

Christ Confronts Pluralism

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Christ Confronts the Culture Series

Acts 4:12; 10:43

My family and I had the opportunity, over the last week and a half, to go back to New York City, where I grew up and to spend some time not only sightseeing, but visiting my extended family – my sister and her husband, my dad and stepmother, and other relatives. We hadn't been to New York for six or seven years. And Marlene and I also had the opportunity to visit my aunt, whom we hadn't seen in quite some time.

Well, we arrived at her apartment in Manhattan. Imagine you haven't seen a relative in quite some time. We arrived at her apartment and chatted a little bit about her job and NYC and some of the things that we had done – a Broadway play that we had taken in – when almost entirely out of the blue, my aunt made a statement that went something like, “Can you believe these idiots that are interested in impeaching the President?”

Now, I wasn't particularly interested in getting into a political discussion with a relative that I hadn't seen for nearly a decade, so Marlene and I both smiled and said, “Uh-huh.” And then she went on and said, “But, of course, we women support the President.” And I watched my gentle wife's face flush a bit and her jaw clench. Having said that, my aunt went on to say, “You know, it is amazing – we women in America have to support the President because of all that he has done on behalf of women.” And having now baited my wife with 3-4 “we women all feel a certain way” kind of comment, but especially that “the President has done so much for us as women”, my aunt successfully lit the fuse on the powder keg and we had an explosion for the next hour. I knew we were in for it when I heard my wife say, “What exactly has the President done for us women? Open the door for a business executive to sexually harass his secretary? What do you mean the President has served us women? By turning sex with a subordinate into a joke so that professors now feel free to prey upon college students and bosses feel free to use their position to gratify themselves with interns?”

For at least a part of the conversation, I was ducking as I watched an irresistible force encounter an immovable object. Have you ever listed to, or been part of a debate or discussion, where the two viewpoints that are being shared are diametrically opposed to each other? You have seen the debates on TVerse. They have the militant Muslim fundamentalist and the Israeli Zionist sitting around a table debating about why there are so many problems in Israel right now. Or the radical feminist and the male chauvinist talking about gender roles. Or the union agitator and the business executive talking about lay-offs or moving jobs to Mexico. What do you get when you bring two opposing forces, two opposing viewpoints together in the same room? You get an explosion. It is something like the Monday Night Football graphic – these two helmets with their

team logos. Tonight the Green Bay Packers take on the Minnesota Vikings. And you watch these two helmets smashing into one another and exploding.

That is what happened on our recent trip to New York when we visited my aunt. That is what has happened, on occasion, with some of you as you have had opportunity to debate, discuss, and argue with people who have radically different points of view. An explosion is precisely what occurred.

In the ministry of Jesus Christ as he regularly confronted the world, sparks constantly flew. And all one needs to do is to read the gospels, the biographical accounts of Jesus' life, and you will see these sparks constantly flying because a great amount of Jesus' ministry was a ministry of confrontation with the world.

Now, I must immediately define what I mean by "the world." The Bible uses the "world" in a number of senses. Sometimes the "world" just simply means the creation, the earth, as opposed to the heavens. Sometimes when the Bible speaks of the "world" it simply means people, people of various races and nationalities – the world of men and women. But often, and particularly in writings of the apostle John, the word "world" is used in a very negative way to describe the viewpoints and thought processes, the values, the aims and purposes – what we might call the mind set – of people who are hostile to Jesus Christ. The world refers to the whole mindset of folks that resulted not only in arguments with Jesus, or explosions and debates, but a rejection of Jesus and ultimately the crucifixion of Christ. A good summary verse regarding the world is found in 1 John 2 where the apostle John writes, "Do not love the world or anything in the world." Don't be attracted to, don't succumb to, don't be in love with the view points, the aims, the purposes, the values, that are in opposition to God, that are hostile to his son Jesus. John goes on and says, "If anyone loves the world, [this hostile mindset to Christ] the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world, the cravings of sinful man, the lusts of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does, comes not from the Father, but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."

Let me apply what I have been saying to Christians and to the church. Why is it that millions and millions of Americans claim to be Christians, are self-identified as "born again", and yet these millions and millions of Christians have so little impact on our universities, our government, on the media, the realm of the arts and entertainment, or in moral battles regarding abortion, euthanasia, sexuality – how do we understand the huge number of self-identified number of born again Christians in this country and the apparently minimal effect, the comparative small impact of their lives on this country? The Bible has one simple explanation. The Bible's explanation is that Christians often succumb to worldliness. By worldliness, we aren't talking about Christians wearing flashy clothes, driving expensive cars, wearing the latest hair style or jewelry or getting a part of your body pierced, other than a woman's earlobes. By worldliness we are talking about succumbing to the goals, the aims, the purposes, the viewpoints of a culture that is hostile to Jesus Christ. We are talking about thought processes that are not the thought processes of God.

Why does the church in America have so little impact? Bottom line: because the church has become worldly.

Let me give you some evidence for this assertion. Survey after survey indicates that born again, self-identified Christians are far more religious than the general public. Self-identified, born again people are more likely to go to church than the average person is. They are more likely to listen to Christian radio broadcasts. They are more likely to watch Christian TV. They are more likely to read a Christian magazine. More likely to purchase Christian books.

But on a variety of values and behavioral measurements, self-identified born again Christians mirror, exactly mimic the behaviors and values of the surrounding culture. Let me give you a few shocking statistics.

1 out of 5 women who have abortions in this country are self-identified, born again evangelical Christians. For those who think that just going to church is sufficient to combat worldliness, 1 out of 5 women in this country who have abortions call themselves born again.

Or how about this – Roman Catholics are far more likely than either Protestants or Jews to have an abortion. The number of abortions performed for Roman Catholic women far exceed their percentage of the population.

Or how about this – one quarter of those who attend an evangelical church and who self-identify as born again Christians strongly agree with the statement that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Here are people who claim to follow the one who is the way, the truth and the life. They claim to believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, and yet a quarter of them strongly agree with the statement that there is no such thing as absolute truth.

41% of born again people say that your first duty in life is to yourself.

I do not want to depress you with further statistics on the prevalence of divorce or premarital sex or tax cheating. There are certainly bright spots – the level of volunteerism, the percentage of people who work with the poor. There is a higher percentage of soup kitchens, homeless shelters and homes for our unwed moms that are run by born again Christians. But there is a lot of statistical data to suggest that the Christian church in America and individual Christians in particular have succumbed to worldliness, being thoroughly soaked with and drenched with the attitudes and behaviors and purposes and aims of the surrounding culture.

If this weren't a great problem, the Bible wouldn't warn us over and over again to be on guard. We wouldn't find passionate rebukes like that of James to the church in his day when he writes, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred to God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." Or Paul's statement to the Corinthian church in 2 Cor. 11, "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's coming, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Jesus Christ." Or Paul's warnings about the last days in 2 Tim. 4 where he writes, "The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine, instead to suit their own desires they will gather around them a number of teachers to say what itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."

I am going to do a series of teachings that I have titled "Christ Confronts the Culture" because I am concerned about the steady drip of what the Bible calls worldliness that pollutes the thinking of Christian people and drives their behavior. I am concerned because when many Christians meet the philosophies, the thought processes, and the attitudes that are hostile to Christ, there is no explosion at all. It isn't two opposing forces colliding like the helmets on Monday Night Football. Christians are not even on the playing field against the forces of secularism or materialism or the sexual revolution. The church has essentially waved the white flag, we have accommodated.

See, I am concerned about the approach that many of you and many Christians in America take regarding a lot of the flash point issues in our culture. The most common approach of most Christians is to privatize their faith. In other words, in order to engage in the university at a level acceptable to a professor, or to engage in business and still be acceptable to one's colleagues, or to engage with one's family, many Christians simply place their faith in this private realm and divorce their faith from their reason. The approach they take is, "Well, in Christianity I find a lot of personal peace. I have my own standards that I am living by and I love the church and I love the friendship and comfort that I get from other Christians." But whenever truth claims come up at an intellectual level in the world, the Christian simply goes along with the viewpoints and thought processes and smiles politely. So the world's claims to be ultimate purveyor of the truth are left unchallenged. Sure I am a Christian, but when I deal with my university professors or other students, when I deal in my H.S. classroom, when I converse in my workplace, I separate my faith from my reason. My faith is a private matter. I am willing to talk with people about Jesus, but the implications of me following Jesus, when it comes to the flash point issues of pluralism, feminism, or homosexual practice, I just shut up about those because I don't want to be viewed as a Neanderthal. I don't want to be marginalized. I know there is a lot of hostility out there and I see what happens when Christians get too vocal and work out the implications of their faith in the public square. I am not going to do that."

I am doing this series because I don't want to have a church full of privatized Christians, Christians who will talk about religion with others occasionally, and maybe talk about church and Jesus, but that's it. The fundamental issues are turned over to viewpoints and thought processes that are hostile to God's way of thinking. Of course, another option is to simply succumb and just surrender.

I see this with many university students. A person begins to think that to be really intellectually honest I have to surrender whole chunks of the Christian narrative, the Christian viewpoint, and the Christian understanding of the world. So maybe that person continues to go to church for a time, but they become unconvinced when it comes to things like: is Jesus really the only way to God? Is the Bible really infallible? Aren't there many ways up the mountain to God? Is abortion really morally wrong? Is it really a sin to have sex before marriage? Is homosexual marriage a legitimate option for some? Regarding major chunks of Christian teaching, Christian ethics, and the Christian story line, if a person doesn't privatize their faith many simply chuck it out and become hollowed out.

Or they become convinced that the truth is really on the other side, and it is not in the Bible. Many simply lose their confidence that what we have in Christianity is really real, that Christianity is the best explanation of reality.

A third approach and the only one I am going to be advocating throughout this series is to bolster yourself regarding the claims of Christianity so that you don't have to cut your faith off from your brain or give up your faith. If you have a substantial foundation for confronting the world, instead of being drenched, you get a grasp of what the issues are and begin to find a really satisfying, meaningful answer to the problems and philosophies that we are confronted with in the world. I will tell you, not only will there be an explosion when you as a Christian are powerfully able to articulate your faith and begin to apply it to a range of issues in life. Not only can you anticipate an explosion, but you can anticipate in the lives of many great acceptance. There are lots and lots of people who are hungry for some foundation. They are desperate for somebody who has a road map. If you are a person who has a compass and you are willing to help others to find their true destinies, to find direction toward God, to find answers for marriage, family and life, you are going to be valued by many. You are going to be sought out by many, you are going to find a ready acceptance. Not only an explosion, but also acceptance. As we understand the issues and embrace the thoughts of Christ, we have the possibility of powerful impact.

Today I am going to talk about when Christ Confronts Pluralism. Let's pray.

By pluralism sometimes people mean just the sheer diversity of race, culture, language, heritage, value systems, and religion in western nations as a whole and in America today. While it is difficult to have absolute numbers because the census bureau is prohibited from collecting religious data, it appears that Muslims in America will outnumber Presbyterians by the year 2000. And they will approach in numbers other groups like Methodists and Jews. Here are the facts of pluralism. Minorities have grown from 1 in 5 Americans in 1980 to 1 in 4 in 1985. And because of differences in age structure, one third of all American children now, 1 in 3 American children are either Black, Hispanic, or Asian. It is an unprecedented fact of diversity of young people today.

About 200 US counties right now have a minority-majority which means that their combined non-white and Hispanic populations exceed their non-Hispanic, white populations. California will be a minority-majority in year 2000, Texas will follow in 2005. Only 14% of Miami right now is non-Hispanic white. Talk with public school teachers in virtually every major urban area in the country. In LA students speak over 100 different languages at home. Nearly 20% of children who attend public schools in America speak a language other than English at home.

Advertisers and the media are just getting in touch with the enormous diversity that currently exists in America. In the past, in the 1950's, about the only Hispanic representative on TV was Ricky Ricardo. Now there are hundreds of Spanish language stations across the country. And in some cities, the most popular stations are Spanish-speaking stations.

This is to say nothing of the 10 million Americans who check the box "other" when it comes to race because of interracial marriages. Because people don't

know how to classify themselves, there is a growing percentage of Americans that are checking “other.”

Here is a second thought. Not only are we confronted with the fact of pluralism, the simple sheer diversity of American culture today, but a second truth that we encounter is that God loves diversity. While many white evangelical Christians are threatened or feel insecure and not quite at home, or are attempting to battle diversity, the Christian who opens up their Bible will discover that God loves diversity. God loves diversity in creation. All one needs to do is visit an aquarium to see an extraordinary variety of sea creatures. There are little hundreds of thousands of varieties of insects that have yet to be even named or classified, to say nothing of the various kinds of plants. God loves diversity.

If you have a Bible, what I would like you to do is open up to Matthew 28 where there is a very famous text often called the Great Commission, the great charge that Jesus gave to the church. We read in Matthew 28:18, “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations [and I want you to underline those words – of all nations] baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And truly I am with you always to the very end of the age.’”

The promise of verse 20 that Jesus would be with us always is designed to encourage us as we follow this charge to make disciples of all nations. One of the most helpful things that has occurred in the area of Christian missions in the last 25 years is a deeper understanding of what Jesus was talking about when he said, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Jesus was not referring to the modern political state like Spain or that group of countries that make up the UN when he said: “make disciples of all nations.” Jesus was talking about ethnic groups, what mission specialists call people groups.

In Luzanne, Switzerland a “people group” was defined by Christian missiologists – mission specialists – as a specifically large group of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, and occupation. What Jesus is saying is go and make disciples out of all ethnic groups. And Jesus is just repeating here what God had been saying from the beginning of the OT. That he wanted people from every ethnic grouping to worship him.

The Jewish people were commanded to declare God’s praise among the nations.

Let me make a simple point here. I don’t know what your picture of heaven is. But the biblical picture of heaven is not a bunch of white, suburban, baby boomer Americans wearing khakis purchased from the LL Bean catalogue, all speaking English and singing Vineyard songs before the throne. Let me put it more plainly. God’s ultimate plan is not to turn everyone into some homogenized version of white evangelical Americans and 1 token Hispanic like Ricky Ricardo. I don’t know what you think of as the scene in heaven, but the Bible says in Revelation 7:9, “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne in front of the Lamb.” In heaven people are going to retain their

diversity. God loves diversity so much that in heaven people are going to look different, I believe. We are going to sound different and dress differently. I expect somehow that we will understand each other. We will love each other, but the diversity that we are seeing in America more and more is something that is for eternity. It isn't something that needs to be crushed and suppressed. This is part of the ultimate plan of God.

You say, "Rich, why does God love diversity? Why does God desire people from every ethnicity, every race, and every language group to be represented in heaven praising his name?"

Let me give you some analogies if I can. The greatness of something can be gauged by the diversity of people who recognize that greatness. For example, if the only person in the world that thinks that you have a nice singing voice or that you have musical ability is your mother, it is probably a safe bet that your voice is not very good and you are not very musical.

If the only people that appreciate a certain group are under the age of 12, like the Hansens, or over the age of 75 like Lawrence Welk, you would still not say that that particular musical form is great. But if you could find music that every one, young and old, appreciated and not only white Americans, but urban Blacks and Japanese people living in Japan and Nomadic tribesmen in Central Asia and Indians living in little villages in India – if a diversity of people around the world all said in unison, "We love this music, there must be something really special about it" then it would be truly great. God's greatness is magnified in direct proportion to the diversity of people who say he is great.

Let me give you a different illustration. A person's leadership is directly related to the range of people who that person has impact upon, and who that person is able to influence. If the only person that you are able to lead is your five year old, and you lead him not very well at that, we might say that you have a small gift of leadership. If you were only able to lead people who are exactly like you – your age, education level, finances, and all of that – if the only people you were able to lead were exactly like you – again, we would say that you have a limited gift of leadership. But if your leadership extended across ages and ethnicities and language groups so that no matter where you went in the world, you had leadership on your life and you were recognized as a leader, then we would say, "There is someone whose leadership ought to be admired."

It reflects the glory of God when there is a diversity of people who come under the leadership of Jesus Christ. When people from every ethnicity, not just white Anglo-Saxon's, but people from every ethnicity come under and submit themselves to his leadership, God gets more glory. He gets more glory from diversity than from uniformity. God loves diversity.

Now what are the limits on God's love of diversity? Well, the limit has to do with truth. See, there is a fact of diversity, race, language and culture. There is a love of diversity of God our Father, but there is a limit regarding pluralism when it comes to the truth. Turn with me to Acts 10, I want you to see this. Here is what we read, "At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a Centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing. He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. He

distinctly saw an angel of God who came to him and said, 'Cornelius.' Cornelius stared at him in fear and asked, 'What is it Lord?' The angel answered, 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.'

Now before we talk about the limits on pluralism, let's understand what the Christian position is biblically. The Christian position toward those who are not yet Christians is not that you can't be a good person, that you probably if you are not a Christian, cheat on your wife or cheat in business, that you probably are uncharitable. Look at this description of Cornelius, who was, at this point, not yet a Christian. Let this description of Cornelius challenge your thinking as you relate to people of different faiths. What does it say?

"He and all his family were devout and God-fearing." He feared God. He was not a Christian. But when it says that he was God-fearing, at the very least we are talking about a man who believed that he was going to stand before God in judgment one day and that he was going to be held accountable for his actions and his words. He was a man of integrity. He was probably scrupulous in his business dealings. Honest in his communication.

And note that it wasn't just Cornelius that was God-fearing. It says that he and his whole family were devout.

It ought not to be a shock to you that people of another faith have good families. I have noticed a tendency in Christians that when there is a Muslim or Mormon family living on the block, or a Jewish family, that appears to be a good solid family, Christians are looking around for the chink in the armor. Well, there must be some problems here because they are not Christians. Well the Bible is unabashed, unashamed in saying that Cornelius had a great family.

He not only feared God and had a great family, he was charitable. He gave to the poor. His good deeds were not just horizontal; there was verticalness to his spirituality. It says he prayed constantly. We would say that in terms of behavioral characteristics, Cornelius was a model that many Christians would aspire to. Many pastors would say, "I would love to have people in my church just be like Cornelius, who didn't know Christ – God-fearing, great family, charitable, prayed constantly. All one needs to do is go into an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood or go into a Muslim country and you will see many of the same qualities. In the neighborhood where I grew up I remember Orthodox Jewish men every morning, it didn't matter if it was snowing, freezing cold, or pouring rain, they would make their way to the Synagogue to say their morning prayer. Like Cornelius, they were good people.

You say, "Well, then, why did God send Peter? Why did God say get some men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon, who is called Peter? Was it so that Peter could announce to Cornelius and his family, "Cornelius, you have made it with God. You may not know this, but you are already saved. Just being a God-fearer and being charitable has made you OK. It has made you right in God's book. You are already forgiven. Your sins are already cleansed."

No, look at chapter 11:13-14 when Peter is retelling the story. Peter says this, "He told us how he had seen an angel appearing at his house and said, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message

through which you and your household will be saved.” Peter is not going to bring you a message to say that you are already saved, your sins are forgiven. Peter is going to bring you a message by which in the future, if you believe it, you will be saved.

Here is the limit on pluralism. The limit is that no matter how good, devout and God-fearing a person is, you must believe the gospel message in order to be saved. That was the message that Peter preached to Cornelius. Look at Acts 10:43, “All the prophets testify about him [about Jesus] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” How is that we receive forgiveness of sins? Any name? Any God? Any message? So long as you are sincere? The limit of pluralism is that we receive forgiveness through his name.

Now, this is the consistent message of the New Testament, particularly the message of the apostles in the book of Acts. And I want you to see this before you object to what I am saying. I just want you to see that this is what the Bible teaches. We will work out the logic and the reasonableness of the belief that there is no salvation other than through Jesus in a moment. But I want you to see that this is what the Bible does teach. The apostles through the book of Acts regularly preached to God-fearing people. They preached to Jews and Gentiles who constantly prayed. What was the message that they preached? You are already OK with God? Remember they weren’t speaking to rank pagans, folks that we would call horrible sinners. They were regularly speaking to people who were coming to the temple, making sacrifices. What was the message they preached? They preached, “Repent and believe in Jesus and then and only then will you receive the forgiveness of your sins.” You need to see this. Look with me at Acts 4:12. It is a narrow message, it is an exclusive message. There is a limit on pluralism when it comes to salvation. Acts 4:12, you should underline this in your Bible. This is what the apostles preached, “Salvation is found in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

Look at the limits that the apostles are drawing on the means of salvation. There is no other name under heaven, not just no other name in Israel, not just no other name here in the Middle East, but no other name in the heaven that over China, no other name in the heaven that is over India, no other name that is heaven over the Amazon, no other name in the heaven over the Eskimos in Alaska. No other name under heaven given among men. Not just among Jews. That word “men” ought to be translated “people.” Among people everywhere.

There is an exclusive universal claim being made here that consistently runs through the New Testament. No other way of salvation other than through conscious faith in Jesus Christ.

Now here is the explosion. This is the point at which Christ confronts pluralism. To say that your God is the only true God and that Jesus is the only way to find God, you can practically feel the veins in any red-blooded American’s neck popping out in anger. How dare you be so narrow? How dare you be so intolerant? So smug? What gives you the right to judge every one else’s religion?

Friends, this explosion, this confrontation of the claims of Christ with pluralism is not simply a product of the fact of diversity in modern America. It is not as if we are the first people in world's history who have been spit at or called narrow because we say only one way to God, no other name. Why do you think the early Christians were martyred? Why do you think every apostle other than John, to a man, was put to death for his faith? Why do you think that the Romans herded Christians into the Coliseum and fed them to the lions or killed them by the gladiator's sword?

The violent opposition to the early Christians was not that the early Christians preached Jesus. The Romans would have been quite happy to add Jesus along side of the pantheon of other Gods. What created the violent opposition against Christians in the early church was that they exerted the exclusive claims of Jesus. The early Christians said there was only one true God and only one way to get to that true God, through his son Jesus.

Friends, nobody is going to be bothered by your little private faith. Believe in Jesus if you want, if it makes you happy, fine. If it is a little irrational, even if it is a little behind the times, if that is what you are into, that's fine. If you just go around saying, "I believe in Jesus and it's what I am into – Christianity. This is what works for me" there is not going to be any explosion. But if you are going to be faithful to the message of the apostles, if you are going to walk in the steps of historic Christianity and not have it watered down by worldliness, then your message needs to be "not only do I believe in Jesus, but you also must believe in Jesus in order to get right with God for there is no other way, no other name, no other means by which you can find God other than through Jesus."

If people hear "I believe in Jesus but you can believe in Buddha, Yeshiva or Krishna, no problem" that is pluralism pushed to unbiblical proportions. It is this radical assertion – one true living author of the universe and one way to be accepted by that author. Let me press this out just a little bit.

We have heard for several generations that all roads lead up the same mountain. There are many paths to God. Why can't you Christians see that?

The reason why a committed follower of Christ can't see that is because it contradicts Jesus' teachings. Jesus never spoke about many roads up a mountain. He spoke about two roads. Not many roads, but two roads. Just two. One narrow road leading to eternal life and a relationship with God and the other broad road leading to eternal damnation and eternal separation from God. Not many roads – two roads.

Just think about it in the physical world. All roads don't lead to the same place. No matter how long you travel from this building, if you go east, you will never end up in Florida – no matter how fast you drive, no matter how sincere you are. Florida is south and going east on the road will not take you there.

Now, there is the same kind of objective reality in the spiritual world. Just because we are dealing with God doesn't mean that any road will lead you to God. If there is a real God, then there is a real way to get to God. The roads to God are not something people create. The roads to God are something that people discover. Or better the road to God is something that God has revealed.

Friends, here is the bottom line truth. Every spiritual path doesn't lead up the mountain. This idea that all spiritual paths lead up to God is not only a lie, it is a tragic lie that costs millions of people their souls. There are a lot of roads, but only one leads to the true and living God who made us.

Isn't it enough that we be sincere? This great modern argument, so long as you are sincere, you are all right with God. Why should God demand faith in Jesus alone? Well, I would say that it is necessary that a person be sincere in order to be saved. God is not going to save someone who has a veneer faith, a faith that is one millimeter deep where the person mouths a certain set of principles, but every time they make a decision, every choice in their life, veers away from Christ. Every time they are faced with a tough decision they choose to run their life and they say, "My will, not your will." It is important to be sincere in order to be saved. God is not going to save someone who claims to follow Jesus while consistently and in every way they turn against what Jesus says and trample over all his words. Sincerity is necessary, but it is not enough.

And I have always found it amusing that sincerity is considered to be enough only in the area of religion and God. I mean is it enough for you that the surgeon who is doing your open-heart surgery just be sincere? Or do you also want him to be skilled? Is it enough for you that the accountant who is working on your taxes or the pilot who is flying the 747 that you or your children are on and are flying through a storm – is it enough that they be sincere? The mechanic working on your car's brakes – is it enough for him to be sincere? Will sincerity save you on the operating table? Will sincerity rescue you from an audit with the IRS or keep the plane up in the air or save you from a car crash if your brakes have been badly repaired?

Friends, if sincerity won't save you in any other area of life, what makes you think that sincerity will save you or anyone else from hell? Think about this. Suppose, just for a moment, that there was a real God, and a real God created people in his image and made them perfect, but that these people that he created rebelled against him and rejected his commands over their lives. Imagine for a moment that this God formulated a way to rescue people and sent prophet after prophet to announce the way folks were to be rescued. He spoke to the human race over thousands of years, but they kept rejecting his messages and his messengers. Finally, this real God comes to us in the person of his Son. Suppose instead of accepting his Son, people took his Son and hung him on a cross. Suppose that God turned the tables and used his Son's death on the cross as a sacrifice and payment for people's sins. Suppose after that, God actually raised his Son from the dead and declared his Son to be Lord of the Universe.

Friends, would it make any sense for God to spend thousands of years communicating to people about the way to come to him, allow prophet after prophet to be stoned and killed, allow his own Son to be hung on a cross if you could get into heaven simply by being sincere? Why would God have bothered creating a way and letting his own Son die a bloody death, if it was enough for you to be sincere, if another way could get you up the mountain. And why bother with all of this work over centuries and centuries?

Here is one of the explosions, one of the collision points with contemporary culture. No other name, no other way, no other road.

Listen, what we are going to find throughout this series is that the explosion, the confrontation of Jesus with the culture, not only concerns eternal salvation, how it is that we get into heaven, but Jesus' confrontation with the culture concerns how it is that we ought to live right now in this world. Let me make a few closing points here.

Christians have, for too long, neglected Jesus' role as our authoritative teacher because we are so intent to proclaim him as Savior of the world. In reaction to liberal Christians who neglected the truth and to this day neglected the truth as Jesus as the only Savior conservative Christians are prone to commit the opposite error. They are so fearful that someone may miss salvation that they fail to underline Jesus' authority to teach us how to live right now. It is certainly true that Jesus is more than a teacher, but he isn't less than a teacher. And what Jesus came to do includes more than teach us about how to go to heaven when we die. Jesus came to teach us how it is that we are supposed to live right now. Again, the explosions that Jesus creates in confronting the culture concerns not only the claims about eternal life, but the claims on life right now.

Let me put this a little differently. There is a writer that I would encourage you to become familiar with named Dallas Willard. He wrote a recent wonderful book called *The Divine Conspiracy*. One reviewer said, "If you are going to read one book in 1999, you ought to read Dallas Willard's *The Divine Conspiracy*." Dallas Willard, in the course of talking about Jesus' authority, his confrontation with the world, said something that really caught me. He said that most Christians don't regard Jesus as being very smart. And because we don't regard him as the smartest person whoever lived, he really isn't our Lord.

Does Jesus know more than anyone else about how your life ought to run? Is Jesus smarter than any counselor you could ever talk to? Is Jesus smarter than any scientist? Does Jesus know more about the molecular structure of the universe? Does Jesus know more about how life came to be on this planet? Does Jesus accurately describe for us reality? Is Jesus really smart about child raising and about marriage and about sexuality and homosexuality and divorce and money matters?

You see, the reason why Jesus has a right to confront people, the reason why Jesus should not politely shut his mouth when confronted by the pluralism of competing ideas and ideologies, is because Jesus has better ideas, because Jesus communicates truer truths. The reason Jesus shouldn't shut his mouth is because Jesus is smarter than anyone who ever lived.

So what are we saying at the bottom line? In the course of this series I want you to grow in your confidence in the competence of Jesus. By the end of the series I want you to be able to say that in every realm of life from child raising to evolution to feminism that Jesus' statements are true, whatever the experts say. I want you to know that Jesus' statements are true down in your gut, whatever you are feeling at the moment. I want you to know down to your toes that Jesus' statements are true whatever the pains and traumas of your life have been, whatever your past is. What he says is true no matter what your father said or did

or what you went through with your ex-spouse. I want you to know that Jesus' statements are true despite your impulses, despite the fashion of the culture, despite the media heroes.

Friends, I have been greatly encouraged by the thought that the more you investigate, the more the facts become known and get crystallized in your mind, the more they lead in the direction of Jesus and his teaching. Over against the popular idea that Christians are people who are swimming up stream against the facts and the truth so that we have to privatize our faith and escape from reason by running to church. Faith becomes some way to cushion the blows of a pressurized world – over against that. I have been encouraged by the discovery that the more facts we learn, the more we give ourselves to truth, the more we are actually swimming in the direction of Jesus.

Many people live with the fear that if they really check the truth out, if they really began reading widely and opening themselves up and checking out all the diverse opinions and checking science out – that if they really knew the truth it would lead them away from Jesus and his teaching. The reality is the more you find out, the more you check it out, the more you discover that the facts, the reality, and the truth all go in the direction of Jesus, it all goes in the direction of his teaching, it all goes in the direction of his claims, after a while there is such a force of truth that to oppose it means you have to take all your energy, you have to exhaust yourself in just fighting against God.

God loves diversity. He loves diverse languages. He loves diverse customs. He loves diverse styles. He loves diverse races. But when it comes to truth, eternal life and living right now, it centers on one name, on one man, on one way – Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Let's pray.