

# IS CHRISTIANITY TOO NARROW?

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## Explore God Series (Part 4)

Text: Matthew 7:13-14; John 14:1-10

### The Elephant in the Room

A teacher was walking among the desks of her Kindergarteners, hard at work on an art project. "What are you drawing" she asked one little girl. "Oh, I'm drawing God," the child replied. "You know, no one knows what God really *looks* like" the teacher confided. Without looking up, the girl rejoined: "Well, they *will* in a minute!"

Every religion, I suppose, shares a bit of this spirit. Each of them speaks to a somewhat skeptical world with the claim: "We know what God looks like. This is God's Way... This is God's Truth... This is God's Life." Some of us wonder, however, if all these religious people aren't a bit like the three blind men who each were asked to describe an elephant. One approached the beast and grabbed its *trunk*, exclaiming confidently, "An elephant is long and tubular and capable of great contortions of shape." The second blind man had his encounter with the elephant and, after placing his hands on the animal's *side*, said, "No, no, an elephant is very broad and leathery and hardly capable of bending at all." To which the third man, having grasped the pachyderm's *tail*, remarked with disgust, "You're both wrong. An elephant is quite thin and smooth has a wiry brush on the end."

If there really is a God, some of us think, then surely no one knows all of Him. At most, each religion grasps but a piece of the vastness of God. Each is too proud of the part it knows and too blind to the parts that others know better. We get this feeling that if everyone would just wise up and humble down about the limits of their perception or the commonality of our fundamental religious yearnings, there'd be a whole lot more peace in this world.

That's why the words of *Jesus* are so disturbing. Here you have this luminous man who loves and serves and teaches in a manner that is so sane and attractive that even atheists and people of other religions have admired and discussed him for 2000 years. Then he goes over the top by claiming what no other Founder of a world religion ever did -- that he is not simply "a" child of God, the way the rest of us are, but the Son of God in a unique sense -- the eternal Word, come in human flesh.

Yet even that is not as shocking as what Jesus says here in John 14 and expresses elsewhere in different words. Where other religious leaders lay out some propositions or processes that they advise working to get closer to God, Jesus says: Focus your life on me. Because **Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father... I am the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)** You mean, you'll show us a really good way to get nearer to God, and

some very true principles, and some life-enhancing tips? NO says, Jesus. I mean I am the Road, the Reality, and the Recreative Power of life itself – and not a single soul gets close to all of God except through me.

Wow. How does this Jesus fit into the World Parliament of Religions? How are we going to talk about Jesus around the dorm room or the cocktail party where people feel Christ's way is just one of many equally valid paths up the mountain of God? How do you understand Christianity in a way that doesn't sound so proud or narrow? What do you make of the Jesus who does not say "Hey, I've got a really good handle on the elephant, I can draw you a great picture." But who says instead, "I am He. Climb on me. Only I can take you over the mountain."

### **The Arms of God Open Very Wide**

If you leave today with only a little bit of what I'm going to say this is the nugget. This is what it's crucial we understand for ourselves and have some ability to pass on to others: The arms of God open very wide, but they are attached to Jesus. It is hard for people today to understand just HOW wide open are the arms of God. We have seen the God of the Church Lady and the Far Wings, bent on criticizing and condemning people. We have been shown the manipulative God of the televangelist and the vengeful God of the terrorist. It would be easy to get the sense that God is interested only in the narrowest bandwidth of people. Only the chosen few are beings for whom he truly cares. But Jesus shows us the real face of God.

There is a scene in the movie the *Passion of the Christ* in which the camera sweeps back behind and above the cross then pans around as if giving us a view of the world through the eyes of Jesus. Spread out at his feet is the whole world it seems – buildings, city streets, commerce and teeming crowd. Suddenly, you get the sense that these arms stretched out upon the cross are not simply hanging there; they are reaching out to the world. And that is true. The Bible shows us the God whose salvation is stunningly INCLUSIVE in its intended scope. Think about this with me.

Timothy 2:3-4 reads: **God our Savior, wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.** 2 Peter 3:9 declares: **The Lord is... patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.** Or hear the words of Jesus in perhaps the most famous Christian text of all time, John 3:16-17, **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.**

I wish we had time to fully explore all the other ways that God reaches out to human beings with those arms so open wide. He sends his messengers to the uttermost parts of the earth to bear witness to his good intentions for humanity. He shines some of the

light of his law through even primitive or pagan religions. God uses the Creation and human conscience to reveal his existence, his character, and his moral desires to humanity.<sup>1</sup> As Romans 1:20 describes, **For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.**

As the old hymn goes, *"There is a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea; there's a kindness in his justice which is more than liberty. There is welcome for the sinner and more graces for the good; there is mercy with the Savior; there is healing in his blood."* It is because of the amazing grace of God that Christians feel at peace saying, "Jesus is the only way."

### **But the Arms Are Attached to Jesus**

But that also is the truth. Just as God's salvation is inclusive in its intended scope, so salvation is EXCLUSIVE in its reliable source. The arms of God open very wide, but those arms attach to one specific person – Jesus Christ. As Acts 4:12 reads: **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to [people] by which we must be saved.** I know it is hard for some of us to accept the idea of Christ as the only way to salvation, but it begins to make more sense once you get clear on four key concepts I'll just touch on very briefly here.

FIRST, nobody is entitled to salvation. God did not have to make us. He doesn't have to sustain us. He doesn't have to save us. Everything is his grace. You'll hear people say sometimes, "Oh, well, God would have to let so-and-so into heaven. What an incredible person he or she is." But it is only because God shields us from seeing the full splendor of his holiness, that we hold onto that idea. When it comes to righteousness, we grade on a curve (measuring ourselves against each other), but God grades on a cross – on the standard of the one and only person in all of history who lived a perfectly obedient, holy life. As we're reminded by the Apostle Paul, **All [the rest of us] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23).**

SECONDLY, we cannot save ourselves, no matter how sincere we are, no matter how many frequent worshipper miles or moral merit-badges we earn. It is an awesome grace that the true God of the universe is not a God who asks us to send our children to blow themselves up for him but who sends his Son to die for us. If somebody is saved, it is exclusively on the basis of the work of Christ on the Cross. Jesus pays the debt from the only bank account big enough not to be bankrupted by the price of sin. Ephesians 2:8-9 declares, **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.**

Here's a THIRD concept: people clear on their condition, give thanks for hope no matter how it comes. I know the exclusivity of Jesus Christ bothers some of us. Isn't it a scandal that God didn't come up with a more general or different methodology for delivering human beings from sin and death? If you are on the Titanic, however, and the ship is going down, would you quibble with the color of the lifeboat or the side of the ship it's lowered from, or even who else is in the boat? If you're running from a forest fire and find your way blocked by a great chasm, how much time are you going to spend complaining that the bridge is 30 yards that way instead of 10 yards his way? Wouldn't you rather give thanks -- as 1 Timothy 2:5 reads, that **there IS one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus** -- our lifeboat and bridge?

FOURTH and finally, remember that people are accountable before God for only what they know. One of the most disturbing thoughts to many of us is the idea that God might sentence to hell someone who had never had the opportunity to hear of Christ or to verbally confess Christ. While God would be within his rights to do that, the person of Jesus shows us that God's character is neither capricious nor cruel in this regard. In Hebrews 11, we are actually given a list of Old Testament saints who it is said were put right with God "**by faith**" even though they lived before the time of Jesus.

On the strength of this, I conclude that it may be possible for someone of genuinely humble and contrite faith to recognize their sin before a holy God, throw themselves upon his mercy, and be saved apart from verbally confessing the name of Jesus or of knowing the historical facts of his sacrificial death upon the cross. God is always more interested in the trajectory of someone's life than in exactly where they are at a given moment. In this sense, I suppose, we might find ourselves meeting a Socrates in heaven, though Romans 1 makes it clear that very few people will come to God in this way. This doesn't negate, of course, the biblical message that **there is no other name by which someone can be saved. (Acts 4:12)** It simply reminds us that this verse is less about *our* saying the right things than it is about declaring that it is through the name (or authority) of Christ alone that salvation is conferred upon any person.

Let me say in closing: All religious paths don't lead to the top of the mountain. Some lead right back down to the bottom. Some to deadly ravines. At the end of the day, the most important distinction between Christianity and other religions is that Christianity teaches that Truth is not a principle, or a proposition, or a process, but a Person. Other religions are based on their founder's teachings. Christianity is based on its founder's life. It is only by walking with Christ that the Truth of who he is, and the goodness of the way He marks out by his own steps, and the life that he becomes in you resolve to absolute clarity. Aha, you'll say, "This is what God looks like."

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent section on general revelation, see, Paul Copan's, *True For You, But Not For Me*, p.139