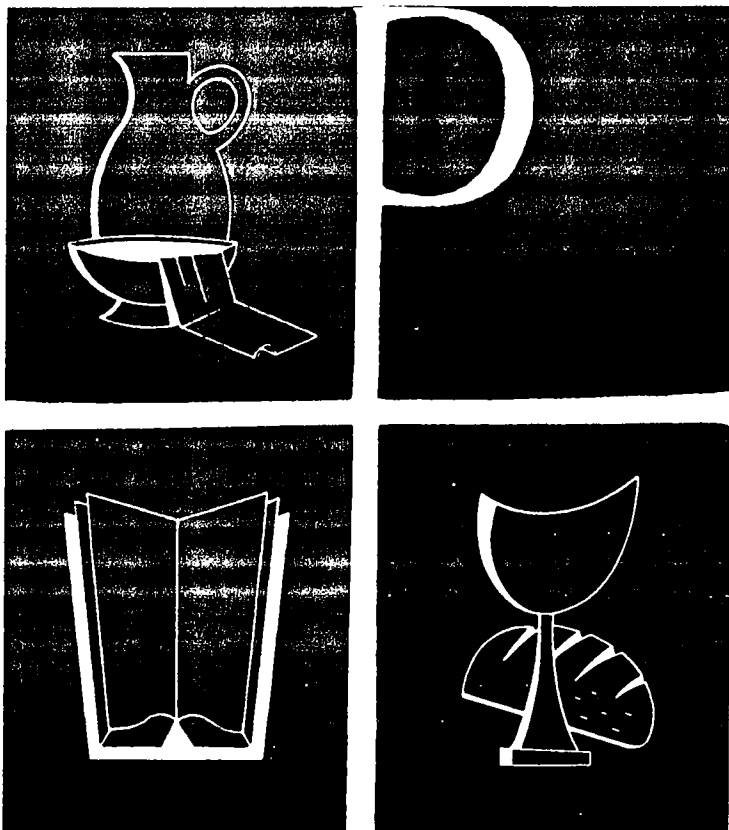


THE CRUCIFIED ONE IS LORD

CONFESSING THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST
IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY



Office of Theology and Worship
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INTRODUCTION

The Crucified One Is Lord *Confessing the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralist Society*

Recent events within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have highlighted one of the most important theological questions facing North American Christians today: How shall we confess Jesus Christ in a religiously plural society? The emergence of pervasive religious pluralism is a dramatic feature of contemporary Christian existence. American society, already in the process of separating itself from the influence of Christianity and its churches, is now characterized by a profusion of religious options ranging from enduring traditions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, to “New Age” spiritualities.

Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims are no longer quaintly costumed people on magazine pages. They are our neighbors and co-workers, whose kids play soccer with our kids, and whose places of worship are in Kentucky and Wyoming as well as Jakarta and Bombay. The pluralism of the American religious scene flows beyond enduring faith traditions and organized religious communities into bookstore sections on Wicca and astrology, eco-spirituality and eclectic meditation techniques.

How shall Christians confess their faith in the midst of people whose beliefs are different? What is the shape of the faith that Christians confess? What should be the church’s stance toward other faith traditions? The Office of Theology and Worship wishes to contribute to the church’s consideration of the issue by making available to Presbyterians a superb theological paper from the Commission on Theology of the Reformed Church in America.

The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America asked its

Commission on Theology to prepare a paper addressing three basic concerns: What do we believe about Jesus Christ? How do we interpret and live out these beliefs in a pluralistic world? How are we to understand the implications of these beliefs for adherents of other religions? The Commission on Theology prepared *The Crucified One Is Lord: Confessing the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralist Society* for the 194th General Synod (2000).

As a result of the Lutheran-Reformed Formula of Agreement, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is in full communion with the Reformed Church in America as well as the Evangelical Lutheran Church In America and the United Church of Christ. Among other things, the four churches have agreed to “commit themselves to an ongoing process of theological dialogue in order to clarify further the common understanding of the faith and foster its common expression in evangelism, witness, and service.” Sharing important theological statements among the churches is one element in “ongoing theological dialogue” as well as a service to all of the churches.

The Office of Theology and Worship is grateful to the Commission on Theology of the Reformed Church in America for their permission to publish *The Crucified One Is Lord*, both on our web site <www.pcusa.org/taw> and in print as the Office of Theology and Worship’s Church Issues Series No. 4. We trust that this important theological statement will be helpful to individual Presbyterians, and that it will be a useful resource for sessions, adult study classes, and presbyteries.

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COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY, REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

What Do We Believe about Jesus Christ?

The earliest and most basic of all Christian confessions is the acclamation, "Jesus is Lord" (e.g., Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11; 1 Cor. 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:5). To confess "Jesus is Lord" expresses a number of important understandings and commitments. It is first of all a recognition of God's unique activity and presence in Jesus of Nazareth. The term Lord, although it is used in many different ways in the Bible, is used throughout the Bible in distinctive ways to refer to God's own being. The Hebrew equivalent *adon*, "Lord," is the regular word used in normal speech to speak of God in the Old Testament. When the full scope of New Testament usages are carefully analyzed, it becomes clear that to say that Jesus is Lord is to attribute to Jesus the same sovereign power and authority that we attribute to God.¹ Therefore to say "Jesus is Lord" is to point to what we believe about who Jesus is, that he is not only "fully human," but also that he is "true God from true God," to use the more developed language of the Nicene Creed.

But to say that Jesus is Lord is not merely to affirm his deity; it is also to make the claim that every human authority is finally subject to Jesus. Even though the world may not acknowledge it yet, every governing official, every religious leader, indeed every human claim to authority must finally acknowledge the authority of Christ (Phil. 2:10–11; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 11:15, 19:16). This confession has throughout the ages been the backbone of Christian resistance to evil and the hope that has sustained the church through its darkest hours.

This means that the statement "Jesus is Lord" not only conveys certain information about Jesus; it also expresses a whole range of

commitments, values, and intentions of the community that gathers under this confession. To make this statement is like reciting a pledge of allegiance. It acknowledges Jesus as *our* Lord, and expresses the hope that Christians will see Jesus' lordship extend and be acknowledged over the whole earth.

Moreover, the confession "Jesus is Lord" is the response evoked from us when we experience the power of God made available to us in the name of Jesus. As we experience healing, forgiveness, release from the power of evil, and new life breaking into our lives, our hearts cry out in praise and adoration, "Jesus is Lord!" For Christians, the confession "Jesus is Lord" is an expression of the Spirit's work in our lives, as the power of God awakens in us the awareness of where our help really comes from. This is why the Bible declares that no one can say "Jesus is Lord" apart from the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).

This confession of the lordship of Christ is thus a response to the saving work that Christ accomplished on our behalf. We acclaim Jesus as Lord not only because of who he is, but also because of what he has done. Indeed, we discover fully who he is only when we realize all that he has done: he has revealed God's love and purpose for humanity in his life and teachings; he has redeemed us through his sacrificial death; he has triumphed over the power of sin and death in the resurrection; he has ascended to the right hand of the Father, where he continues to enliven the church through the Holy Spirit given in his name; and he will come again in judgment to blot out evil and restore the whole creation. Revelation 5:9 points powerfully to this celebration of Christ's work:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;"

Jesus is Lord because it is his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and final return that restores creation, providing salvation for all those whom God has chosen to redeem.

Moreover, the churches of the Reformation have consistently emphasized that Christ is both necessary and entirely sufficient for salvation. The Reformed emphasis on *solus Christus* (“Christ alone”) reminds us that there is no other mediator between God and humankind. This focus upon Christ alone is closely related to Reformed emphases on *sola gratiae* (“grace alone”) and *sola fide* (“faith alone”), which underscore the necessity and sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf and the necessity and sufficiency of faith in Christ, without reliance on human works. Even the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) draws its basic rationale from the unique role of Scripture in its witness to Christ.

How Do We Interpret and Live Out These Beliefs in a Pluralistic World?

While almost all Christians continue to celebrate this confession as their personal belief, some Christians have become uncomfortable asserting it in the “public square.” Some are not so sure any more whether this confession can be held as true, not just for oneself, but with the whole world in view. There are a variety of reasons for this unease. Changes in our culture have called into question whether anyone can claim to know any truth that transcends one’s own context and experience. Past abuses committed by the church ostensibly in the name of the lordship of Jesus—from the crusades to the Inquisition to slavery to a silent acquiescence in the Holocaust—have given some Christians pause about the way this confession should be used in the public arena. In addition, we find ourselves encountering adherents of other religions with increasing frequency in North America. Such contacts often raise questions about the uniqueness of Jesus and the exclusive claims made by Christians. It is important to explore these reasons for discomfort, and to discern how the church can constructively address them. How can we open up fresh perspectives on this ancient confession, which may enable the church to confess it with new conviction, sensitivity, and clarity? In our exploration, we shall pay particular attention to the *function* of confessing “Jesus is Lord” in addition to the *content* of that confession. That is, we shall be

concerned with those assumptions and practices that surround our confession and bring its implications into engagement with the world around us. We want to concern ourselves with the concrete differences it makes in our lives and in our culture when we rightly confess that Jesus is Lord.

Fears about the Use and Abuse of Authority

To speak about Christ's lordship is to speak about *authority*. In our culture, however, this is a subject of great controversy. People from a variety of theological perspectives have questioned the language of lordship and authority in its application to God or to Christ. It has been argued that such terms are outmoded, reflecting a patriarchal and hierarchical society very different from the democratic egalitarianism of contemporary life. When the church honestly examines itself, it must acknowledge that this language has at times been used, even in the church, to condone oppressive relationships that reflect nothing of the Spirit of Christ.

Yet to reject this language entirely on the basis of these abuses is to confuse a distorted reflection with the true reality. It is also a failure to understand the distinctive way in which the confession of the lordship of Jesus functioned in the ancient church. Far from being used to legitimate human hierarchies and patriarchies, the confession of Jesus' lordship was used to relativize and critique all such human structures of authority. For example, Matthew 23:9 states, "call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father to the one in heaven." In Acts 5:29, when the disciples are ordered by the religious authorities to be silent, Peter responds, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."² In both these examples, God's authority supersedes and relativizes all human authority. The same is true in the book of Revelation, where the lordship of Jesus is the starting point for resistance to a cruel and oppressive Roman Empire claiming power and lordship for itself. To confess that Jesus is Lord is not to give sanction to human authority, but to subject it to a penetrating critique that challenges any claim to authority apart from or different from the

authority of the Christ who gave himself for the life of the world. Jesus turns the authoritarian and patriarchal world of his day on its head by declaring “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matt. 23:11–12). To confess the lordship of Jesus is radically to redefine what lordship and authority mean in the first place! It is to embrace as our rule and guide the distinctive way in which Jesus embodies authority.

At the core of the Bible’s understanding of authority is its affirmation of divine grace. Even the creation itself is expressive of God’s gracious authority; God speaks, and the things that are not must respond and come into existence (Rom. 4:17). The world is sustained by the gracious decrees that proceed from the throne of God (Isa. 55:10–11). Yet this authority never expresses itself in domination, but rather in service (Luke 22:25–27). It is difficult to underestimate the significance of the graciousness of divine authority. God’s authority gives life, it forgives and renews, it encourages diversity while binding people to each other.

Throughout human history, authority and power have usually been won by shedding the blood of others. But Jesus is acclaimed as Lord precisely because he has shed his own blood on behalf of the world. To say that Jesus is Lord without recognizing this distinctive understanding of gracious divine lordship is gravely to misunderstand the Christian confession.

This combination of authority, power, and self-giving is seen most clearly at those points where Jesus’ claim to authority appears strongest. Consider John 14:6, where Jesus states, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” One can scarcely imagine a more exclusive claim to authority. Yet the “way” of which Jesus speaks in this text is precisely the “way” of suffering and death (cf. 13:36, 14:3). It is because Jesus establishes and models this “way” of self-offering that he is also “truth” and “life.” In other words, Jesus’ claim to be the sole mediator of salvation derives from the uniqueness of his self-offering in death. Self-offering, power, and authority always come wrapped up in each other.³

This is not to say that divine authority never challenges, confronts, or judges. The same Jesus who gave himself for his enemies also challenged them, rebuked them, and warned them of God's judgment. But the judgment that Scripture speaks of is always in the service of grace. It is carried out by a God who loves this world more deeply than we can imagine, and whose wrath therefore will not allow anything in all creation finally to deny, demean, or destroy the love of God revealed in Christ, the love that energizes the whole creation and holds the universe together.

When we recognize this distinctive *function* of the confession "Jesus is Lord" in the early church, it raises some important issues surrounding how we make our confession of the lordship of Jesus. It is possible for us today to be entirely "orthodox," saying all the right words, but to do so in a way that attempts to establish the privilege and superiority of the church rather than to call the church and the world to discipleship in Jesus' way. It is not enough to be clear on what we should say; we need also to be clear on *how* we should make use of that confession in the life of the church.

The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in a Post-Christian Context

This leads to another challenge that is often heard today to the confession "Jesus is Lord." Some have argued that to confess that Jesus is Lord is arrogantly to presume that Christians have a monopoly on the truth. Here the complaint centers not on the notion of lordship or authority; it focuses upon the way in which Christians attribute final authority *only* to Jesus of Nazareth, not just for themselves, but for the whole world. The same complaint is heard in many variations: "It's OK for you to believe in Jesus, but you have no right to impose your beliefs upon others." "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere." "Every religion has important truth in it, and you can't say one is better than another." "There are many paths up the same mountain, but they all reach the same top. There are many religions, but they all are saying basically the same thing." "How can you claim to know more about God than anyone else?"

All these comments, diverse as they are, share a common resistance to the confession “Jesus is Lord.” In each case, the final and public allegiance to Jesus’ lordship grates against the pluralism and individualism so deeply embedded in North American religious consciousness. Most people prefer that religion be kept private out of the public sphere and that it be kept humble and subservient, never claiming access to any truth or authority that might impinge upon others.

In one sense, the resistance of the dominant culture to the confession “Jesus is Lord” is as old as Christian faith itself. The early Christian martyrs were not put to death simply for believing in Jesus; they were put to death because they would not take part in the imperial cult of Rome. That is, they were not willing to regard their own religious beliefs and practices as part of an eclectic smorgasbord in the way most religions did. Rome was remarkably tolerant of a wide range of religions, as long as they made no claims to ultimate authority nor demanded final allegiance. But the early Christians wouldn’t go along with that. For them, to say that Jesus is Lord was to say that Jesus represented both the rule by which all other religions should be assessed (including the imperial cult), and the allegiance that superseded every other loyalty (including loyalty to the emperor). That allegiance cost many of them their lives.

Although resistance to the claim that Jesus is Lord is not new, our own culture has distinctive reasons for resisting this confession—reasons that we must try to understand. To do so, we must first go back to the period following the Reformation, when the so-called “wars of religion” tore Europe apart in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. By the time the Peace of Westphalia was concluded and these wars brought to a close in 1648, much of Europe was physically, economically, and culturally devastated. This anguish over religious conflict paved the way in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for approaches to the relationship between religion and public life which increasingly moved religion out of the public sphere and into the realm of subjectivity and private life. The implicit assumption driving much of this change was the belief that religion, when it acquires too

much power, becomes explosive and divisive. Europe had come to that conclusion through the hard knocks of experience.

This disenchantment with a public role for religion was furthered by developments in the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century. Not only did political thought during the Enlightenment increasingly separate the role of church and state, but the empiricism and rationalism of the Enlightenment drew an increasingly sharp opposition between religion and science. Empiricism stated that our only access to truth is through the five senses; rationalism insisted that truth must be based upon reason alone, rather than faith. Because religion could not be empirically or rationally proven, it was relegated even more decisively to the realm of private opinion and feeling rather than to public truth. In this context, to say that Jesus is Lord might be meaningful as an expression of one's own feeling or belief. Yet since such a statement could not be empirically or rationally proven, it would be meaningless as an affirmation of public, objective truth that might make a claim on others or on the world as a whole. Ironically, the intensely inward and subjective character of the pietistic heritage of much American Christianity has often played directly into the hands of this public-private split in the function of religion.

The twentieth century, however, brought about a weakening in the Enlightenment's confidence in empiricism and rationality. The most scientifically advanced societies in the world almost brought themselves to extinction in two world wars, horrible beyond belief. In the late twentieth century our own postmodern context is suspicious, not only of religion, but of reason as well. More and more our culture is coming to the belief that *all* knowledge, both religious and scientific, is partial and provisional. We have come to recognize the ways in which reason itself is often merely a tool driven by the deeper and darker forces of ethnocentrism, greed, and the will to power.

And so in our own culture we are beginning to extend the same suspicions toward other social institutions that have long been directed toward the church. Our culture increasingly is suspicious of *all* claims

to objective truth and all final allegiances. On almost any subject, people are encouraged to keep their opinions to themselves and to avoid the mortal sin of imposing their beliefs on anyone else. We are a deeply suspicious people.

This emphasis on the provisional and tentative character of our knowledge is further intensified by our increasingly pluralistic society. Economic developments, immigration, and changes in communications and travel technologies cause us to be exposed to many different kinds of people, more so than ever before. We work and go to school with Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and adherents of many other religions. We are confronted almost daily by people who believe differently from us, and these people are often decent and respectable. Sometimes they may even strike us as admirable, embracing societal values we share or even religious ideals to which we may also aspire.

This loss of a public role for the church, combined with increasing contact with adherents of other religions, places the church in a new social position that often feels uncomfortable for us. In the past, Christian faith appeared to have influence in the society as a whole. We still have long-established memories of a European Christendom where the church played a central role in society. Now North American Christians ironically are finding themselves increasingly in the same position as Christians in many other parts of the world: they are a minority faith, often with little respect or status in the dominant culture, competing in a wide-open marketplace of diverse religions. Christendom—that mutually reinforcing alliance of religious institutions and public, secular power—is dead.

These changes in our world and in our own experience pose fresh challenges to the church. The deepest challenge, however, is not from outside, but from within. These social and cultural changes have affected us as Christians. We are not always as confident as we once were. Our privileged place in society as religious leaders is increasingly questioned. Our own patterns of thinking have been deeply influenced by the culture around us. There are many who are willing to acknowledge Jesus as their “personal Lord and Savior” but are not sure

whether this confession has public significance for their neighbors and the world as a whole as well. They are hesitant to “impose” their beliefs on others. They are reluctant to suggest that their own beliefs might be superior to or more true than the beliefs of others, especially when they suspect that their own moral behavior and that of their fellow Christians is not always superior to the morality of adherents of other religions.

Public Witness in a Pluralistic World

How then do we bear witness to the lordship of Christ from this new social location? We are increasingly a minority faith, relegated to the sidelines of many public debates. Our confession of the universal lordship of Christ seems to many quaint at best, and at worst a threat to the pluralistic fabric of our society. Some Christians, particularly in the United States, respond to this situation by longing for and working for a reassertion of Christendom, where the church works hand-in-hand with government to influence public life. If we can only again seize the reins of power, they argue, we can reassert our nation’s historic Christian identity and reestablish the credibility of the church’s witness to the lordship of Christ.

Yet thoughtful Christians are increasingly questioning this approach. The rise of religious pluralism and the peripheral position of the church in our culture as a whole need not be seen only as a failure and a loss. In many respects, it can be seen as a fresh opportunity for the church. We may be in a situation today that is closer to that of the New Testament church than ever before. As we are freed from the false security of being an established religion and forced to compete in a wide-open marketplace of ideas and perspectives, the Holy Spirit may be opening an opportunity for renewal and transformation in the church, leading us into a fresh and deeper witness to the world, a witness undergirded not by the status and prestige of the institutional church, not by smarter politics, better marketing, or more money, but by the quality and

character of our lives. Christians all over the world have been living and thriving as minority faiths in such pluralistic contexts, and they have much to teach us.

Even in a pluralistic world, the reality that no one can deny is the transformation of human lives into the image of Christ. Perhaps more than ever before, the church is called to witness to the gracious and transforming lordship of Christ through a blended witness of word and deed. If our faith does not transform our lives to reflect Jesus Christ, no one will listen to us. If we do not find creative ways both to point to and to exhibit the radical, shocking, and subversive love of Christ, no one will pay any attention to us at all. But once we gain their attention, if we do not tell them the story of Jesus and challenge them to faith and discipleship, our witness will not bear fruit.

In the middle of this century, when the church still had a certain measure of public prestige, the style of evangelism was built around large crusades and the invitation to “come and listen.” In our day the challenge must be “come, see, and learn.” In our pluralistic world, people must often first see the transforming power of Jesus’ lordship, and then they will learn the way of faith—often not in a one-time decision, but gradually, over a period of time. This process of conversion is no less a work of the Holy Spirit. It is the same Spirit who energizes our witness in word and deed. It is the same Spirit who speaks both through the words of the preacher and through the life of the church.⁴

This means as well that the church must pay very careful attention to the formation of Christian identity and maturity in its members. We live in a society where the supports for Christian faith and life are crumbling. To choose to live as a Christian requires intentional commitment. We must learn to recognize the powers in our world that continually undermine and subvert Christian faith and commitment. We must find fresh ways of encouraging each other to stand as lights in a dark world, of picking each other up when we fall, of supporting each other in the radical and subversive act of confessing Jesus as Lord.

How Are We to Understand the Implications of the Lordship of Christ for Adherents of Other Religions?

The challenges of pluralism come to a particular focus when the question of salvation is raised, particularly with reference to adherents of other religions. In the context of a pluralistic culture in which the provisionality of all knowledge is assumed, it becomes harder for many Christians to affirm that Jesus is Lord of the whole world and that salvation is found in Jesus alone. In our time it is becoming increasingly popular to adopt a general approval of all religions, a view that assumes that all religions are expressions of the same basic human quest for God. By this view, all religions that are sincerely followed are capable of mediating salvation to their adherents.

Yet such a perspective, as gracious and magnanimous as it may appear, is both highly questionable on its own grounds and incompatible with the central affirmations of Christian faith. It must first be asked, "How do we *know* that all religions are capable of mediating salvation to their adherents? What kind of evidence or arguments might be advanced to support such a position?" When pressed, it becomes clear that this position is in reality little more than wishful assertion, and it has little if any clear evidence or argumentation to support it.

When examined closely, it is not at all clear that all religions are trying to achieve the same sort of salvation. Indeed, many careful scholars of comparative religion have emphasized the degree to which different religions conceive of salvation itself in very different ways. Only by the most reductionistic and simplistic analysis can it be said that all religions express the same quest for God or offer the same salvation. It is by no means certain that all religions are even attempting to mediate salvation in the way that Christians think of the concept.

But from a Christian perspective, there is an even deeper problem. Such a general approval of all religions cannot be reconciled with the message of Jesus. Jesus came proclaiming, "the Reign (or Kingdom) of God is at hand."⁵ In so doing, Jesus was not simply stating that something interesting or unusual was in the offing. That

phrase “the Reign of God” evokes all the hopes and dreams of the people of God for God’s final redemption of Israel and the whole world. When Jesus declared that the Reign of God was coming in his ministry, he meant that all of God’s saving purposes for the whole world were coming to their climax and fruition in his ministry. Jesus never claimed to be opening one new path to God amidst many others; he claimed that in his ministry, God’s saving purpose for the whole world was coming to its culmination (cf. Matt. 24:14).

This emphasis on the Reign of God points to an even more fundamental challenge to the assumption that all religions lead to the same goal. The most basic metaphor for the popular view of religions is the image of paths up the mountain. This view assumes that there are many paths to God and that each of us must find the path that is best for us. But note two important features of this metaphor. First, God is passive, waiting to be found at the top of the mountain. Secondly, human beings are the active ones, climbing up the mountain, struggling as best they can to find God, in an enterprise that requires a great expenditure of effort. The great drama of history, in this view, is this: how and when will humans ever make it to the top of the mountain to find God?

The biblical view, summarized in the message of Jesus, is quite the opposite. The great drama of history is not how humans will find God; it is rather when and how an active, seeking God will finally get through to a resistant humanity. When Jesus declared that the Reign of God was at hand, he was not claiming to open a new path to God; he was claiming that God was blazing a new path to us in Jesus. Christian faith is, in the final analysis, not about our going to God, but about God’s coming to us in Christ. Christian faith is not about discovering God; it is the experience of having been found, despite our resistance and rebellion, by a God in search of us: “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Christian faith is incompatible with a general affirmation of all religions because of a fundamental difference in understanding what religion is.⁶ For Christians, it is not our quest for God, but our response to God’s quest for us in Christ.

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the cross of Christ. Here is the moment where God meets us in all our rebellion, resistance, idolatry, and violence. At precisely the point where humanity is most resistant to God, the love of God shines most brightly, overcoming our rebellion, forgiving our violence, and inviting us into a new way of living. Christianity's distinguishing mark is not that we are seekers who have found God; we are sinners enemies of God whom God has loved and forgiven. Christianity is about grace, from beginning to end.

Consequently, Christians do not so much claim to have discovered the truth as to have been apprehended by the truth. Their great joy comes not so much from what they have found, but from the fact that they have been found by God. Their concern is not so much with the wisdom they have acquired, but with the Wise One who has drawn them to himself. If all Christians had to offer was another spirituality, another ethic, another path to fulfillment, Christianity would indeed be just one of many religions. But this is not the heart of the gospel. The gospel affirms that at the center of reality is the living, resurrected Jesus Christ, at work in the world through the Holy Spirit; everything else flows from this living person who has gripped the hearts and minds of those who call themselves Christian.

Can Christians Learn from Other Religions?

Because the gospel is centrally concerned with God's grace in the midst of human failure, Christian faith manifests a distinctive combination of confidence and humility. True faith is confident enough of God's gift in Christ to commend Jesus Christ to the whole world and to risk all in trusting Jesus. But Christian confidence is based, not on our grasp upon God, but on God's grasp upon us. We don't understand or know everything—far from it! But we are known by the One who does. Our only comfort (and confidence) is that “we are not our own.” This combination of humility and confidence means that Christians expect humbly to learn from others, even non-Christians. Christians acknowledge every week their own sinfulness,

limitations, and shortcomings before God and the world in the confession of their sins in public worship. But everything that Christians learn is set in the context of the central confidence that defines Christian life at its core: We are not our own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful savior, Jesus Christ.⁷

Christians look at other religions from this dual perspective. Because other religions do not recognize the unique way in which God has come to us in Christ, they participate in the bondage of all humanity that can only be broken through God's mercy revealed in Christ. Paul speaks of those apart from God's gracious covenant as "having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). These words are in keeping with a long biblical tradition that exposes the futility of idolatry and the diverse ways in which human religious activity is not so much a seeking after God as an avoidance of the true God who comes to us in promise and judgment (e.g., Isa. 44:6-20). Insofar as other religions do not recognize who Jesus is and what he has done, they lack the joyful assurance of reconciliation with God that stands at the heart of the gospel. This they need to hear, and all the church's evangelistic efforts are rightly directed to that end. Without this discovery, no other form of religious life can bring assurance of salvation. We have something vitally important to share with other religions.

But that does not mean that other religions have nothing to share with us. There is another perspective that Scripture and the Reformed tradition provide as well. Reformed theology has always acknowledged that something of God's truth can be known through the natural world. Article II of the Belgic Confession states:

We know [God] by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to *see clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity*, as the apostle Paul says (Rom. 1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse.

Reformed theology denies that God's self-revelation available in creation and culture is sufficient to bring us to salvation because it takes seriously the depths of human resistance to God. We do not respond appropriately to God's self-revelation in the world around us. We twist and distort it to our own idolatrous purposes. But the knowledge of God is nonetheless available in the natural world and is reflected in many religious traditions, partial and distorted though it may be.

A good example of this is found in Acts 17:16ff., where Paul identifies the altar "to an unknown god" as a groping after God, and says, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (vs. 23). Paul goes on to cite several Greek poets as pointers to the truth found in the gospel. Of course, Paul never suggested that the religious perspectives he found in Athens were sufficient to bring about the true and complete knowledge of God. They are pointers to the truth, not the truth itself. Their value for Paul lies in their capacity to point people to the gospel of Christ. Yet in this capacity, they have real value. Paul's sermon illustrates a broad theme found throughout Scripture. Melchizedek and Jethro, the father of Moses, stand outside the covenant community and yet are channels through whom God instructs his people. Much of the wisdom in Proverbs 22:17 to 24:34 bears close affinities to Egyptian wisdom documented from other sources. Isaiah declares that Cyrus of Persia is God's anointed who has been raised up to do God's will (Isa. 45:1).

The same understanding has repeated itself frequently in the history of the church. Many of our cherished Christian practices were originally borrowed and adapted from non-Christian religions. Christmas trees find their origin in northern European pagan practice. Even the date of Christmas coincides closely with a pagan Roman festival devoted to the sun god. Rather than denying any truth or value in such practices, the church saw them as early pointers to the gospel and incorporated them under the banner of the lordship of Christ, always making sure that they pointed clearly to Christ. Christians don't deny that there is truth or value in other religions or that God works through other cultures. Rather,

Christian faith simply declares that all religions (including the Christian church in a continual way) must respond to what God has done, in sending his Son into the world and in calling all to respond in faith to him.

This means that Christians should always expect, not only to teach, but also to learn in their encounters with adherents of other religions. Yet we often find it very difficult both to teach and to learn. Sometimes we become so driven to challenge people with the gospel and to call them to repentance that we fail to see the remarkable ways in which the Holy Spirit is already at work in their lives and even in aspects of their religious heritage. The result is a self-righteous posture that does little to commend the gospel winsomely. Others become so captivated by the pluralist spirit of the age that they lose sight of the transforming power of Christ and the urgency and necessity of challenging people with the gospel at all. The result is a veneer of tolerance that conceals a callused indifference to the suffering and spiritual confusion of many. Neither extreme is faithful to Scripture. We have a wonderful gift to offer in the life-giving power of the gospel. But we can also learn from other religions. The artistry of faithful witness is to learn how to do both together.

What does it mean for Christians to learn from other religions? There are several ways in which that learning takes place. Sometimes other religions challenge us to embrace more deeply the implications of our own faith. The regularity of the prayer life of our Muslim neighbors may confront us with the infrequency of prayer in our own lives. The interest in the spiritual world among Native Americans may confront us with our own materialism and indifference to the Spirit of God. The celebrative affirmation of the law in Judaism may challenge our own cheap grace that fails to see God's law as a gracious gift. In all these ways and many others, dialogue with other religions may help us to become more truly and deeply Christian.

Other religions may also teach us fresh wisdom that is entirely in keeping with the gospel of Christ. In acknowledging this, the church

must also acknowledge the danger of diluting or distorting Christian faith with practices or beliefs incompatible with the gospel. All things must be tested by the Scriptures and by the Spirit at work in the Christian community. Yet Christians around the world are finding architectural forms, meditative techniques, rituals, and patterns of worship in other religious and cultural traditions that are not only compatible with the gospel of Christ, but enable the gospel to be expressed more beautifully and powerfully in the lives of people.

There is also a third way—perhaps the most important of all—in which Christians can learn from adherents of other religions. This is not a learning of concepts, or beliefs, or practices, or values. It is rather the learning of *persons*, motivated by the love of God. We rarely encounter religions in the abstract. We encounter *people*, with their own culture, history, relationships, and values. We encounter people deeply loved by God, whom God also calls us to love. And love is always hospitable and open to the other. Love not only gives the gift of the gospel, but receives the gift of the other in turn, with care and gratitude. In the mystery of the work of the gospel, our capacity deeply to listen to and to learn from others will be directly related to their capacity to hear from us and accept the truth of Christ.

Learning from other religions and witnessing to the uniqueness of Christ are therefore not competing or incompatible options. Rather, they must be understood as complementary and mutually reinforcing activities. Christians who will not learn from other religions will easily become arrogant and will find it increasingly difficult to gain a hearing with adherents of other religions. Christians who fail to witness to Christ's uniqueness will easily become indifferent to the plight of those "having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). But those who can listen as well as teach, who can affirm as well as challenge in their encounters with other religions, are often used by God in remarkable ways to heal religious strife, to bring some justice and wholeness to a pluralist world, and to lead many people to the good news of God's remarkable love in Jesus Christ.

Salvation and Other Religions

But what of salvation? Should Christians claim that there is no salvation apart from those who explicitly confess Jesus as Lord and Savior? In order fully to answer that question, a number of preliminary comments are necessary. First, Reformed theology has always taught that salvation is ultimately in God's hands, beyond the pale of human understanding. Calvin states, "We must leave to God alone the knowledge of his church, whose foundation is his secret election" (*Institutes*, IV.1.2).

A basic posture of humility should characterize all discussions of the scope of salvation. Christians claim not to have mastered the truth, but to have been mastered by it, and thus should be cautious about claiming to know too much of God's saving ways. God is greater than we, and we ought not to claim to know all of God's saving plan. While the Scriptures call us to discern between good and evil and between truth and falsehood, they also repeatedly caution against judging—that is, against attempting to determine the ultimate destiny of any person (Matt. 7:1; Luke 6:37; Rom. 2:1, 14:10; 1 Cor. 4:5; James 4:12). It is sufficient for us to be guided by the Scriptures which led us to Christ, affirming what seems clear and remaining silent where Scripture itself speaks with less clarity or finality. To probe too deeply into these matters is to subject oneself to grave spiritual danger, assuming knowledge and authority that rightly belong to God alone.

Secondly, it is important that we think of salvation in the broad biblical sense and not simply as a ticket to heaven. According to the Bible, salvation is, in the deepest sense, our covenantal response to God's initiative. God comes to us to restore our relationship with God and with the creation, beginning here and now and extending into eternity (2 Cor. 5:18–19). Hence, for Christians it is meaningless to suggest that people will be saved unless this salvation actually begins to be experienced concretely in their lives in the present. To speak of salvation without also speaking of repentance, the freedom of the Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, participation in the redeemed community, and the transformation toward a new and holy life is to

speaking of a meaningless salvation, abstract and devoid of content. To claim that salvation is present where these realities are not experienced is for Christians to strip salvation of most of its content. If Christians' discussions of salvation tend to become otherworldly at times, it may reflect the loss of a firm grip on what it means to be a redeemed community in the here and now.

Thirdly, we must remember that salvation has to do ultimately not only with individuals, but with the restoration of the whole creation. The salvation won in Christ comes to its culmination at the judgment seat of Christ, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when swords will be beaten into plowshares, when the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and when justice will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Hence when we think about the salvation for which we hope, we must not only consider how individuals will stand at that great and terrible day. We must also consider how and where the Spirit of God is already bringing to light the seeds of justice and peace that will come to flower when Jesus Christ restores all of creation to God's intention.

Finally, it is important to remember that the Bible always links salvation (in its full scope, present and future, personal and corporate) with faith in God's gift and promise. Without faith there is no knowledge of God and no salvation (Heb. 11:6; Eph. 2:8). But faith must not be construed as a "work," as something we do that wins God's favor. Faith is not a precondition for God's grace; it is a work of God's grace. The whole process by which faith emerges is under God's gracious providence.⁸ Faith is the other side of the coin of salvation. It is not only the grateful receiving of God's salvation, but also the fruit of that salvation. To discover God's surprising mercy in Christ and to place one's trust in that mercy that reconciles us to God and to one another is, in itself, the experience of salvation (cf. Luke 19:9). Christians say that there is no salvation apart from faith because faith is itself our grateful receiving of salvation and our joyful entry into the redeemed community. A salvation that is not so received is no salvation at all.

Salvation in the Name of Jesus

With these preliminary considerations, we turn to the question of the place of Jesus Christ in the salvation of persons. Is explicit faith in Jesus as Lord necessary for salvation, or is it possible that adherents of other religions will also be saved? What does the Bible say about this, and can the Bible's perspective make sense for us today?

The Bible makes some very strong statements about the centrality of faith in Christ for salvation. Jesus declares in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." In Acts 4:12, Peter says, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." In Romans 10:9, Paul affirms, "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Clearly, the central affirmation of the New Testament is that God extends his salvation to the world through Christ. The Bible does not say that God comes to us in many ways to save; it affirms that God's salvation has come to us "in the fullness of time" in Christ. Hebrews 1:1–2 speaks of how God long ago spoke "in many and various ways," but that "in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds." One can scarcely imagine a more central role for Jesus in God's saving purpose for the world. Christian faith is absolutely clear: Jesus is God's definitive word—the only savior.

But what if the name of Jesus is not known? Must Jesus be explicitly named in order for salvation to be experienced? On this subject, the Bible speaks with a clear central message. The central message and emphasis of Scripture falls upon the centrality and significance of the name of Jesus and the hearing of the gospel. Paul summarizes this theme in Romans 10:14:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without

someone to proclaim him?

Paul bears witness here to the passion that drives the whole New Testament church: the passion to make Christ known. Such passion is incomprehensible apart from the conviction that the name of Jesus is critical to the experience of salvation. Paul believed that God intends people to find salvation through the name of Jesus. He believed that Jesus was God's Messiah, the one appointed to bring salvation to the world. Along with the entire New Testament church, Paul believed that the means by which God has chosen to bring salvation to the world is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is the mandate given to the church, to be the agents through whom God extends his salvation to the world, through witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed. There is no assurance of salvation revealed to us apart from confessing Christ and trusting in him alone. Yet the church also must confess that it does not know the limits of God's grace. We cannot be certain that God will *not* impart saving faith in Christ, even perhaps where his name is not explicitly known. Throughout Christian history the great confessions of the church have affirmed with clarity that our salvation is found in Christ alone, while at the same time exercising restraint in determining too sharply the extent of that salvation or how God may bring people to a saving relationship with Christ.

The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, an important and widely used Reformed confession, allows that God can save in ways other than through the preaching of the Word. After arguing that "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (no low doctrine of preaching here), the confession goes on to state, "We know, in the meantime, that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry, which is a thing appertaining to his power; but we speak of the usual way of instructing men, delivered unto us from God, both by commandment and examples."⁹

In an analogous move, the Westminster Confession states, "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. *So also*

*are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.*¹⁰ The confession goes on immediately to rule out the notion that such a belief might be used to argue for the salvation of all non-Christians: “much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature and the law of that religion they do profess.”¹¹ The Westminster Confession thus walks a middle road, rejecting both the idea that other religions can mediate salvation and the notion that only those who are “capable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word” can be elect. It is also worth noting that the confession walks this middle road specifically out of a desire to preserve both the necessity of the gospel of Christ for salvation, and also the freedom of God to work “when, where, and how he pleaseth.”

Calvin emphasizes primarily the necessity for explicit faith in Christ and rejects any idea that salvation is mediated through means other than the gospel of Christ. Yet even Calvin held that though preaching is the “normal mode which the Lord has appointed for imparting His Word,” God’s saving ways cannot be restricted only to preaching. Commenting on Romans 10:14, Calvin writes,

If it is contended from this that God can instill a knowledge of Himself among men only by means of preaching, we shall deny that this was the meaning of the apostle. Paul was referring only to the ordinary dispensation of God, and had no desire to prescribe a law to His grace.¹²

At the same time, Calvin observes, “It is enough to bear this fact alone in mind, that the Gospel does not fall from the clouds like rain, by accident, but is brought by the hands of men to where God has sent it.”¹³

These two streams that flow from the Reformation are both important. We must never lose sight of the centrality and necessity of the preaching of the gospel of Christ. On the other hand, the affirmation of divine freedom in passages like that found in the Second Helvetic Confession rightly cautions the church against arrogating to

itself human control or complete knowledge of God's saving work. In the face of a corrupt Roman church that had insisted on its own mastery over the mediation of salvation, the reformers insisted on the freedom of God and the freedom of the Word of God. The Reformed emphasis on the freedom of God provides an important caution, lest the church again be tempted to claim for itself control over God's saving ways or too deep a knowledge of the extent of God's salvation.

The relationship between divine freedom and God's use of human agency is a mystery. It is wise for us to confess with conviction what God has revealed—that the only assurance of salvation revealed to us is found through explicit faith in Jesus Christ. At the same time it is also wise for us to avoid saying what we do not know—exactly how God will deal with all those who have not heard or responded to the gospel. We do know that God is both completely gracious and completely just. That is enough for us. With Abraham we confess in hope, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen. 18:25).

When the church confesses that it does not know the limits of God's grace, however, this in no way weakens the urgency of its mandate to evangelism, its joyful responsibility to be heralds of the gospel to all the nations. The church can never smugly sit back and declare “God will somehow make it all right” when billions of people live and die in hopelessness, poverty, oppression, and despair, without the transforming and life-giving power of the gospel of Christ. We live in the hope that God will finally set all things right, but we also believe that the means God has chosen for this end is the preaching of the gospel of Christ in word and deed.

To be a Christian is to be entrusted with the gospel, with the commission of bringing God's light to the whole world. And yet it is finally God's gospel and God's mission, not ours. As a saint once quipped, we are to preach as if everything depended on our proclamation, and to pray as if everything depended upon God. To follow that advice is to preserve the Bible's emphasis on the necessity and centrality of the proclamation of the name of Jesus, while also recognizing that salvation is finally in God's hands and not in ours.

And in any case, it is always Jesus who is the savior. He is God's Messiah; it is his sacrifice that has atoned for the sins of the world and reconciled believers to God.

The Ongoing Challenge

But simply knowing this truth and believing it is not enough. In our society the Christian claims regarding the uniqueness of Christ and the necessity of salvation in Christ will immediately raise suspicions of arrogance and a fear of domination. In other parts of the world they raise painful memories of colonialism, forced conversion, and oppression. The church's history of confessing the lordship of Christ has not been without its failures. In subtle and powerful ways the church can be tempted to want to reign with Christ without following the path of Christ, the path of humble service. There is simply no place for self-congratulatory superiority in our pointing to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. At the same time there is no place for hesitancy, lack of confidence, or lack of conviction as the church points to Christ's uniqueness. If Christians really believe that the love of God revealed in Christ is the only hope for this world, if they really believe that Jesus is "King of kings and Lord of lords," then they cannot be silent about the claim of the gospel on the life of every person, every community, every culture. Christians who claim to have been transformed by the surprising love of Christ cannot and must not keep that love to themselves. If Jesus really is Lord, then his gracious lordship must be made known to all. No task is more central to the church's mission.

But there is a world of difference between efforts to impose or coerce Christian faith and the gracious commending of Christian faith by words and lives that are empowered by the Spirit. The church will be able to point credibly to Jesus as the only savior of the whole world only if it makes that claim as a community that assumes a posture of humble service, if it seeks out the lowest places of service, and loves where no one else is willing to love. Only then will Christians be able to persuade the world that Jesus comes, not to destroy our cultures, but

to renew them; not to reinforce patterns of domination, but to give life to all; not to negate our religious searching, but to show us the reality for which we have been longing; not to impose uniformity, but to bring many diverse gifts to full expression. If this is the Savior whom we have come to follow, we will indeed have good news not just for ourselves but for the whole world.

ENDNOTES

1. For example, Phil. 2:10–11 states, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” When compared with Isa. 45:23, where God is speaking, the similarity of the language is striking: “By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.”
2. Cf. Calvin’s *Institutes*, IV.20.xxx–xxxii, and the contemporary discussion in Richard Mouw’s study, *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).
3. It is striking how many of the “I am” sayings of Jesus in the Gospel according to John combine an exclusive claim about Jesus’ status and authority with a pointer to his gracious self-offering. Jesus is the bread of life (6:35), and that bread is his flesh, offered up in death (6:51). When he claims to be the light of the world (9:5), he demonstrates that claim by giving sight to the blind man. When he claims to be the gate (10:9), and the good shepherd (10:11), he goes on to speak of laying down his life for the sheep. When he identifies himself as the vine in whom the disciples must abide (15:1), he goes on in that same context to call them to lay down their lives for each other, just as he did for them (15:12–14).
4. Cf. Acts 2:37–47.
5. Biblical scholars have recognized for some time that the Kingdom

of God is not conceived in the New Testament primarily in spatial terms, but in terms of divine activity. The Kingdom of God is preeminently associated with God's royal action to save and to restore. Hence the translation "Reign of God."

6. Cf. The technical discussion of the idea that different religions envision the nature of religion in dramatically different terms in S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).
7. *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 1.
8. *The Heidelberg Catechism* Q&A 61 states, "It is not because of any value my faith has that God is pleased with me. Only Christ's satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness makes me right with God." Q&A 65 goes on to state, "Where does faith come from? The Holy Spirit produces it in our hearts by preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it through the use of the holy sacraments." Eph. 2:8 makes it clear that the entire process of being saved by grace through faith is all "the gift of God."
9. Chapter 1, tr. By Philip Schaff, reprinted in *Creeds of the Churches*, rev. ed. by John Leith (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1973), p. 134.
10. Chapter 10, section 3 (italics added).
11. Chapter 10, section 4.
12. *Commentary on Romans*, tr. by Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 231.
13. *Ibid.* pgs. 31

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