

“One Amongst the Many?”
Galatians 2:1 – 10

True story.

Two friends were meeting for coffee at a local café. One (his name was John) was a pastor and a scholar (those two can sometimes go together). And he was explaining to his friend about what the local church was doing to promote Jesus amongst the residents of the area. At one point, as John was doing this, he noticed a woman sitting a few tables away looking at him intently as these two had their conversation. He assumed the woman was a fellow Christian interested in listening into his conversation, so he kept talking.

A few minutes later, the woman got up from her table, paid her bill, walked straight across to his table, and, at what seemed like the top of her voice, said: ‘So, you want to convert the world. How dare you!’ And off she stormed.¹

It’s a good question, one we have to answer one way or another.

John goes on to say he was so dumbfounded and for a moment wondered, “Well maybe our mission is presumptuous. Maybe this isn’t part of a reasoned, modern faith?”

It’s actually a question Paul faced as he began to preach and plant churches.

Who is Paul to say that Jesus is the only one among the many through which there is salvation from sin and death?

Who does he think he is?

In the Roman world there were many deities of various kinds – Zeus, Apollo, Hermes, Diana – and to claim that Jesus was the exclusive deity, the only God was outrageous.

Of course Jews did the same.

¹ John Dickson, *Promoting the Gospel* (Sydney South: Blue Bottle Books, 2005), 17.

His main critics he faced here in Galatians were saying Paul's gospel was deficient and different from what the other Apostles were preaching.

Paul says they were "false believers" and they were demanding that Titus and other non-Jews or Gentiles be circumcised, which he refused to do. Circumcision, his critics were saying, is part of the gospel.

So as we heard and read Paul goes to Jerusalem to meet the other Apostles and put before them the message he had already been preaching for the last 14 years.

This is the Good News that you and I can be reconciled to God and have deep, close, real and intimate relationship with Him.

We know that Jesus, from all eternity, dwelt with the Father and the Spirit.

Now He has come to make them known.

In His face we see the Father's face.

In His character we see the character of the Father.

In His life, death, resurrection and ascension we see the abiding love of God for all humanity.

On the Cross a bridge was built, a barrier broken, reconciliation made for all humanity that only Jesus could make.

We can now have peace with God.

That's where this word 'atonement' comes from.

It means through Jesus substitutionary death on the cross, God and human beings, previously alienated from one another, are made 'at one' again.

This relationship is only possible through King Jesus.

And the Apostles affirm Paul and his message.

They are in firm agreement that there is one good news of Jesus Christ for Jews and Gentiles.

There is one good news of Jesus Christ for all people everywhere, anywhere, for all times and in all places.

In other words there is only one New Testament gospel and one salvation that is through Christ alone; there are not several different legitimate alternatives. Paul is absolutely convinced of this and deeply protective of it.

So where I felt to go this morning is this:

when you or I say having restored relationship with God comes through Jesus alone, you're immediately met with a problem – we live in a time where we are exposed to other religious beliefs not just on say, social media but in our everyday lives.

Followers of Jesus can easily find themselves rubbing shoulders with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Sikhs, adherents of indigenous beliefs, the vaguely spiritual and agnostics and atheists.

In other countries this close contact has produced sparks, flames and even fires that we have thankfully been spared from, and we should be thankful to God that this is the case.

The reason many people like the woman in the café get upset is because of an underlying worldview that says,

“What about people of other religions who are highly moral and deeply devout? It’s arrogant to say that Jesus is the only way to God and try to convert everyone to it.”

How would you respond???

There are a number of views.

Popular Universalism

This is the kind of pluralism that you might encounter at work or at a café – maybe over a cup of tea after church.

It's goes like this: it's like we're climbing different sides of Mount Cook. Near the bottom the terrain all looks so different. But the nearer the ridgeline we get the more familiar things seem, and the view becomes the same. And when we reach the summit we'll realise this whole time is all we've been doing is taking tracks to same place.

We've all been climbing up different sides of the same mountain.
(Have you heard this before?)
When we reach the top we'll realise that all this time we have been pursuing the same God."

In the end all religions teach the same things.

So when we look at Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims for example, the outward form of worship and life and expression of faith looks very different from what we find in the Christian faith.

But all each faith group is doing, however, is reaching out in its own way to the same Divine Being.

Each faith group is responding to the great messengers sent down through the ages: Moses, Buddha, Muhammed, and of course Jesus.

And salvation is found in a myriad of ways in these faith groups.

So some people are convinced by this argument.

But I think on closer inspection the reality is actually the opposite.

If we go back to the analogy of mountain climbing, at the lower levels is where the similarities lie.

In fact an ethic held by all the world's major religions is an ethic of caring for others.

This expresses itself in a concern for the common good.

For example, as followers of Jesus we would find ourselves in great agreement with moderate Muslims.

In terms of the good of society we'd be in agreement that marriage be upheld and honoured, that violence be repudiated, that abortion is far from being a good thing, that the vulnerable be protected and those in material need be provided for.

Back to Mount Cook: as you climb upward, you become increasingly aware of where the differences lie.

For Buddhist there is no personal God. For Hindus there are thousands. For Muslims Jesus is a prophet.

In fact once we reach the summit, so to speak, we will realise that we are on completely different mountains all together! ²

John (the guy in the café) tells another story.

He was speaking on the centrality of Jesus and God who came to live with us.

He writes:

“After I had finished my speech and sat down, a man in the audience began to publicly disagree with me.

He stole the audience’s attention and declared, “It is impossible! God would never become a human being. God is too big, too powerful. God would never limit himself to flesh and blood. It is absurd to think of God needing to eat, sleep and go to the toilet. What you have said is blasphemy!”

The man was a devout Muslim. For the next 15 minutes or so, we entered into a public debate over the issue. In the end, I think it was a very important occasion for everyone in the lecture theatre.

No one could the room thinking, “Oh, all the major religions teach basically the same thing”.

What is blasphemy to Muslims [and in fact most of the world’s religions] was, in fact the crowning jewel of Jesus’ teaching – God has become like one of us!” ³

So that is one view.

Another increasingly popular view is **“Christian” Universalism.**

This is one area where progressive/liberal Christianity departs from Biblical, historic, orthodox Christianity.

It is the belief that at the end *all* people everywhere, who have ever lived, will be reconciled to God through Jesus.

² Take for example to concept of God. Christianity posits a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, co-eternal, co-equal yet separate persons. Islam holds to a God who one person, absolutely distinct from the world; Hinduism has a multitude of gods numbered in the thousands. Buddhism on the other hand does not believe is a personal deity at all. These variant views cannot be reconciled at all.

³ John Dickson, *A Hell of a Life – From Manger to Megastar* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 1996), 77 – 78.

A minority of Christians hold strongly to the notion that death is not end of our opportunity to respond to God's love.

Jesus death on the Cross was so powerful and effective that it reaches beyond the grave.

They say post-mortem, even after death, God pursues people who have not had a chance to "Yes" to Him and even those who said "No" when they were still alive.

In fact, as one Presbyterian minister put it, God's "Yes" to us, is greater than our "No" to Him.

So no matter how long it takes, even over eons of eternity, God will pursue all people.

And people, when they truly see the beauty of God in eternity, will finally say "Yes" to God gift found in Jesus and enter into His heavenly rest.

I think the problem with Christian Universalism lies in two places and especially in the close reading of Scripture.

For one, the opportunity for a post-death response to God is not affirmed by Bible. Scripture does not give space to the idea of post-mortem or post-death conversion.

The New Testament further affirms this by calling death "an enemy" that Jesus came to finally overthrow.

Furthermore there is no compelling text that points to any opportunity to respond to God after death.

There is one life to live, and as Hebrews states, "people are destined to die once, after which there is judgement." (Hebrews 9:27).

And second, God in Scripture takes our responses in this life very seriously. Peter writes the Lord does not want anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance.

John declares, For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who *believes* [that is, *trusts*] in him may not perish but have eternal life.

If universalism is true then Paul's preaching the gospel for 14 years and the Apostle's preaching is meaningless.

Instead Scripture says that decisions made in this life matter.

What then, people will say, about those who've never had an opportunity to respond to or reject the good news of Jesus?

The testimony of Scripture is this: God is good.

God does all he can do to bring people into relationship with Himself through Jesus.

For example is very common for Muslims to have dreams about Jesus.

One I know of is a Muslim woman had a dream where someone bathed in light appeared before her. This person said to her, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

As a Muslim she had never heard these words before. So when she woke up she did what? Hopped on her PC and she searched it up. And from there she became of follower of Jesus and was able to call God her Father.

We know that some tribes have prophecies before the coming of missionaries.

We know this: God is just. God is fair. God is holy love and merciful justice. He does not want anyone to perish.⁴

However it works out in the end, we can trust Him.

Jesus is not one among the many.

Jesus is the distinct, decisive and definitive revelation of God's love.

⁴ 2 Peter 3:9

If you're searching and seeking this morning, it's really great to have you here. Make Jesus the centre of your searching and seeking.

For those of us who call Jesus Lord, don't be swayed by people who want to make the environment or climate change or social justice the *centre* of the good news, because they are not.

There is a lot of pressure to add to the good news of Jesus – don't do that.

And when we engage with the world around, with those of other faiths, don't be afraid to engage with graciousness and deep humility.