblical occurrences of that word or phrase or sentence or narrative. How are the passages similar and how are they different? Are some usages less obscure than others? Which usages predate the others and might have served as models or inspiration for the later usages? Do some usages appear to be expansions or modifications or corrections of earlier usages?

When you do the necessary homework to answer these kinds of questions, you’re moving from what we commonly call “Bible study” in the church to “biblical studies” in the academy, and the chances of your actually learning something go way up. You begin to see that the Bible isn’t just a jumble of random obscure writings wedged between a front and back cover, but rather it has a vast, richly-layered and coherent message. The Bible starts to become the word of God for you in ways it never can be if you treat it simply as an impenetrable thicket of good ideas, on the one hand, or a piece of pious bric-à-brac, on the other.

And sadly, Sunday mornings at church don’t give us the opportunity to do this kind of sustained, detailed work, which is why I teach several different Bible courses in the Lay School and encourage all of you to take them. The Lay School is a tremendous opportunity to get beneath the surface of the Bible and begin to see the inner workings that have made this text so authoritative for so many for so long.

I say all of this – which the most orthodox fundamentalist would agree with – by way of prefacing an interpretation of this morning’s text which is anything but orthodox. The text, to remind you, is the second half of the sixth verse of the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, and it says this: “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The speaker is Jesus, or so it appears, but in the Gospel of John, it’s important – in fact, it’s essential – to remember who, exactly, John is writing about when he writes about Jesus. And to get a clearer understanding of who Jesus is for John, we turn, not to the fourteenth chapter of his gospel, but rather to the first, and its opening verses, which say this:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

That eternal, uncreated Word of God – which John identifies not only as being with God but actually being God – that infinite, eternal reality, for which John uses the Greek word *logos*, that is what John takes as the subject matter for his gospel, and he writes about it in its incarnate form, whom we know as Jesus. And it is that form of God – that

eternal, infinite, divine truth, knowledge, love, and wisdom, all made flesh in Jesus the Christ – who is speaking in John’s gospel whenever Jesus speaks.

So this morning’s text, a verse used for over twenty centuries to divide Christians from everyone else and to give us our sense of religious superiority to all other faiths, does, in fact, nothing of the sort. It does not say, as Christian theologians and preachers have so often said, that you must be a Christian in order to be saved. It says, rather, that if you wish to come *to* God, you must do so *through* God. God is not simply the end, God is also the means – the only means – or, as John puts it in Jesus’s discourse, the eternal Word of God-in-Flesh is the way, the truth, and the life.

Now I realize, of course, that it’s a quick, easy hop from what I’ve just said to what the vast majority of Christians say, which is that the eternal Word of God-Made-Flesh is Jesus, and that to come to the Father through Jesus means you have to follow Jesus, and the people who follow Jesus are called Christians, ergo, you must be a Christian in order to be saved. That’s how that classic theological syllogism runs. It’s a line of reasoning that’s neat, powerful, persuasive to many, and wrong.

And the reason this interpretation is wrong is because it does not conform to the overall message of Scripture. It is patently ludicrous to suggest that every single person who ever lived on planet earth has to have or have had some sort of personal acquaintance with the historical person Jesus in order to be saved. I recognized the absurdity of this idea when I was in my early teens and I asked one of my Sunday School teachers if Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Jeremiah and Isaiah and all the other people who lived before Jesus were going to hell. They had never taken Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, and they’d never even had the chance to. It seemed puzzling literally beyond belief to my teenage mind to suggest – no, overtly declare – Christian exclusivity, on the one hand, and yet hold up as models of faith people who predated Christianity, on the other. That kind of reasoning made no sense to me then and makes even less sense to me now.

It’s an offense to God and to a Christ worthy of the name to think and teach that only a tiny fraction of people are going to be saved because they claim the name Christian. And yet, this is exactly what orthodox Christianity has taught, at least since the third century, when a bishop from North Africa named Cyprian coined the expression, “Outside the church there is no salvation.” Christians of every stripe – Orthodox, Catholic, Southern Baptist, Pentecostal – have embraced this teaching as their own, urging everyone else to get on their particular bus before it leaves the station for heaven, lest they get left behind.

Don’t laugh, friends. Remember the “Left Behind” series, those sixteen books of fictionalized biblical literalism by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins? In 1998, the first four of the series held the top four slots on the *New York Times* bestseller list, even though the best-seller list doesn’t include sales from Protestant booksellers. The series has sold over 63 million copies, and seven of the adult titles have reached the number one spot on the best-seller lists of the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publishers Weekly*. The notion that heaven has a sign reading “Christians Only” is not a fringe idea; in American religion, especially American Protestantism, it’s mainstream, it’s popular, and it sells.

And so it’s left to us, liberalized and increasingly marginalized Christians, to preserve a more inclusive Christianity and follow a more inclusive Christ. As fewer and fewer of our young people want anything to do with religion of any kind, I believe the future of American Christianity belongs not to those who exclude, shut out, and threaten with damnation, but rather with those who will offer a version of the gospel that is welcoming, demanding, compassionate, and honest. A version of the gospel that asks us to be mature in our thinking and feeling, resisting simplistic answers to the world’s needs,

whether those answers come from the Bible or from a preacher or from a catechism. In the globalized, flattened world of information in which our young people have grown up, to ask them to embrace an “our way or the highway” version of the gospel is to doom us to irrelevance and to subject the gospel of Jesus Christ rightfully to scorn.

We have work to do, friends, you and I. We have a message to proclaim of an inclusive Christ, who welcomes sinners and demands of his followers that they take up their cross if they wish to follow him. It’s not easy being that kind of Christian, with that double message, but it is exciting, and joyous, and real. If you’re looking for an adventure that will last a lifetime, look there.