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A Reasonable Faith

Is There No Other Way of Salvation?

We live in an increasingly multicultural and globalized society. Not only is there a greater racial mix within our cities, but the effective size of the global community

is also shrinking at the same time as the global population is increasing. In this age of integrated communication, we are more in touch with one another's ideas than at any other time in human history. Television neatly carves up society, dishing out "the other man's view" in liberal portions. The Internet has further closed the effective distance between human beings, exposing a pluralism of concepts and worldviews.

We started this module by exploring whether the message of the Gospel could hold its own in the "marketplace of ideas" that has become our world. For it not only to hold its own but thrive, as intended by God, it must answer one funIs the Christian Faith Rational? **Does God Exist?** Is the Bible God's Word? Do Science and Scripture Agree? Why is There Evil in the World? **Do Miracles Really Happen?** What Should We Think of Jesus? Did Jesus Die and Rise Again? Is There a Heaven and Hell?

Is There No Other Way of Salvation?



Can We Really Know the Truth? How Do I Share My Faith?

damental question to the satisfaction of each inquirer:

Why do you claim Christianity to be the only way of salvation?

In today's world, for a Christian to claim he knows "the way" sounds not just arrogant, but positively ludicrous. After all, doesn't Islam claim the same thing? Who's to say that Christians are right and Muslims are wrong? And isn't such dogmatism the source of so much religious strife around the world today?

The contention that Christianity and other religions are essentially the same is a significant barrier blocking many people from accepting Christ. "Isn't Christianity just one of many ways to discover God?" a person may say. "Doesn't the sin-

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cere Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim worship God, but just under a different name? How can you know that what you believe is true and what someone else believes is false? And anyway, how can you know what's true for you is true for everybody else?"

These are four major questions that may confront a Christian sharing his faith. In **2 Corinthians 4:3**, we are told that the Gospel message is "veiled to those who are perishing." **Verse 4** then tells us:

"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

Satan has done a masterly work of disinformation, veiling the minds of unbelievers behind numerous fallacies. Four of these principal fallacies are revealed in the four questions we just read above:

- **⊃** The many-roads-to-one-destination fallacy "Isn't Christianity just one of many ways to discover God?"
- **The many-names-for-one-God fallacy** − "Doesn't the sincere Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim worship God, but just under a different name?"
- **⊃** The many-points-of-view fallacy "How can you know that what you believe is true and what someone else believes is false?"
- **The many-truths-for-many-people fallacy** − "How can you know what's true for you is true for everybody?"

The first two fallacies can be grouped together under a single question:

Question One: What makes Christianity different?

The last two fallacies can also be grouped together under a single question:

Question Two: Can we really know the truth?

In this lesson, we will address both these core questions in turn.

What Makes Christianity Different?

What Christianity teaches and what the average person *thinks* Christianity teaches are two very different things. In fact, it may be said that the greatest hindrance to a person understanding the Gospel is what he *thinks* he understands about the Gospel!

The popular notion is that Christianity simply teaches basic moral goodness, such as loving others, doing good to others, not speaking falsely about others, and the like. Yet it doesn't take a degree in religious studies to see that this is also what many other religions teach, in one form or another. In fact, when you compare religions, it doesn't take much effort to distill a common theme in all religious belief and, in that sense, a common message. This message is usually called "the Golden Rule," which was best expressed by Jesus in **Luke 6:31**:

"Do to others as you would have them do to you."

This "Golden Rule" summation of Christianity is the basis upon which many people conclude that Christianity is just one of many ways to God. After all, Buddhism also teaches that we should treat our fellow man with compassion and dignity. And even the Golden Rule itself is not exactly unique to Christianity. Here are some quotes from sources outside the New Testament:

- **→ Pittacus of Lesbos** (c. 650-570 B.C.) "Do not that to thy neighbor that thou wouldst not suffer from him."
- **Confucius** (c. 551-479 B.C.) "What you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others."
- **⊃ Isocrates** (436-338 B.C.) "Do not do to others what angers you if done to you by others."
- **⊃ Tobit 4:15** (c.160 B.C.) "And what you hate, do not do to anyone."
- **⊃ Lucius Annaeus Seneca** (c. 4 B.C.-A.D. 65) "Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your betters."

Similar quotations can be found in many of the major religions of the world. There is even the story of Rabbis Shammai and Hillel (who founded two opposing schools of the Pharisees during the time of Jesus) that goes like this:

"Once a heathen came to Rabbi Shammai and promised to become a proselyte if he could teach him the whole law while he stood on one leg. Shammai got angry and drove him away with a stick. The heathen went with the same request to Rabbi Hillel, who never lost his temper, received him courteously and gave him, while standing on one leg, the following effective answer: 'Do not to thy neighbor what is disagreeable to thee. This is the whole Law; all the rest is commentary: go and do that."

So again we come back to the original question: What makes Christianity unique? Does it simply share the common theme of all religions, phrased in a slightly different way?

Although, superficially, the Golden Rule might appear to sum up Christianity, when you look closer you discover that the Golden Rule is not a shallow "do good" concept but a deeply integrated lifestyle that demands two things:

- **⊃** Absolute love for God
- **⊃** Absolute love for others

In fact, this love for God and love for others is expressed in Christianity as the sum total of all that God requires of each person. **Matthew 22:37-40** provides us with the unique Christian basis of the Golden Rule:

"...'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

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Notice that it is not "Love your neighbor as yourself" that is the first and greatest commandment. The Lord Jesus made the Golden Rule dependant upon what could be called the Platinum Rule: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." The quality of the love for our fellow man is a direct result of the quality of our love for God.

Read Romans 13:8-10

The New Living Translation renders this verse with these words:

"Pay all your debts, except the debt of love for others. You can never finish paying that! If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill all the requirements of God's law. For the commandments against adultery and murder and stealing and coveting – and any other commandment – are all summed up in this one commandment: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to anyone, so love satisfies all of God's requirements."

The *New International Version* speaks of "the continuing debt to love one another." *The Message* underscores "the huge debt of love you owe each other." *God's Word* describes this debt of love as "one debt you can never finish paying." J. B. Phillips' *The New Testament in Modern English* describes the "perpetual debt of love which we owe one another."

Do you notice how in Christianity the concept of "loving your neighbor" is pinned to a concept of the debt we owe to God? We are not just *commanded* to love one another. We are *indebted* to one another and the only form of payment allowed is love! God's love for us demands a similar expression of love to others.

It is only when we begin to understand our "debt of love" that we can comprehend the depth of the Golden Rule as taught by Jesus. For Jesus didn't just say, "Love your neighbor as yourself." He also commanded you to "love your enemies" (**Luke 6:35**). How is this possible? In fact, this command is nothing short of *impossible* unless we understand that the debt of love we bear is not just toward those who do us good but also to those who do us evil.

What has made us indebted in this way to one another – to both friend and foe? It is the magnanimous love that God has lavished upon us! (**John 3:16**; **Ephesians 2:4-7**; **1 John 3:1**). And what makes it possible for us to love even our enemies? It is the fact that we too were once enemies of God (**Romans 5:10**; **Colossians 1:21**), yet God extended his mercy toward us.

What makes the Golden Rule different in Christianity is the added dimension of God's love. It is the love of Christ which defines the Golden Rule, not ourselves. Unlike every other expression of the Golden Rule (which defines the rule according to how we want others to treat us), Christianity makes the standard of our love for others nothing less than the love that God has expressed toward us.

Read 1 John 4:7

Here we discover that our very capability to love one another flows out of God's love, since "love comes from God" (see also **verses 11-12**). And how is the love of

God defined? How can we know what God's love for us is really like?

Read Romans 5:8

As you can see, everything in the Christian message brings us back to a unique historical event – the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Without the Cross of Christ there can be no Golden Rule, not in the depth that Christ expressed it. In fact, the average person doesn't realize that Christ took the Golden Rule far beyond the simple expression, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." In **John 13:34-35** he declared:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

The Golden Rule (also called the "royal law" in **James 2:8**) is defined by the love that Christ demonstrated upon the Cross (note **John 15:13**). This quality of love expressed by Christ toward us is both the *standard* against which our love for others is measured and the *motivation* that drives us to love others. Only the personal experience of God's love can empower a Christian to live up to the incredibly high standard of Christ's Golden Rule. Just take a look at these verses:

- **⊃** Romans 15:7 "Accept one another, then, *just as Christ accepted you*, in order to bring praise to God."
- **2 Corinthians 5:14** − "For *Christ's love* compels us..."
- **⊃** Galatians 5:22 "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'...So I say, *live by the Spirit*, and you will not gratify the desires of the [flesh]...But the fruit *of the Spirit* is love..."
- **⊃ Ephesians 5:25-28** "I pray that...Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, *being rooted and established in love*, may have power, together with all the saints, *to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ*, and *to know this love* that surpasses knowledge *that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."*
- **⊃ Ephesians 5:1-2** "*Be imitators of God*, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, *just as Christ loved us* and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."
- **⊃ Ephesians 5:25-28** "Husbands, love your wives, *just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*...In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives..."
- **Colossians 3:13** − "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive *as the Lord forgave you.*"

The theme of love is universally recognized as being central to the message of Christianity. But it is a serious misunderstanding of the Christian message to re-

fer to the Golden Rule – total love for others – without taking into account its twin tenet, the Platinum Rule – total love for God.

What is most remarkable about the Christian message, however, is that hand in hand with such lofty moral ideals is a startling declaration, unique in the world of religious thought: that man is a sinner, deserving of the judgment of God and incapable in himself of living up to the simplest requirements of the Golden Rule.

Understanding the Problem

According to the Gospel, man has a problem. The Bible calls this problem "sin," which describes not just evil acts but also the internal condition of man's heart.

"One of the central affirmations throughout the Bible is humanity's estrangement from God. The cause for this estrangement is sin, the root cause of all the problems of humanity. The Bible...describes sin as an attitude that personifies sin as rebellion against God. Rebellion was at the root of the problem for Adam and Eve...and has been at the root of humanity's plight ever since."2

Just as Christ elevated the Golden Rule beyond humanity's highest moral ideals, so he also defined sin as deeper than mere surface actions. As Erwin Luzter explains:

"Christ's definition of sin penetrates far deeper than a list of sins on a membership card. It goes to our inner desire, motivations, and secret thoughts."3

In the Gospel, we find three dimensions to sin:

- **Spiritual dimension:** Rebellion against God and the state of spiritual "lostness."
- **⊃** Personal dimension: Selfdestruction and judgment harm to oneself and to others.
- **Social dimension:** Injustice and poverty – the accumulated effects of sin on human society.

In direct contradiction to the teaching of every other religion, and of

Defining Sin

Sin has been described in countless ways. Benjamin Whichcote defined it as "defiance to the authority of God;"4 Augustine of Hippo, as "energy in the wrong channel;"5 Martin Luther, as "essentially a departure from God;"6 Charles Colson, as "essentially rebellion against the rule of God;"7 and Oswald Chambers as "my claim to my right to myself."8 Oswald Chambers goes on to tell us that sin "is not wrong doing, it is wrong being, deliberate and emphatic independence of God."9

For the purposes of this study, we will define sin in this broad way:

> "Sin is anything that tarnishes your desire to live with and for God."

EVENING STUDY

popular psychology today, the Bible tells us that man is not basically good, but basically evil - that there is a natural inclination within the human heart that pulls a person toward sin.

This is in such stark contrast to the ideals of the Golden Rule that most people don't make the connection. After all, how can you say in one breath that the answer to all life's problems is to love one another, and then in the next breath say that not one single person is capable of sustaining true love for his fellow man?

The Message of the Cross

It is the twin concepts of God's love and man's sin that focuses the Christian message upon the crucifixion of a man 2000 years ago. Although it was sin that nailed Christ to the Cross, it was God's love that brought him to earth in the first place. Thus it is in the Cross of Christ that we find the reconciliation of the two important elements of the Christian message:

- The ideal of total love
- The reality of total depravity

Everyone recognizes that the Cross is the primary symbol of Christianity. We see it on our churches, on the covers of our Bibles and even on our websites. But the average person rarely understands what the Cross really represents. Yet if you take the Cross out of Christianity, you are left only with lofty moral instructions that fail to work in the real world. For it is not in the teachings of Jesus that Christianity finds its unique position in the world. It is in the sacrifice of Jesus that we find a message without parallel in religious thought. Like Paul's defining declaration in **Romans 1:16**, we can then truly say:

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because *it is the power of God* for the salvation of everyone who believes..."

As deep as the problem of sin is, so deep is the extent of God's salvation, accomplished through the death of Christ upon the Cross. As we have explored so thoroughly in **Module 102**, the Bible declares that only the "new creation" is capable of loving God and loving others in the absolute sense required by Christianity. Only the "new self" is capable of fulfilling the ideal God has set for each person (**Ephesians 4:22-24**), and this "new self" comes about not by self-effort (as is the teaching of every other religion) but through a transformation by the Spirit of God himself (**2 Corinthians 3:18**).

In John 8:32, Jesus made a famous proclamation:

"Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

This incredible statement has been quoted in countless different contexts. It is even the catchphrase of the CIA. But few people know the words with which Jesus immediately followed up this statement. In **verse 36**, he said:

"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Freedom from what? Freedom from sin's effect and power (note **John 8:34**), and freedom to fulfill both the Platinum Rule and the Golden Rule. Freedom to live with and for God. *That* is the core meaning of Christianity. In Paul Little's words:

"Man's problem has never been not knowing what he should do. His problem, rather, has been that he lacks the power to do what he knows he should. Christ raised the ethical level and thereby made the requirements higher. This by itself raises our frustration level. But that is not *all* Christ did, and this is a major difference between Christianity and other religions. Christ offers us His power to live as we should...He does something for us we cannot do for ourselves." ¹⁰

The man-on-the-street tends to compare his limited understanding of various religions with his equally limited understanding of Christianity, and come to the conclusion that "they're all basically saying the same thing." But when you investigate the matter, you quickly find that although there are similarities between Christianity and other religions, these similarities are quite superficial. Beneath the skin, they are very different animals. As Paul Little goes on to say:

"Every other religious system...is essentially a do-it-yourself proposition. Follow this way of life, they say, and you will gain favor with God and eventually achieve salvation. In a sense, other religious systems are sets of swimming instructions for a drowning man. Christianity is a life preserver."

Do you notice what we've done in this lesson? We've taken a street-level conception of Christianity – the fact that Christianity is just about obeying the Golden Rule – and we've shown that:

- ➤ Yes, the Golden Rule (together with the Platinum Rule) is the core requirement that God has for each person.
- No, it is not possible for any person to truly live the Golden Rule without the empowering of God.

Why does Christianity claim to be the only way to God? Because it claims to be the only way to deal with the basic human predicament $-\sin - in$ its spiritual, personal and social dimensions.

The Ultimate Claim

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Jesus is the only way to God. What a claim! This is either the most outrageous, arrogant, narrow-minded claim a person can make...or it is true.

The Bible constantly asserts that this claim is true. In **Acts 4:12**, Peter declares:

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Peter is not beating about the bush here. He is making a statement that is either true or it is not. There is no half-way position on Jesus. It's a black-and-white issue, with no grays in between.

Paul too makes the same claim in 1 Timothy 2:5:

"For there is *one* God and *one* mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

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Rephrased, Paul is saying: "There is *one* God and *only one* way to God – Jesus." Yet as outrageous as this claim may seem, Paul is merely echoing Christ's own words, who in **John 14:6** declared:

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father *except through me.*"

This is the foundation upon which the Christian message is built. If this declaration is false, then the whole of Christianity tumbles like a house of cards. For the claims of Christ to be the sole path to God cannot be explained away or watered down. They must be either accepted or rejected.

As Paul Little explains:

"Christians assert that Jesus Christ is the only way to God...not because they have made it their rule, but because Jesus Christ our Lord taught it...A Christian cannot be faithful to his Lord and affirm anything else. He is faced with the problem of truth. If Jesus Christ is who he claims to be, then we have the authoritative word of God Himself on the subject. If He is God and there is no other Savior, then obviously He is the only way to God. Christians could not change this fact by a vote or by anything else." 12

In a world that values tolerance and inclusivity, the charge of exclusivity is often leveled against Christians. Why can't there be a dialogue between faiths, people ask? Why can't we learn from one another? Well, we can only learn from one another, in the deepest sense of the meaning, if we perceive that we all have a portion of the truth. Yet the Christian message screams a direct contradiction to this. According to the Bible, there are not many portions of the truth, carved up between different religions. There is only one truth, and that truth is personified in the person of Jesus Christ, who declared that "I am...the truth."

Yet even those who would charge Christianity with the crime of being intolerant, exclusivistic and narrow-minded find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. For the very Jesus whom they would seek to embrace as one of many great religious teachers is the one who declared that there is no other way. So you must either accept Jesus (and thus reject all other religions) or you must reject Jesus, sacrificing him once again, but this time upon the altar of religious toleration.

Yet people still try to wriggle out of the uncomfortable challenge of Christianity by claiming that truth "is in the eye of the beholder." So now that we have established that Christianity does indeed have something unique about it, let's take a look at the next obvious question: Is it really possible to know whether Christianity's claim to be the only way to God is true or not?

Can We Really Know the Truth?

Read John 18:37-38

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Pontius Pilate's response to Jesus' declaration, "...for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth," was: "What is truth?" Through us, Jesus is making the

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VENING STUDY

same declaration to people today. Yet just as Pilate did, many shrug off Christ's claim to being the Revealer of truth with the words: "What is truth?"

There is a premise peddled by the mass media and by the Western educational system that, when it comes to spiritual matters, "all truths are relative." The technical term for this philosophy is "postmodernism." In street lingo, it is called "different strokes for different folks." And whether people realize it or not, this philosophical outlook flavors the thinking of the average person when it comes to their spiritual quest.

Yet it is perhaps the ultimate irony that post-modernism* (or "what's true for you is not necessarily true for me") flies in the face of the scientific method upon which modern society is built. No self-respecting scientist would dare claim that it "doesn't really matter" what the result of the experiment is, as long as you "believe sincerely." No credible historian would ever announce that it "doesn't matter" whether Hannibal *really* crossed the Alps or not, or whether Hitler *really* wrote *Mein Kampf* or not. No, the modern scholar seeks to establish or discredit the truth of a statement, particularly if he wants to build a working hypothesis upon that statement.

Yet somehow people believe that when it comes to spiritual matters, truth becomes a distorted lens through which any opinion may pass. Paul Little writes:

"Believing something doesn't make it true any more than failing to believe truth makes it false. Facts are facts, regardless of people's attitudes toward them. In religious matters, the basic question is always, 'Is it true?'"13

Most people have not thought through the consequences of an it-doesn't-matter-what-you-believe-as-long-as-you-believe-it-sincerely philosophy. No one can deny that Hitler sincerely believed in the racial superiority of the Aryan race. Does his slaughter of six million Jews (as well as hundreds of thousands from other so-called "inferior" races) not matter, simply because he sincerely believed what he believed?

The fallacy of subjective truth (the belief that truth is determined by each person's own view) is utterly preposterous when examined closely. The vast majority of things we believe in matter *greatly* upon whether what we believe is factually true or not. Take these examples.

- → A person stands on the top floor of a skyscraper, ready to jump. He tells you, "I believe I can fly!" Who would respond by saying, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe it sincerely"?
- → A child stands at the edge of a busy road. She tells you, "I believe I can run across the road without getting hit by a car!" What parent would respond by saying, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe it sincerely"?

^{*} Postmodernism holds that truth does not exist objectively. It is entirely the product of a person's culture and experience. Another term that can be used (more or less) interchangeably with postmodernism is subjectivism.

A bomb disposal expert is carefully diffusing a bomb that could level a whole city block. You look on nervously as he decides whether to cut the red wire or the green wire. He closes his eyes and picks one at random. "Are you sure that is the correct wire?," you ask. He smiles and responds, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe it sincerely."

Note the common theme in all of these scenarios? There is inherent danger in the decision being made! If the belief is false, the result will be fatal!

So when answering the question, "Does it really matter what I believe?," we must first ascertain the risks that arise from being wrong. If there is zero risk, then, yes, it doesn't matter what you believe. You are free to tailor your faith as you see fit, finding a personal solution among the thousands of possible beliefs. But if the result of believing the wrong thing is fatal, then it becomes *imperative* to know what you believe and why you believe it. As Paul Little explains:

"Sincerely believing something does not make it true, as anyone will testify who has ever picked a wrong bottle out of a medicine cabinet in the dark. Faith is no more valid than the object in which it is placed, no matter how sincere or how intense the faith is. A nurse very sincerely put carbolic acid instead of silver nitrate in the eyes of a newborn baby. Her sincerity did not save the baby from blindness." ¹⁴

Let's take a practical example from the pages of comparative religion. Christians believe that Jesus is God come in the flesh, and that his death, burial and resurrection form the foundation upon which a relationship with God is established. Muslims, however, deny the deity of Christ and even the fact of his death, burial and resurrection. These two views are mutually contradictory. One of them is right. One of them is wrong. They cannot both be right at the same time.

Yet the same Christianity that claims that Christ is God come in human form also declares that "whoever believes in [Christ] shall not perish but have eternal life" (**John 3:16**) and that "whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (**John 3:18**). These statements are either true or they are false, and the stakes could not be higher. For this reason, there can be no stronger priority for any person than to determine whether Christianity is indeed true or false.

Christianity has effectively painted itself into a corner. Either Christianity *is* the only way to God, or its entire message collapses. Either it is exactly what it says it is – the unique and sole path to God – or it is an utter fraud.

In many ways, the trilemma that we visited when we investigated Jesus' claims to be God, and when we investigated the eyewitness testimonies of the disciples, can also be used when we investigate the claims of Christianity itself:

Either Christianity is a lie Or Christianity is lunacy Or Christianity is the light

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Is there no other way of salvation? The Bible's answer is an emphatic "No." Alone among the religions of the world, the Gospel addresses the core human need — the reconciliation of sinners to a holy God. Christianity is unique in both its moral standard and its remedy to humanity's powerlessness to live up to that moral standard.

So high are the eternal stakes that every person must decide for themselves whether Christianity's claim to be the only way of salvation is true or not. But decide we must. For with Christianity, as Harvey Cox put it, "Not to decide is to decide." ¹⁵

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