

Series: "Questions About Life and God"  
"What right do I have to convert others to my religion?"

One of the defining traits of American culture is the tremendous value it places on *tolerance*. About the worst thing anyone can say about a person is that he or she is *intolerant*. Americans are very intolerant of people who are intolerant!

This carries over into the realm of religion and faith. For someone to convey that his or her faith is the true faith or superior to other religions creates for many the feeling that this person is woefully bigoted and narrow-minded. This raises issues in regards to sharing our faith as Christians. It leads us to the next question we'll look at in this series of messages: *What right do I have to convert others to my religion?*

A lot of people today assume that all religions are pretty much of equal value. We hear things like, "All religions contain truth and one is as good as another..." "You shouldn't criticize another person's religion..." "The various faiths are just different paths to the same god..." "It doesn't matter what religion you have as long as you live what you profess." The conclusion many reach is that *it's wrong to impose your faith on someone else*.

This raises some interesting questions about sharing the gospel in this kind of cultural climate that elevates tolerance to the highest level. Should I be witnessing to Jewish people? Is this disrespectful of them? Should Christians be sending missionaries to Muslim countries? Isn't Islam simply another way to the same God? What right do I have to label Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons a cult? What about witnessing my faith to people at work or school – is this trespassing too much into their private lives? Isn't it a bit presumptuous of me to witness to *anyone*, since that would suggest that I believe my religion is better than theirs?

We're going to look at some Scriptures that address these questions. But first, ***let's try to clear up the misconception that all religions teach the same thing.***

They don't! The religion of Mother Theresa and the religion of an Islamic Jihadist are worlds apart in what they teach! Mormons are polytheists; they believe in many gods. Brigham Young, one of the "prophets" in the Mormon Church, taught that Adam was God, and had sexual relations with Mary to produce Jesus. Mainstream Christianity does *not* teach that. Hindus believe in reincarnation, that the soul of man is ever on a round of births and rebirths. That is far different from a Christianity that says, "People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

This sentimental idea that all religions basically teach the same thing can only be believed by people who haven't put forth the mental effort to *understand* the teachings of the various religions. Someone has said, "People who talk in such fashion pride themselves on their tolerance whereas they should apologize for their ignorance." Because the various religions differ widely in their teachings, all religions are not of equal value, nor do they generate the same kind of life style among their adherents.

Let's take a look at some Scripture passages that relate to this question, "What right do I have to

convert others to my religion?" Please note a warning here! Depending on how much you've bought into this idea that all religions are about the same and of equal value, you may have some problems with some of the Bible verses we're going to look at!

We will turn to John 14. Jesus was near the end of His life. He was trying to prepare His followers for the crucifixion, and that He would no longer be with them. Jesus says, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'" (John 14:3-5). Look at Jesus' response: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

A lot of people resent or reject that verse, because it says Jesus is not *a* way, but *the* way, *the* truth, *the* life - and you can't get to the Father except through Him! This Scripture was read at the funeral service for President Gerald Ford. I was so happy that the gospel was read on national TV. But the pastor reading this passage stopped with the words, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." He didn't read: "No one comes to the Father except through me." I'm not sure why. Was this too offensive for a broad audience? Yet, these are the words of the Lord Jesus.

Here's another Scripture that doesn't go over big today. It's in Acts 4. Simon Peter is speaking to Jewish religious leaders, the "big guns" of Judaism. He's been preaching about Jesus. "This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:11-12). Did you catch that? No other name, other than the name of Jesus, whereby we must be saved? A lot of people – perhaps you – may be thinking, "This is such a narrow-minded, opinionated statement!"

Many in our culture resist or reject the claim that the New Testament and Christianity embody the truth of God in a way that no other religion does. But this is what Jesus followers claim. It's not because Christians are any better, or smarter, or more favored by God than anyone else. They're not. But rather, Christianity is unique, and set apart from all other religions, because of the One who is at the center of Christianity: Jesus Christ.

*It is the claim of Scripture that Jesus is the fullest and most complete revelation of God and of Truth that humankind has ever experienced.* God's nature and God's truth were not revealed to the fullest extent through Buddha, or Mohammed, or Joseph Smith and the Mormons. God revealed Himself most supremely in the historical Person of Jesus of Nazareth some 2,000 years ago. What makes Christianity unique and separate from all other religions is *Jesus!* Someone has said, "In His life and teaching, His Cross and Resurrection, we believe we have found a moral and spiritual ultimate. We have come to a fixed point in our moral and spiritual universe. We know what life ought to be." Now you don't have to believe this. Many people don't. They choose another faith, or no faith. But this is the claim of Christianity.

There is a passage in the New Testament that relates to what we are saying. The Apostle Paul is in Athens, Greece. "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbling trying to say?' Others remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.' They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean' (Acts 17:16-20).

Paul begins, "Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD'" (Acts 17:22-23a). Then he speaks to them about the true God, and about Jesus: "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone— an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead" (verses 29-31).

Notice: Paul didn't say that their idols and their gods were just as good as what he believed. He contrasted their religion with the truth found in Jesus, and the fact of Jesus' resurrection. Notice also their response: "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject'" (Acts 17:32). And, "Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed" (Acts 17:34). Some accepted the unique message of Christianity. Others rejected it.

*Christians of the first century did not believe that their faith was just another religion equal to and similar to the religions of their day. They spread the news about Jesus and His resurrection. They witnessed to Jews and said Jesus was the Messiah they've been waiting for. They spoke to Greeks and Romans, who had a whole assortment of gods and goddesses. They didn't stop their missionary efforts and say, "These people have their own religion. We don't want to infringe upon their spiritual beliefs." If they had held that attitude Christianity would have quickly died out and would not have survived the centuries.*

I know of a young lady, a committed follower of Jesus, who has a calling to share Christ with Muslims. She has a heart of love for Muslim people. I know another couple who have served as missionaries for many years, and more recently have been working with Kurdish people.

Because so many folk today think it's politically incorrect to say that any religion is better than another, and because our culture places so much value on tolerance, many people see Christians who try to share their faith as arrogant, bigoted, intolerant. But *not all Christians who have a heart to share their faith are arrogant or bigoted.* Yes, there are some who "witness" in a way

that turns people off. They come across as obnoxious, arrogant and pushy. (I want to talk this in next week's sermon). If we're Christians we can try to share the Lord with humility, not coming across as being better than others, or disrespecting what they may believe. As it's been said, a Christian sharing his or her faith is just "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

***What about working together with people of other faiths?*** I can value Jewish people for their faith. I can respect Moslems who are devoted to their religion. In fact, in a world teetering on violence and terrorism, we need to understand our Islamic friends. I can *respect* people without *agreeing with* them.

When I was serving a church in Easton, PA, we participated in an interfaith Thanksgiving Eve service. It was my first year there. I was "the new preacher on the block", so (as is often the case) I was asked to speak at the service, which was held in a Jewish synagogue. Our congregation was fairly conservative and evangelical, and I was a bit nervous speaking in a Jewish synagogue, so I wasn't sure how it would go. But we had a wonderful time worshiping and eating and enjoying conversation with our Jewish neighbors.

People of faith, no matter what their faith, can make our communities and world a better place if we can dialogue with each other, find common ground, and work together. But that doesn't mean we stop praying for our non-Christian friends and neighbors, nor quit looking for opportunities to tell them why we believe in Jesus.

***Jesus made it clear that we are to share the message about Him with all people.*** Each of our four gospels ends with Jesus commanding His followers to tell the world about Him.

In ***Matthew's gospel***, before Jesus ascends to the Father, he says this, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

In ***Mark***, Jesus says, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16).

Look at the end of ***Luke's gospel***. "(Jesus) said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things'" (Luke 24:46-48).

In ***John's gospel***, the Risen Christ appears to the disciples, breathes on them the Holy Spirit, and says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).

It's like Jesus is saying: If you've found me to be the way to God, to embody the truth of God, and if you've experienced in Me a new quality of life - life that is abundant and eternal, don't keep it under cover! Let people know!

