

exploreGod™

THE 7 BIG QUESTIONS

"Is Christianity Too Narrow?"

Idea: Christianity is an exclusive message with an inclusive appeal.

Intro: How narrow is Christianity? Jesus said...

13 *"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. – Matt 7:13-14*

Jesus points out to us that the path to eternal life is narrow and the vast majority of people don't find it. On the other hand, the path leading to destruction is wide and many people are on it. According to Jesus the path to eternal life and peace is narrow and found only in Him. This path is so narrow that it can't be found through religion or good works. It is exclusively found in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

21 *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23*

And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' – Matt 7:21-23

Inquiry: Does it seem sensible to you for the Christian message to be so narrow? After all, in a world of seven billion people with all kinds of different religious beliefs, how can Christianity claim to be *the* path to God? Does it not sound more sensible that all religions basically teach the same thing just from a different perspective? Isn't there truth in all religions? And isn't the elements of truth contained in each religious understanding of God leading people up the same mountain as everyone else to meet God?

The idea that there is only one correct way to God is fading in America today. A study released by the Barna Group in 2011 revealed that 40% of Americans agreed with the statement, "All people are eventually saved or accepted by God, no matter what they do, because he loves all people he has created." 26% of those identifying themselves as born-again Christians agreed with the statement, "It doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because they all teach the same lessons." A 2008 Barna poll of thirty-five thousand Americans revealed that 57% of evangelical church attenders said they believe that many religions can lead to eternal life.

It is obvious that a growing number of people, including evangelical Christians, do not accept the proposition that there is only one "right" way to God. Instead, they hold to a more universalist or inclusivist understanding of salvation. They espouse that all people or at least the vast majority will be saved and experience eternal life.

The Fallacies of Inclusivism:

- Every major religion but one claims an exclusive way to eternal life.
 - Christianity calls man to recognize the sin in his life and by faith put his trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of that sin.

- Islam requires man to find salvation in Allah by keeping the laws found in the Qur'an.
- Judaism requires man to find salvation in Jehovah God by following the Mosaic Law.
- Buddhism calls for man to find salvation by rejecting his insatiable desire for pleasure, status, and the other novelties of life and instead follow the Noble Eightfold Path to the restful state of nirvana.
- Hinduism calls man to understand the endless condition of samsara, and pursue Brahman through the four yogas.

If you say that it doesn't matter which path you take, then you are saying that Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and many other religions are all wrong since they claim an exclusive way to eternal life. Of the world's major religions, only Hinduism teaches that all religions lead to God. The religions of the world are not inclusive.

- It forces one to reject some of the clearest teachings of Jesus.

Inclusivism affects your view of Jesus Christ. The person who believes that all people will be in heaven regardless of their religious faith must reject some of Jesus' clearest teachings about the exclusive nature of His message.

- Was Jesus wrong when He spoke of a narrow way that leads to eternal life and a broad way that leads to eternal destruction? (Matt 7:13-14)
- Was Jesus intolerant by declaring that no person could come to God except through Him? (John 14:6)
- Was Jesus demonstrating hatred toward others when He taught regularly about the reality of a hell that will be populated with people who had rejected His message? (John 3:18)

How can we believe anything that Jesus said if He was wrong that His way was the only way to salvation?

- It devalues the atoning sacrifice of Christ.
On the night that Jesus was arrested and put on trial, He spent the evening with His disciples observing the Passover. During that meal, Jesus broke the bread and related it to His body. Likewise, He took the cup and related it to His blood, which would be poured out for the forgiveness of sins (Matt 26:26-28). Then Jesus took His disciples to a garden in Gethsemane to pray. There, He agonized in prayer with the Father, asking if there was another way. Jesus said, “Let this cup pass from Me.” But He knew there was no other way (Matt 26:36-44). He willingly submitted Himself to the task of dying as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity.

If there are other ways for people to experience salvation, then why did Jesus ever surrender Himself to the pain and suffering of the cross? The truth is there are not many paths to God. There is only one path – Jesus Christ. It is an exclusive path.

The Misconceptions of Exclusivism:

- It is intolerant.
In our society we celebrate tolerance as the highest of all virtues. Think about it, being labeled as intolerant is just about like, if not worse than, being labeled a child molester. Today’s tolerance can best be understood as the rejection of all moral and spiritual absolutes. To be tolerant of homosexuality means that you are unwilling to label it as a sin. To be tolerant of Hindus means that you accept Hinduism as an equally valid avenue to God as that of Christianity. However, to claim that faith in Jesus Christ is the exclusive means of salvation is a demonstration of intolerance toward others.

The historic understanding of tolerance is much different. It means “to allow or to permit, to recognize

and respect others' beliefs and practices without sharing them, to bear or put up with someone or something not necessarily liked." To be tolerant of another person doesn't require that I surrender my own convictions. Inherent in the definition of tolerance is a fundamental disagreement with the person you are tolerating.

The fact that Christianity claims to be the exclusive way for man to find salvation in no way means that it is intolerant of others. It simply means that Christianity, like every other religion, teaches that it is the only way of salvation. Tolerance means, "I respect your right to be wrong."

- It is unnecessary.
Like George Bernard Shaw, some object to Christianity's claim of exclusivity based upon the supposed similarities of all religions. Shaw stated, "There is only one religion, though there are hundreds of versions of it." Pluralists would contend that the different religions of the world express various realities about the same God.

The problem here, as I've already made the case, is the fact that Christianity is not the only religion that makes exclusive claims. Every major religion holds a very different understanding of who God is. These religions are also in disagreement as to what man's greatest problem is. And they teach contrasting modes and means of salvation. So it is as author Dinesh D'Souza claims, there are only two groups of people that allege that all religions are the same: atheists and well-meaning but unformed religious people.

"Every religion at its core is exclusive."
– Ravi Zacharis

- It is troubling.

Perhaps the fundamental reason people reject the exclusive truth claims of Christianity is the obvious fact that most people have embraced the wrong religion. If Jesus' words in Matthew 7 are true, then the vast majority of people alive today and the majority of those of history are destined to an eternity in hell. After all, only 25% of the 7 billion people in the world today even claim to be followers of Christ. That means that nearly 5 billion people are sincerely following a system of belief or unbelief that will result in their eternal damnation.

How can so many sincere people be so wrong? The answer is that while man is insatiably religious, he is also incurably rebellious. Men and women do not want to believe the claims of Christ because, like Adam and Eve, they do not want God.

The reality of so many people rejecting the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ and thus experiencing the consequences of their rejection, cause many to choose to disbelieve the message of Christianity. This is a misconception. Truth is truth regardless of whether or not it is believed.

It is true that Christianity is narrow. Jesus intended for it to be that way. Nevertheless, before you listen to the culture and write it off as being intolerant, make sure you understand its message. Allow me to share two significant aspects of the Christian message.

1. The inclusivity of the gospel appeal.

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. – Romans 1:16

13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." – Romans 10:13

The gospel message is an inclusive one. Jesus sacrificed His life so that the world might be saved (John 3:16). He doesn't call the rich, the poor, the educated, the uneducated, the powerful, the weak, the religious, or the unreligious. His appeal has nothing to do with any of those things. Jesus calls the sinner. His message is for the Southern Baptist who was raised in church as well as the animistic person raised deep in the Amazon jungle. The gospel is inclusive. Jesus wishes for none to perish (2 Peter 3:9).

2. The exclusivity of the gospel message.

Jesus and His followers clearly taught that He was the only means for salvation and life after death. It is an exclusive message and is meant to be so.

*6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."
– John 14:6*

Jesus told Thomas that He was the way, truth, and life. Thus, through Him is the only way for a person to know God.

Facing the possibility of punishment, Peter and John told the Pharisees that salvation is found exclusively in Christ.

12 And 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

And Paul reminded the Ephesian believers that salvation is by grace through faith. It doesn't come through the good works of a man or woman who is sincerely trying hard in their religious beliefs.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. – Eph 2:8-9

On the day of Pentecost after Peter had preached the gospel to the people in Jerusalem, they asked, “What shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ.” In essence Peter told them to turn from themselves and to turn to Jesus. The hope that he offered to them in Christ wasn’t something they could earn. They had to receive it as a free gift. Peter didn’t call them to a religion. He called them to a relationship. Christianity is exclusive in that it is the only religion whereby salvation is granted by faith through grace and not works.

Conclusion: Christianity is an exclusive message with an inclusive appeal. It is the message of hope in a hopeless world. In it the love of God is revealed to an unlovely people. It deals with the fundamental issue in man. It addresses man’s rebellious, sinful heart. Man wants to earn his own salvation and forgiveness. There are several problems working against man here. I’ll point out two major things. First, finite man has sinned against an infinite God. How can one ever atone for the sin against such a God? Second, sin has corrupted every facet of man’s life, so that even the seemingly righteous deeds that he does are like filthy rags in the sight of God (Is 64:6). Our good deeds can never be enough to atone for our sins because of our wicked hearts. Mankind is incapable of doing anything that is not self-centered and rebellious at the core.

The only solution for man’s sin is God Himself. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. He came to pay the sin debt we owed. He came to atone for our sin by sacrificing Himself in our place. The Holy One came to be the holy sacrifice that would satisfy the Holy wrath of God against your sin and my sin. Jesus paid the debt in full. Now, He offers the free gift of eternal life to all who call upon His name.