

THE ONE WAY

1 John 5:9-15

How much control should the government have over our lives? It was thought in this country that the government was there to protect our nation in wars and make treaties with other nations, but otherwise leave us alone. The Great Depression was such a crisis that people looked to the government to rescue them. During World War 2 the government had great control over peoples' daily lives, but everyone was so behind "helping our boys overseas" that they readily gave the government what was needed to win the war. Since then there has been a tug of war between more and less government control. The sensible idea is to have a balance.

It can be great to have government control over things in a crisis, like producing vaccines in record time; but that can lead to only one source for where to get things. The result is that the prices go up and the quality goes down. That is why it has been a blessing that we have several companies producing vaccines. It is also why we have government laws to control monopolies—to keep companies from taking advantage of people by providing the only means they have to get a product or service.

But think of the "monopoly" we have in our Christian faith. Our epistle lesson from 1 John affirms, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." Jesus is the only way, not just one or the easiest way or the best way, but the only way.

Theologians call this "monopoly" the "scandal of particularity," that Jesus is the only way. How out of sync that must appear in a world in which diversity is so promoted. How can we say we have the truth and others do not unless we enslave everyone to our point of view? Since traditionally Christianity has not been so common in Africa and Asia and Europeans conquered the Americas, is this just white domination over people of color? How can we say a Christian is any better than a sincere Hindu or Buddhist?

That seems all the more harsh when we think of all the people who have lived in the world and never heard of Jesus. We know that the vast majority of Native Americans died from old world diseases like smallpox before they heard the Gospel from missionaries. People lived for centuries in the highlands of New Guinea and had no contact with the outside world until the 20th century. The countries with the largest populations—India and China—did not receive missionaries until the 1500's. And those missionaries were accompanied by mercenaries out to exploit the wealth of those lands. Christianity had spread into western Asia and North Africa even more than Europe, but those areas were taken over by Islam. And there are more even in so-called "Christian" nations in Europe, the Americas, and Australia who only know Jesus as a good, wise man, never really being told the message of how He saved us from sin. If Jesus is the only way, are all those people condemned?

John's epistle was written in the context of the Gospel being brought to people who are both Jews and Gentile. The Jews believed in the one, true God, the God of the Old Testament.

Many of the Gentiles were people exposed to that God by going to Jewish synagogues. The people John wrote to believe in God. The question he poses to them is, “Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, who has come to reveal God to us?” These are people who heard the message of Jesus. Some reject Him, not because they are ignorant, but because they clearly reject Him. John is saying that if you reject Jesus, you reject God.

Why would people reject Jesus? Franz Pieper was a famous theologian in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the 1800’s. He wrote a three-volume work of Christian doctrine which is still used to train pastors. In it he writes that there are only two religions—the religion of the law and the religion of the Gospel. Other than Christianity, all religions are about how we work our way into God’s favor or into a state of peace and prosperity. It is based on what we do whether by pagan rituals, meditating ourselves into a state of “Nirvana,” doing enough good to get to heaven, depending on human technology to solve our problems, or just make the most of what we have. This is the religion of the law. Only in Jesus is there the religion of the Gospel, the religion of God coming down to us in Jesus, about what He does, not us.

The way of Jesus involves rejecting any way I can save myself. I can’t depend on how good I am, how much I have, how happy or content I feel, or whom I know. If we don’t trust in Jesus, about what He does, then we are trusting in something else—ultimately ourselves.

That is the problem facing the people to whom John wrote. Either there were the Jews who rejected Jesus because they didn’t want to lose their status over others as the children of Abraham or they were the pagan Greeks who emphasized getting to a higher plane of intellectual life and going beyond the pain and suffering of this world. Both of the views rejected Jesus because it would mean that anyone, even Gentiles, even the ignorant, even the poor and sick, could have life through Jesus.

That is what the message means for us today. It is not talking about other people and how they must believe in Jesus. It is talking about what Jesus means for us. What rejects Jesus is either when I think I am better than others or when I put what I feel I deserve over what God freely gives to me.

The movie “No Country for Old Men” won the academy award for best picture. It depicts a sheriff in west Texas who despairs over the evil in the modern world. Like that sheriff we can long for the “good old days” when things were better. But near the end the sheriff is told by his uncle who is an ex-lawman that times were just as evil in the past. Our world is full of sin, of rejecting God and therefore rejecting one another.

That is why John directs us to Jesus. He is not the only way, but the one way we have to be rescued from evil. John tells us:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

It is that confidence that leads us to proclaim that Jesus is the way to salvation. It is not that we have the right way and others have the wrong way as much as we have such good news that we want to share it with others. We don't know why we and not others were raised in families that were Christian. We just know the confidence we have in Jesus and which we can offer to others. That comes when we first realize that we are not better than others and we too are tempted to try to earn our way to happiness. Then we can see the overwhelming love of God in Jesus, a love that moves us to live in that love in how we relate to other people.

People will continue to reject Jesus, just as we are tempted to think of ourselves better than others or try to earn our way to salvation. That is what sin does to us. But Jesus died to forgive us from that and rose so we can live in a new way, a way that trusts in Him. For He is the one way.