To my beloved wife and children:
Heather, Haley, and Dawson.
May being a Fifth-Gospel Christian
never cease being our family ideal.
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“The gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue, but of life. It cannot be grasped by reason and memory only, but it is fully understood when it possesses the whole soul and penetrates to the inner recesses of the heart.”

John Calvin

Every so often somebody strings together a set of words that have transforming power. Words that serve as a launchpad, providing the opportunity for cultural transformation. Words that carry shaping influence. Such is the case with a quote attributed to Rodney (Gypsy) Smith, a nineteenth-century British evangelist who passionately led evangelistic campaigns to countries such as Australia, South Africa, and the United States. On one occasion he quipped, “There are five Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the Christian, but most people never read the first four.” Talk about Twitter material. Little did Gypsy Smith realize his words would be turned into a book someday! These are not mere words. They are words with a challenge. A challenge to be something. In this case, a living Gospel!

The early church grasped the gravity of Gypsy Smith’s words by living the Gospel. It was the Gospel fleshed out in their daily lives...
that made the Gospel so compelling to those getting saved. They lived as if they really believed it. With conviction, fervor, zeal, and a white-hot passion for Jesus Christ. Their belief was tangible. So real, so firm, so raw was their conviction that their message blasted off through their lives from Jerusalem and would eventually reach out to the ends of the earth. Unfortunately, today, many Christians treat the Gospel like fine china, brought out only on special occasions. Or like an ancient artifact displayed in a glass case, something you talk about in the event someone inquires about it. The only “lost Gospel” is the one housed in the hearts of believers, a Gospel pleading to be released.

This book is an invitation to go beyond merely reading the Gospels to actually living the Gospels. To visibly display the Good News of salvation through the Messiah and Redeemer of humankind. The Fifth Gospel is “another” Gospel, not in addition to the four found in Scripture, but instead a living incarnation of them. Not an inspired Gospel, but an inspiring one. This was Jesus’ original intention, for ordinary people like us to live inspiring lives, pointing others to the only message, the only Person, who can give them hope for not only this life but also the next.

The Gospel of Jesus is simply beautiful. Period. There’s nothing like it on earth in depth or scope. It has no equal in power. The riches it holds are immeasurable. It interacts with the worst part of humanity, yet remains pure. It can still be found today in its glorious form, without unnecessary extras added to it to enhance its market appeal. No, this Gospel is legit all by itself, understood simply and plainly from the lips of Jesus or the pages of His Bible. But therein lies a problem—actually two dilemmas.

The first is that many people in our culture rarely seek truth by opening a Bible. Sad but true. In a world of growing hostility toward the church and evangelicalism, it may be wishful thinking
that this generation’s eyes ever fall on the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

But the second obstacle in displaying this beautiful Gospel is that, from the very beginning, Jesus intended His truth and character to be revealed, not only through the printed page, but also through the lives of His followers. It’s this largely unknown, incarnated Gospel that our world knows so little about.

The Fifth Gospel is an appeal for a watching world to witness the reality of Christ through the lives of His followers.

Of course, such a task presents an inherent challenge. It’s risky. Transparent. Possibly awkward. A little more authentic than we’re used to. Even potentially dangerous. But considering that the majority of our unbelieving friends will likely never read the first four Gospels, shouldn’t we at least give them the opportunity to read the fifth one? Isn’t it time for us to become a visible witness for the One we profess to love so much?

“Sharing the Gospel” spans the spectrum within the Christian community. On one end are the morality police—those Gospel grenade-launching believers who see it as their mission to expose and condemn every ill of culture, further alienating non-Christians from anything remotely connected to Jesus. Perceived hate typically produces hate in return. And as a result, we’re often viewed as the playground bully, the villain of the story. Tragic.

On the other end of this spectrum are those believers who feel obliged to make restitution for two thousand years of mistakes made by Christians and their church, to right the wrongs done in the name of Christ—the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials, abuse, moral failure, and the slick, modern, market-savvy methods of the megachurch movement. It doesn’t take a scholar or historian to understand that in both ancient and modern times, Christians haven’t always gotten it right.
You could fill a book—a library of books—with the ways Christians have missed the mark, to use a biblical expression. There’s no shortage of power-hungry pastors and ecclesiastical Pharisees in our day. But neither is the cause of the Gospel helped by the explosion of young bloggers with just enough knowledge of history to be dangerous and almost no understanding of Scripture or how to interpret it. Their mantra: “If we’re just nice to people, they’ll see our perspective. Don’t judge anyone’s beliefs. And whatever you do, don’t offend anybody!” Their apparent goal is for all humanity to coexist as one, singing in three-part harmony some sort of postmillennial world peace anthem. They believe if we simply say we’re sorry, tone down our language, and redefine some key biblical truths to accommodate our culture’s tolerance-based morality, that’ll do it.

But will it?

What this naïve perspective fails to take into account is the basic animosity unbelievers have for God and all things biblical. There is a sin nature and there is a devil. While their motives may be commendable, redefining truth and Scripture will be as effective in changing the world as shooting a squirt gun at a forest fire. Meanwhile, the Bible-club-wielding Christians are tossing gasoline on that same fire.

We Christians are a mess, aren’t we?

Many of today’s Christ followers are either ridden with guilt for not preaching the Gospel or so silent about it that no one really knows they’re a Christian. And the vast majority of us don’t have a clue about communicating our faith and translating it through a lifestyle that actually makes sense to the average person.

This book will help you do that.

It will help you wrestle with some of the critical issues involved in living out your faith in front of a watching world.
not-so-friendly world. It’s not a book of recipes but a manual of life skills. But before we construct this life apologetic together, we first have to do some de-construction. We have to go back before we go forward. We have to reject the notion that the louder the gospel music, the more powerful it becomes and that if we just turn up the volume, people will listen. Similarly, we also have to stop cowering behind a twisted tolerance and blending our values with the world’s. If there’s nothing distinctive about our faith, then we have little to offer our friends. Jesus called us the “light of the world.” Our mission is to neither dim that light nor to blind people with it.

This book is not an apology to our culture, with chapter upon chapter exposing Christianity’s faults and failures. Rather, it’s an apologetic. The difference? One says, “I’m sorry” while the other says, “Here are believable, convincing reasons why Jesus Christ is real!”

So now, as we begin this journey and dig into the following chapters of this book, I hope to show you that one of the greatest convincers or de-convincers of Christianity is Christians. When the Christian lives like his Christ, he moves beyond the mere Gospel in print and begins to demonstrate the Gospel in action. In person.

This is the passion of God’s heart—to unleash His transforming Gospel through you! The question is, are you ready?
Chapter 1

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW IS...?

“Where one man reads the Bible, 
a hundred read you and me.”

D.L. Moody

Some experiences in life mark you forever. They are memories custom-made by God to remind you of His presence and powerful love. Like an internal scrapbook of unforgettable photographs, these life episodes define your story, contributing to God’s masterpiece, giving your life here a sense of meaning.

Coffee from Heaven

One of those moments for me came one sunny morning in a local coffee shop. Call it a divine appointment or happy accident. For me, it’s what can only be described as a God-thing. That’s how I describe the moment I bumped into Trent.

Trent was a neighbor of mine. A likeable guy. Friendly. Intelligent. A good member of our community. There was only one problem.

Trent was gay.
And not just casual gay either. Trent lived in an openly homosexual relationship with his partner just down the street from our house. Most Christians today struggle with how to respond to gay people. We trend toward the extremes, pendulum-swinging from wide-open acceptance of virtually anything to ultra-legalistic, self-righteous rudeness. Thankfully, Trent’s sexual orientation didn’t deter me from being his friend or showing God’s love to him. And so, that morning over a cup of dark roast, we struck up a conversation, and before long the topic turned to God. Though obviously disillusioned with the church, to my surprise Trent was nevertheless still hungry for truth and spirituality. You could see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice.

During our conversation I said something that struck a chord with Trent, opening up his heart a bit.

“Trent, unfortunately most churches want people like you to agree with them on every point before they will accept you. But I think we’ve got it backward. In fact, as I read my Bible, I see Jesus accepting those He had strong disagreements with.”

Trent’s eyes widened, as if a light had been turned on inside. And that’s when he began sharing his story with me. He had grown up in a religious home where his parents were heavy on legalism and light on grace. That, combined with repeated abuse, understandably caused Trent to become disillusioned, confused, and disconnected from anything (and anyone) connected to God.

My heart broke for Trent. Though I differed with him morally, I still accepted him relationally. God’s love and compassion guided our random meeting that day, and to my surprise, not long afterward Trent and his partner invited my family over for dinner one night. Some Christians may have trouble imagining a pastor and his
family having dinner with a homosexual couple, but last time I checked, God still loves people, so we gladly accepted the invitation.

Following that evening, I’d run into Trent from time to time, and one day, he stopped by my house and said, “Bobby, you probably don’t know this, but I’ve been watching you. I see you outside playing with your kids. I see the way you relate to them.” My first thought was, *Oops, I hope he’s seen me on my good days.* Nevertheless, I was reminded that unbelievers do watch us, secretly wondering if what we have is real or just religious pretense.

Then one morning Trent knocked on my door to tell me he and his partner were reading the book of John together. I almost choked on my coffee! He said that God was working in his life. Shortly afterward, Trent showed up again to tell us he had finally fallen in love with Jesus Christ. In fact, God became so real to him that he broke off his relationship with his partner and moved out. His passion for Christ continued to grow, and in time he met and married a wonderful woman.

It had been a few years since I had seen Trent, and I often wondered how he was doing. Then one day a few months ago I was eating lunch at a local steakhouse, and to my surprise in walked Trent with his wife and their little child. It’s hard to describe the feelings of satisfaction that overwhelmed me. Even as I write this, I’m still moved.

Trent’s story reminds me of Jesus’ words, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” We often forget that Christianity is not a philosophy to be argued but a Person to be known. To be sure, our values stand in stark contrast to many in our culture. Finding areas of disagreement really isn’t much of a challenge, is it? The real challenge is to build bridges, not walls.

Looking back, all Trent really needed to get on the road toward
life change was for an ordinary Christian to accept him as a human being, as someone God loves and for whom Christ died. Today I clearly see the reflection of Jesus in Trent. That experience taught me that no one is too difficult or too far gone for God to reach.

**Starting from Square One**

If we’re to effectively represent Jesus to our world, we must choose to trust God to change our minds and hearts about certain things. And that journey begins with honesty, authenticity, and answering some tough questions about our faith.

“Does the world really need Jesus?”

One of those questions defines us as believers. It’s one that uncovers the foundation of our faith, revealing what it’s really built upon. So here it is. Are you ready? That question is:

“Does the world really need Jesus? I mean c’mon…really?”

Some Christians may be offended by this question. Some may even protest. Others might wonder why we even need to ask it at all. But it’s a fair question, and a critical one that touches the very heart of Christianity.

Do people need Jesus…or not?

Ours is a faith that unswervingly believes “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.”[^2] We believe the crux of Christianity is the cross, where God’s eternal love and atoning sacrifice are displayed. At no other time in human history has God so plainly and blatantly revealed Himself than at Calvary. At no point has He so graphically uncovered His heart for mankind. It was there, on a hill outside Jerusalem, the Messiah bled for us, suffering hellish agony and sin-induced banishment, all the while enduring the brutal wrath of a holy and righteous God.

The exclamation point to this graphic love letter to us was the resurrection—Jesus’ conquering moment of triumph over sin, Satan, and the grave. This is what Christians are all about, right? It’s how we are saved. Take away the cross and we’re no different from any other religious idea. It’s Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection.
Strip away all the modern church fluff and this is what you find at the core of our faith. It’s essential. Nonnegotiable. Undeniable. It’s what makes us who we are. It’s what makes Christians “Christian.” And it’s why Jesus is the answer to all of life’s deepest issues.

The only question is: Do we really believe it?

Of course you may nod your head in agreement, but how can you be sure, other than the fact that you think and believe it to be true?

It doesn’t take a scientific study to prove there’s a Grand Canyon-sized difference between what many Christians say they believe and how they actually live. And there are those who are more than willing to point that out. But imagine how things would be different if our lives mirrored what we say we “believe with all our heart.” Would we be more like the Christ we claim to follow? After all, the word *Christian* means “Christ follower.” But how many professing believers are thoroughly convinced that without Christ, our families, friends, classmates, neighbors, and coworkers are incomplete and lost, destined for eternal wrath?

What about you? Are you convinced? And how would you know?

Some argue that believing Jesus is “the only way” may have worked okay in the first century, when people were still digging water wells by hand, using candles, and living in mud huts. But how does faith in an unseen, supernatural Savior hold up in an age of science, reason, and technological wonders? Is this ancient Christian belief of ours still plausible? Is it reasonable? Does it work for the twenty-first century?

These are some of the critical issues we must explore together. For if they’re true, they provide convincing credibility to all Christ’s other claims. But if not, then everything we believe is negotiable and understandably suspect. And we, of all people, are to be pitied for believing in a very old, religious fairy tale.
Holding on to this one core truth about Jesus can feel like riding a homemade raft in a Gulf Coast hurricane. Strong cultural winds and a constant moral crosscurrent toss the exclusivity of Jesus around to such a degree that it’s become highly inappropriate to even believe it anymore. The religious correctness of our day has bullied Christ’s Bride into silence, with some even conceding that the world will turn out just fine in the end—

But have you ever stopped to consider just why it’s so hard for some people to believe in Jesus as the perfect path to forgiveness, happiness, fulfillment, and heaven?

**Mini Gods or Many Gods?**

We live in an age marked by “religious pluralism,” which says no one religion (especially Christianity) holds the exclusive title to “absolute truth” (if there even is such a thing). Religious pluralism says all religions ultimately lead to one nebulous God, the Creator and Savior of us all. Tolerance, acceptance, and “personal belief” have become the new path to contentment, peace, and world unity.

*While it is important for Christians to effectively and lovingly relate to a plurality of people and to be tolerant of others in that we are patient, kindhearted, and gentle, we are not to be tolerant as in passive or pluralistic in that we fail to stand for the exclusive truth claims of Christ.*

Unfortunately, today, those who believe in a first-century Jewish Rabbi as “the way” are seen as harsh, mean-spirited, arrogant, and backward. And who wants to be like that? However, simply swap that definite article (*the*) for an *a* and instantly Jesus (and His followers) become a lot more palatable. One little word change and the Gospel aroma magically becomes more pleasant in an all-inclusive world. It reveals whether you’re an exclusivist (a belief that only one religion is true) or a pluralist (all religions lead to God). Besides, it
just sounds plain mean to exclude people, doesn’t it? God wouldn’t exclude people. God is love. He loves everybody the same, right?

And that’s usually the point in the conversation where things start getting really uncomfortable and awkward. Raised in a secular climate of uber-tolerance, many Christians struggle to explain why kind, sincere, and devout followers of other faiths will miss heaven by a long shot. For example, how would you respond to a friend who challenged you with the following statements:

“It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re sincere.”

“As long as it works for you and makes you happy.”

“There is no such thing as ultimate (or absolute) truth.”

“I believe there are many ways to God.”

“It’s rude to say one person’s religion is better than another’s.”

“It takes everyone’s truth to equal the truth.”

“What makes you think your religion is right and everyone else is wrong?”

Any of these sound familiar? It is now socially unacceptable to criticize another person’s religious beliefs (unless, of course, you’re slamming Christianity). But keep in mind that, historically, ours has always been a creedal faith, meaning our beliefs direct and influence our attitudes and actions. Since its inception, Christianity has made a bold claim concerning the identity of the one true God and His Son Jesus. And that belief has enjoyed a relatively trouble-free existence in countries and cultures governed or influenced by Judeo-Christian beliefs. But not so today, where this foundational
truth has taken a beating in the marketplace of public opinion (not unlike what our first-century brothers and sisters experienced).

Nothing New Under the Sun

As Christ-followers, we believe God has made Himself known through creation, our conscience, and special revelation in Scripture. And He has never stuttered when He has spoken, making His character crystal clear so that we wouldn’t mistake Him for any other so-called gods. And two thousand years since Christianity’s inception, in the midst of our culture’s buffet-style theology, the church still maintains that God’s identity isn’t optional (or even open to a facelift).

However, pluralism is also nothing new. Way back in the Old Testament, a diverse range of religious beliefs coexisted alongside ancient, monotheistic Judaism. Baal worship and various forms of Canaanite deities crop up repeatedly throughout the Jewish record. And it was in this worldview context that God spoke, clearly setting Himself apart from other deities and distinguishing Israel from other nations. A simple read of the Old Testament and one can quickly see that God isn’t too hip on sharing His glory.

“I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.”

(Isaiah 42:8)

“My glory I will not give to another.”

(Isaiah 48:11b)

That sounds a bit narrow-minded and exclusive…maybe even egotistical or self-centered. Apparently God thinks He deserves all of humankind’s adoration and praise. All of it. How dare He?
And though Scripture claims the Lord does all things well, sharing His glory apparently isn’t one of them. He is decidedly intolerant on that issue.

Interestingly, when the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians took Israel into captivity, it was largely due to the Jewish nation’s worship of multiple gods, abandoning their allegiance to the one true God. Over time, it had become very fashionable to mix the worship of Yahweh with Ashtoreth and Molech, the cultural gods of Baal.

But God’s intolerance of rivals isn’t because He’s insecure or jealous, like some middle-school girl. God's jealousy for His glory goes much deeper than mere human emotion or understanding. This guarding of His glory and an unwillingness to share the spotlight of praise is rooted in the essence of God Himself. The very nature—even the idea—of God demands that He has no peers. No equals. If the Bible is true, then Yahweh stands alone as God. Period. One Deity, existing in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This logically means there is no such thing as Allah. No Molech. No Baal. No Krishna. These deities are, in reality, conjured up from man’s religious imagination, or perhaps even manifestations of demonic entities, fallen angels masquerading as gods. And why would they do this? Could it be they want the glory too?5

Another reason for God’s jealousy is His love for us. As God, He understands that we were made for Him alone and that our souls are never fulfilled until they are worshipping Him.

So do the logic. Either Yahweh is God or He isn’t. And if He isn’t, then every other religion or belief system on planet Earth is up for grabs. Like your choice of music, food, clothing, or lifestyle, it’s whatever works best for you. Personal preference and experience then become the path to Paradise, not some irrefutable absolute truth about an invisible Supreme Being.

Unfortunately, this preference for pluralism didn’t work out so well for the Jewish nation, resulting in painful and prolonged...
consequences—displacement, subjugation, and slavery. And in time, they realized God was not the syncretistic, eclectic Deity who is one of many faith options.

So let’s fast-forward to today. What are people really saying when they affirm, “It doesn’t really matter what you believe as long as you are sincere and treat others fairly.” Does this make sense? Is it even rational?

With myriad belief systems available today, it can be both confusing and difficult as Christians paddle their way upstream against the flow. Though some postmodern theologians suggest that time and history has changed God’s character and what ancient Scripture says is true of Him, the author of Hebrews (who claimed the Word of God was living) maintained, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” And the prophet Malachi wrote, “For I the LORD do not change.” Since God exists outside of time, centuries of history and the advance of civilizations cannot alter His character…or cause Him to warm up to the idea of pluralism.

According to Scripture, there is still room for only One on heaven’s throne.

Okay, okay, you may be thinking, I already believe that. But does today’s pluralism still personally affect me as a believer? Is it really that big of a deal? I mean, come on. Isn’t it about time the church took a chill pill and relaxed?

The Incredible Shrinking Planet

Everybody knows our world is getting smaller. Within just one generation, massive change has occurred with communication, community, and commerce. Virtually every person now possesses global access to almost anything. Someone shares a thought through a tweet, and in a few seconds people all over the world know about it. When Osama bin Laden was killed, it took just minutes before
phones all over planet Earth lit up with texts, banners, emails, bulletins, and push notifications. Through the Internet, the world is literally at our fingertips. In our information-rich and technology-driven age, we are now more aware of the vastness of the universe and the world around us than any previous generation in history. You and I are a big part of that process and phenomenon.

Additionally, reason, philosophy, and science have risen as new gods to be revered and respected while faith is considered Victorian or antiquated. Obsolete. Out of date. A relic of a time long since passed, before humanity matured. In the religious community, a move toward a blending of religions has begun. But it’s not the concerted conspiracy of a particular person or religious organization. Rather, it’s something much more subtle and sinister. It’s almost as if it’s in the air we breathe.9

Consequently, faith in unchanging absolute truth has been moved into the adjoining room like an unwanted old uncle at Thanksgiving dinner. And many Christians have unfortunately become products of their age, just as Paul warned against.10 The result is that, while most Christians may flatly reject pluralism, they may still not be able to effectively defend the faith against a strong logical, philosophical, or scientific argument.

And the world continues to shrink and become one.

The good news is that this positions us to deliver the Gospel to all nations and in large numbers. However, it’s easy to post anonymous rants about our faith online, as the walls of the World Wide Web insulate us to a degree. But try it in the classroom, workplace, or in our community, and we find ourselves suddenly interacting with people of all sorts of beliefs, faiths, philosophies, backgrounds, persuasions, and
lifestyle choices. They are no longer across the world. They now live across the street. They sit across the aisle at school. They work in the cubicle next to ours. These people are not our enemies. They’re our neighbors and friends, those we love and care about.

Sadly, instead of demonstrating our concern for them through talking about Jesus, we often misapply the Christian values of compassion and tolerance by accepting their beliefs as “okay for them.” I mean, doesn’t it sound a bit arrogant to tell someone that their entire belief system (upon which they may have built their whole life) is nothing more than a big fat lie and deception? Who wants that kind of unpopularity, especially with people we like!

And yet, in our Gospel silence (perhaps due to fear or ignorance), we may unknowingly contribute toward creating a world of “customizable” beliefs. We help define truth as “whatever is true for you.”

But what would it be like if this casual approach was widely accepted in other parts of society? What if pharmacists and surgeons (or the person who writes your paycheck) operated with this relativistic approach, doing whatever “seemed right for them at the moment”? Fortunately, a commitment to unwavering accuracy still remains the standard in these fields.

And yet, when it comes to matters of faith and religion, there is no universally accepted standard or measure. It’s not the Truth that’s uniting us. Instead, what’s bringing us together is the belief that there is no ultimate truth.

Even many ministers argue for packaging a newer, tastier Gospel that digests easier than the exclusive claims and narrow requirements of the past. As a result, our world is rapidly becoming one, with apocalyptic implications. As a planet, we have become “Post-Jesus.”

Reading the Warning Signs

Okay, so just why are these issues so important? Think of it this
way: Sharing your belief about who has the best college football team only makes you a loyal fan. You can argue the merits of your favorite team with others, but in the end it’s just a game without any global significance or life-changing implications. But belief in who the God of the Universe is…well, not so trivial. If there is such a thing as absolute truth, then it really does matter what we believe.

To avoid being naïve Christians, we must understand how today’s multifaith approach changes the way we think about the important stuff. And what exactly are the theological and practical implications of pluralism? Pluralism informs and influences a person’s beliefs concerning:

**The Nature of God**

Like a sidewalk artist’s caricatures, pluralism’s portrait of God is a distorted one, with certain features highlighted (love, acceptance, compassion) while others are muted, downplayed, or completely ignored (justice, holiness, or even wrath). With a pluralistic perspective, God is not portrayed as constant but as constantly evolving, becoming better over time—reflecting culture’s beliefs and us more accurately. In religion, He’s a glorified Sugar Daddy, dispensing free passes to heaven like a travelling circus promoter.

**The State of Humankind**

Though belief is important, pluralism promotes a person’s thoughts and beliefs to sovereign status. It elevates man’s ideas, making them binding and authoritative. But what we think actually matters very little for determining truth. Belief cannot create truth. It can only validate it. Believing $2 + 2 = 4$ is valid only if $2 + 2$ actually equals 4. Believing that man is inherently sinful and in need of salvation is not a widely held belief. But what is this belief based on?

In the final analysis, what matters most is what God thinks and says about Himself and us. Our low view of God and disproportionately high view of man is inverted. Our thinking must reverse if we are to genuinely understand the world’s need for Jesus.
The Mission of Christians

As subtle forms of pluralism creep into the Christian faith, we become missionally impotent. For why would you take the effort to share Jesus with someone if your beliefs aren’t any more true or valid than theirs? Many Christians today suffer from “missional paralysis.” But being bold about Christ and His claims requires a confident, courageous faith and the ability to endure what people might think about you. A tough assignment, but one worth the risk. At least the early church thought so.

Universalism

With the publication of Rob Bell’s Love Wins, Universalism burst into the Christian conversation, uniting and dividing people from all belief spectrums. Universalism is the idea that (somehow) everyone eventually goes to heaven regardless of the object of their belief. While some closet Universalists may not be vocal about believing this for fear of being labeled heretics, secretly they still hope for that heavenly loophole where everyone makes it. We live in a time where armchair theologians (preachers, authors, bloggers) have emerged, unfurling a banner that effectively reads, “There is no hell. Everyone will eventually be saved. We are all one…at last.” This is the logical result of religious pluralistic thinking.

Our Doubts

Religious pluralism in culture has also created many secret doubters in the church. For this reason, we’re forced to reexamine some foundational questions about our faith, such as: “Do people of all religions really need Jesus in order to get into heaven? Do they require Christ in order to be declared righteous in God’s sight?”

If Jesus’ own cousin, John the Baptist, a man who spent his entire life preparing for Christ and promoting Him, could experience major doubts on his deathbed about
whether Jesus was the true Messiah, what chance do we have of dodging doubt in a world filled with thousands of conflicting beliefs?

Having doubts or questioning isn’t a bad thing. It’s what you do with those doubts that makes the difference. We shouldn’t ignore the hard questions. Instead, we have to seek answers and think about why we believe what we believe.

Doubt isn’t foreign to Scripture and its strugglers (Abraham, Thomas, Peter, and many more doubted). The real question is, “When God’s words and ways seem confusing or troubling to my thinking, emotions, and nature, can He still be trusted?”

Do you suppose Abraham experienced some inner turmoil at the thought of Sodom and Gomorrah being destroyed? And yet, even in his confusion, he posed the question, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”11 The psalmist declared, “[God] will judge the peoples with equity.”12 And a few verses later writes, “He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.”13

So ask the hard questions, but keep moving forward. Confidence comes to those who diligently seek God while submitting to His character and justice. Only then can we honestly face and overcome our doubts.

Tolerance as the New Truth

As the pool of beliefs deepens and widens in our culture, the more narrow- and closed-minded the cultural perception of Christians. And it’s not going to get better. Today, tolerance is the newest god in the marketplace, easily obtained through trading in our conviction about biblical truth.

Tolerance can be good and bad. It can be good when it means that we are patient with one another, when we bear with one another’s weaknesses, when we lovingly care for one another in spite of
our differences, and when we seek to understand one another. This kind of tolerance is a Christian virtue every believer should strive for.

Tolerance is bad when a Christian succumbs to the lie that he is a bigot if he defends his beliefs and values in the public square. Even those who claim there are no absolute values will still vehemently defend the (absolute) value of tolerance. Christians unwilling to bow to this god are routinely labeled as mean-spirited “fanatics” and “haters” (and some are). But all this is merely evidence of a rising tide of subtle persecution that will one day swell to tsunami proportions.

How ironic that “open-minded” atheists often promote intolerance and even hostility toward those who claim God exists. Relativists contradict themselves by saying it doesn’t matter what you believe, but then condemn the belief in the absolute truth of God. They quickly turn on you, because the only absolute truth for them is the truth that there is no absolute truth. To disagree with them is to encounter intolerance and hatred.

Obviously, not all beliefs can be true. Not all roads lead to God, because many of these belief systems flatly contradict one another. While it’s possible for two belief systems to both be wrong, they can’t both be right. God cannot at the same time both exist (theism) and not exist (atheism). Atheism and Christianity cannot both be right. It’s impossible. A logical contradiction. God either is or He isn’t. He is either the God depicted in the Bible or He isn’t. Pluralism is therefore a classic contradiction. It doesn’t work—logically, philosophically, or theologically.

Something has to be true. If we say nothing is true then we are living in an illusion and the illusion becomes our invalid reality. As Christians, we claim Jesus is that truth. We believe the world is genuinely in trouble and that people really do need a Savior. We believe Christ came to us and died for the sins we could never atone for. We believe He bridged the gap between man and God through His death and resurrection.
But because we’re fallen humans, we’re naturally turned off by some of God’s words, especially those that make us uncomfortable. Jesus’ exclusive claims fall into that category. It’s not natural for us to accept Him or His words. His truth doesn’t sit well with our theological tastebuds. Some of God’s truth is palatable and comforting, but at other times it’s distasteful and hard to digest. This becomes both a challenge and an opportunity to exercise faith and humility in our relationship with Him. I suspect this falls into the “I’m God and you’re not” category.

**Did Jesus Believe in Jesus?**

Popular thinking would reinvent Jesus as a soft-spoken hipster-poet promoting world peace and coexistence among the world’s religions. And while it’s true that Christianity united Jew and Gentile, rich and poor under a common belief and family, Jesus’ own words and actions often divided people more than uniting them. In our day, where absolute (or propositional) truth is viewed as repressive, narrow-minded, and mean-spirited, Jesus’ claims stand out more than ever. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in His most often-quoted declaration. With two short sentences, the Sage from Nazareth drew a timeless, definitive line in the sand. Speaking to His soon-to-become-famous doubting disciple, Jesus replied to Thomas concerning the path to heaven,

> “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

Statements such as this cause adherents of pluralism to scatter in fear like cockroaches in a newly lit room.

As with His other statements, Jesus knew exactly what He was saying. His words were confident and designed to communicate exclusivity. He knew who He was, where He had come from, and where He was going. He was fully convinced of His identity and

Jesus knew who He was, where He had come from, and where He was going.
mission and that access to heaven was His alone to grant. This bold claim is brazen and arrogant…if it’s not true. And He risked offending not only those who heard Him speak it, but all of humanity.

But Jesus would have been a complete fool to get Himself crucified if there was any other way to heaven. What kind of person hangs bleeding on a cross in unimaginable agony for a lark or a lie? One must concede, even if they don’t believe in Jesus, that Jesus believed in Jesus. He believed He was the only way. In fact, the night before He was arrested, tortured, and crucified, He prayed, begging the Father for another way. His humanity cried out for God’s infinite mind to think up some other divine strategy to redeem this rebel human race. In the garden He seemingly asked, “Is there another way?”

But heaven gave no answer.

Shortly afterward, strengthened by an angel, He would rise from prayer and begin His painful journey to the cross. And why? Because He believed fully there was no other way. You could claim Jesus was deluded or insane, but that wouldn’t match the nature of His words, actions, character, and the testimony of those who knew Him best. It also fails to account for the untold millions of lives He’s changed. If God, in His infinite wisdom, could have devised another path to salvation, don’t you think He would have chosen it? But the Father gave no other option. A multitude of religious efforts or human options falls short. Even the Old Testament Law was inadequate to solve our sin problem. Only Jesus could pay the penalty for our sin by drinking the cup of God’s wrath.

Only Jesus did it.

Perhaps you’ve secretly wondered, But what about now? Now that God has had more time to think about it, now that there are good people in all religions and lifestyle choices, is there still no other way?
What if someone sincerely believes in You with all their heart, but just happens to call You by another religion’s name? Wouldn’t You accept them then?

But belief itself never causes anything to be true or untrue, valid or bogus. Beliefs become legit when they reflect truth. You can believe with all your heart that the chair you’re sitting in can take you to New York, but your belief doesn’t make it true. You can believe in aliens or the Easter Bunny, but your belief doesn’t make them any more real. What we believe is irrelevant unless it’s grounded in fact. It’s the object of a person’s belief that’s important. Place your faith in the right object and suddenly your belief has purpose, meaning, power, and validity.

Similarly, when it comes to heaven, a person’s belief is only credible if it is placed in a credible object. Jesus Christ claimed to be that credible object. He claimed to be “the way and the truth.” And either He is or He isn’t. It’s that simple.

From Clarity to Confidence

So where does that leave us? As we’ve said, at its core, Christianity is defined by the belief that Jesus is both the Christ and the Lord. God in human flesh. He alone, through His undeniable death and resurrection, connects humankind to God. People don’t get martyred for pluralism. Jesus’ disciples spilled their blood because they believed the world really needed only Him.

Do we believe as they did?

In the end, pluralism is a false belief, a subtle lie pressuring Christians to weaken their defense of the faith. As a result, the Gospel is diluted because of fear and an attempt to keep peace with our culture. Even in our churches, we must always guard against becoming a social club or being caught up in programs and events, and then hyping those events with creativity in an attempt to win the world to Christ.
We can try so hard to relate to the world that we become virtually indistinguishable from it. We can’t simply imitate culture and by this effort expect to reach it. We won’t change people’s hearts because of our innovation, creativity, or technology, or because of our political influence. We also won’t reach the world by shunning all things secular and isolating ourselves from culture. Jesus wouldn’t want that.¹⁷

So, in an increasingly pluralistic age that desperately needs help, hope, and Jesus, what are we to do? How are we to live? If following Christ is really worth it, then how can we clearly and convincingly demonstrate this reality? And will anyone even notice?

If lobbing Gospel grenades at a pagan culture won’t do it…
If retreating into the safety of the church walls won’t do it…
If absorbing culture with its values won’t do it…
If slick, amazing presentations and church services won’t do it… then what will?
Let’s find out.
Gospel Appeals

- Before you worry about standing out for Jesus, first learn to sit before Him.
- Watch how you live, because others are.
- Jesus was willing to die for you. Are you willing to live for Him?

Questions for Further Thought and Discussion

1. Are you a Fifth-Gospel Christian? That’s a big question. Why is it so important to be able to answer this question in the affirmative?

2. Considering that most people will never read the first four Gospels, what needs to change in your life for you to be a Fifth-Gospel Christian?

3. How can pluralism weaken one’s obedience to the command to share Christ?

4. Why is this “Jesus is the only way” language so hard to digest in today’s culture?

5. Bobby said, “People don’t get martyred for pluralism.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

6. If Jesus wasn’t the only way to heaven, why would He have been a fool to die for our sins?