

No Other Gospel

One day Jesus stood in the court of Pontius Pilate on trial and Pilate asked Him a question. You all remember the event; it is described in the Gospel of John. “What is truth?” Pilate asked. (John 18:38) Jesus did not answer the question. Pilate had asked Jesus three questions prior to this one and Jesus had answered all of them. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate had asked – and Jesus answered. “What have you done?” Pilate had asked – and Jesus answered that question, too. “Are you a king then?” Pilate had asked – and Jesus answered his question. But then Pilate asked a fourth question: “What is truth?” And Jesus did not answer the question. Why not? It is certainly an important question. Couldn’t Jesus have told Pilate that the truth was found in God’s Holy Word, the Scriptures? Couldn’t Jesus have spoken as He did once before when He said to His disciples, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”? Why didn’t he answer Pilate’s question?

I think we all know why Jesus didn’t answer Pilate’s question. His question was rhetorical. It was a question that did not expect nor desire an answer. It was a question which contained its own answer within the question. In fact, Pilate’s question was actually a confession of his faith – or lack of it – and instead of asking, “What is truth?”, Pilate could just as well have stated, “There is no such thing as truth.”

The faith of Pilate – or perhaps we could say, Pilate’s lack of faith – is quite familiar to us in our pluralistic age. Especially in our country, the United States, a very high percentage of the population seems to believe that truth is a variable and what may be true for you may not be true for me. You have your truth, I have mine. And don’t tell me that your truth is superior to mine. This flexible idea of truth makes possible the strange success of a book and a movie like *The Da Vinci Code*. Although the book and movie are fiction and although its major propositions cannot be substantiated by fact or documented by historical sources, nevertheless many people actually choose to believe that its views are true.

Political pluralism can be a good thing. In a politically pluralistic society opposing political parties can coexist peacefully, even though they have very different ideas about what is best for their nation and people politically. Ethnic pluralism is a good thing. When people from differing ethnic backgrounds can live together peacefully, each respecting the other, solutions to problems will probably not be violent ones.

Even religious pluralism can have benefits. It can affect a society in such a way that people do not kill each other over religious differences, but even though they disagree, tolerate the expression of different beliefs. For Christians, however, religious pluralism becomes a problem, in fact a very serious problem, when all religions, including Christianity, are viewed as having

equal possession of the truth. Such religious pluralism dethrones God as the one who gives and is the source of truth and permits human beings to determine for themselves what they will believe and hold as true. Such a view of truth clearly embraces the “faith” of Pontius Pilate, who in response to Jesus’ claims for exclusive possession of the truth, declares with his question that nobody has the right to say such a thing.

But we who follow Jesus agree with His answer to Pilate’s third question, “Are you a king?” Jesus says, “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.” John 18:37

Let me make two observations about Jesus’ statement. First, he does not say, “I have come into the world to bear witness to a truth.” He says, “I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth.” Second, He does not say, “Everyone who is of the truth hears a voice.” He says, “Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.”

In our increasingly pluralistic and syncretistic culture, it is becoming increasingly necessary to declare with utmost clarity and without any shade of ambiguity: There is only one way to know the true God and that is to know Jesus.

If we no longer insist upon this truth, Christianity will dissolve. For apart from the truth that we come to the Father only through Jesus, Christianity loses that which makes it distinctive from all other world religions. And if Christianity loses that which makes it distinctive from all other world religions, not only does Christianity lose that which makes it unique, but the world itself loses all hope of reconciliation with God, all hope of forgiveness, salvation, eternal life. Because only within Christianity, and only in the person of Jesus Christ, does the world find a God of mercy and grace, a God who forgives, a God who actually loves with an unconditional love.

In every other world religion, if we find a god at all, we find a god who loves if, a god who loves when. Only in Christianity do we find a God who loves because. In other religions we find a god who loves if people are obedient and who ceases to love when they are not. In other religions we find a god who loves people when they have fulfilled the requirements the god has set for acceptance or approval. Only in Christianity do we find a God who forgives and accepts because. He forgives because His Son has already been obedient in the stead of the people and God accepts His obedience as theirs. He accepts the people because His Son has already fulfilled, in the stead of the people, all the requirements God has set for His approval. Thus the people are accepted for the sake of the Son.

Therefore, when the Father declares at the Baptism of Jesus, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased,” this declaration of the Father is more than simply a statement about the Son. For the Son stands in the place of the people. And when the Father declares again at Jesus’

transfiguration, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased,” once again, this declaration is more than simply saying, “My Son has done well.” The Son stands in the place of the people. The Father’s declaration of approval is a declaration about the people, in whose place the Son stands. That is why St. Paul can say about Jesus that he was delivered for our offenses and raised for our justification (Romans 4:25).

This is nothing more than to say that Jesus is our substitute. In the eyes of the Father what He has done we have done. What he has suffered we have suffered. His life is our life, His crucifixion and punishment, our crucifixion and punishment, His death our death. And since he is, as St. Paul says (1 Corinthians 15:20), the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep, His resurrection not only foreshadows, but also causes the resurrection to eternal life for all who trust in Him.

This message about Jesus’ life, suffering and death, this message about Jesus as substitute for the people, this message about Jesus’ resurrection and ours, this message about forgiveness, deliverance from death and punishment and eternal salvation for all who trust in Him, this message is the Gospel through which the Holy Spirit has created the church by creating faith in the hearts of people. This is the message that has created and sustained your faith and is at the center of everything that makes you God’s child. This is the message, and there is no other, that offers hope to a sinful and lost world. Therefore, we must not lose this message. Luther warns us, “...if this article concerning Christ – the doctrine that we are justified and saved through Him alone and consider all apart from Him damned – is not professed, all resistance and restraint are at an end. Then there is, in fact, neither measure nor limit to any heresy and error.”ⁱ

Christ alone is our salvation,
 Other than this sure foundation
 Christ, His cross and resurrection,
 At the throne of God’s perfection
 Christ the rock on which we stand;
 Will be found but sinking sand.
 Is alone the sinner’s plea.
 Nothing else can set him free.ⁱⁱ

“Christ alone is our salvation; nothing else can set us free.” Does it ever bother you that we Christians embrace a faith that seems to be so exclusive? Christianity does teach, after all, that there is no salvation for anyone outside the Christian faith. There is no other Gospel. Jesus Himself says, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me.” (John 14:6) In his epistle to the Ephesians Paul makes it clear that we can approach God with confidence and in freedom, but only when we approach God with faith in Jesus. (Ephesians

3:12) The Apostle Peter preached about Jesus shortly after the day of Pentecost and said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) The Apostle Paul emphasizes the same point in his first epistle to the Corinthians. He says, “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 3:11) Again, Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, I am the door for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door; whoever enters through me will be saved.” (John 10:7-9) How are we to be saved? Only through Jesus.

And a slightly different question: How are we to know God and to see God? Jesus answers that question in response to Phillip’s request that Jesus show them the Father. He says, “Have you been with me so long, and yet you have not known me, Phillip? He who has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9) Jesus says to the Pharisees, “If God were your Father, you would love me.” (John 8:42) There is only one way into the sheepfold and that is through Jesus. There is only one way to the Father and that is through the Son. There is only one way to know the true God and that is to know the incarnate God – Jesus.

This exclusivity is clearly taught not only in the Scriptures but in our Lutheran Confessions. Thus, we read in the *Augsburg Confession*,

Whoever knows that in Christ he has a gracious God, truly knows God, calls upon him, and is not, like the heathen, without God. For the devil and the ungodly do not believe this article concerning the forgiveness of sin, and so they are at enmity with God, cannot call upon him, and have no hope of receiving good from him. (Tappert, p. 44)

For the sake of time, I will forego reading fifteen or twenty other quotations from the Confessions which teach this same truth that one cannot know, come to or pray to the true God apart from Jesus. But I would like to share a few choice quotations from a man we all respect – Martin Luther. Listen to him teach about the exclusivity of the Christian faith.

On the contrary let everyone see to it that he is certain his worship and service of God has been instituted by God’s word, and not invented by his own pious notions or good intentions. Whoever engages in a form of worship to which God has not borne witness (John 5:31-37; John 8:18) ought to know that he is serving not the true God but an idol that he has concocted for himself. That is to say, he is serving his own notions and false ideas, and thereby the devil himself; and the words of all the prophets are against him. For the God who would have us establish worship and service of him according to our own choice and inclination—without his commission and word—does not exist. There is only one God, he who through his word has abundantly established and commissioned all the various stations of life and the forms of worship and service in which it is his will to be served. We should abide by this and not turn aside from it either to the right or to the left, doing neither more nor less, making it neither worse nor better. Otherwise there will be no end of idolatry, and it will be impossible to distinguish between true worship and idolatry, since all have the true God in mind, and all use

his true Name. To this one and only God be thanks and praise, through Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord blessed forever. Amen. (AE 35, 272-273)

Again listen to the words of Luther.

It does Jews, Turks, and heretics no good to profess a very great devoutness and to boast against us Christians that they believe in the one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and also call Him "Father" with intense earnestness. For all that, their worship consists of nothing except futile and useless words with which, against the Second Commandment, they take the name of God in vain and misuse it. Thus Christ tells the Jews in John 8:54: "It is My Father that honoreth Me, of whom ye say that He is your God, yet ye have not known Him." Here you see that they do not know who God is; and when they call Him "Creator" and "God" and "Father," they do not know what they are saying...Therefore they actually have no God, but they misuse the name of "God" in sin and shame and invent their own god and creator, who is supposed to be their father and whose children they profess to be. (What Luther Says, An Anthology, compiled by Ewald M. Plass, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, Missouri, 1959 vol. II, page 548, #1663.)

It has become common in the United States, following a tragic event of some kind, to hold an interfaith worship service. For example, after the 9-11 attacks, an interfaith prayer service was held at a large stadium in New York City. Clergy from various different faiths participated – Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Christian. The service began with an invocation and ended with a benediction. In between were some of the other elements of a worship service, such as hymns, prayers and a sermon. The expressed intent was to provide people of every faith the opportunity to receive comfort within the context of a single service. The problem, of course, is that such a service declares loudly to the entire world that:

1. All the religions represented are valid, in fact, equally valid.
2. There is religious truth to be found in every religion. No religion has an exclusive claim to truth. And
3. It is appropriate to place Jesus on the stage with all the other world's gods. He is one of them, but not the only one.

Since 9-11 other tragedies have occurred and been followed by such interfaith prayer services. The massacre in Newtown is an example. The bombing at the Boston marathon is another. In some of these cases pastors of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod have participated, causing a great deal of division within our church body. Some have insisted that we need to be present at such events. Our absence, they say, will testify to our lack of concern. Others, including myself, contend that this is a First Commandment issue. "You shall not have any other gods before me," or as the Hebrew states, "You shall not have any other gods in my face." Our God is a jealous God according to Exodus 20. To place Him on the stage with all the other gods, as though He is just one among many, is a flagrant breaking of the First Commandment. In addition, participation in such a service strongly implies that the prayers prayed to false gods

will actually be heard. This encourages people to believe that there is hope where there is no hope. When this happens, it is sad. In the midst of sickness, war, destructive natural events such as floods and storms, surrounded by death, Christians have hope. Christians have someone who can truly deliver us in the time of need. Jesus is the door through whom we have access to the Father. To point people in any direction other than to Jesus is to point them to a locked door. It is to point them to another gospel, which is no Gospel.

Imagine you are thirty people in a room filling up with a poisonous gas. The room has 12 doors. 11 are locked. Those who do not get out quickly will die. You cry out, "Get out one of the doors." And you run out the one you know to be unlocked, permitting the others to perish. You could be considered a murderer if you acted this way. We simply cannot give people the impression that it does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. The results of such a message are truly disastrous. But the culture in which we live insists that this must be the message. When Christians cry out, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved," (Acts 4:12) the world cries out, "There are many names by which we may be saved."

Religious pluralism is not going to go away and the survival of orthodox Christianity hinges upon whether Christians will be led by the Holy Spirit as He speaks in His Word or by Satan's seductive song. And Satan's song always points away from Christ. It frequently points toward something called God, but it always points away from Jesus. And it always denies the exclusive claims of Christianity. But to soft-pedal the exclusive nature of Christianity is to be complicit in the damnation of the unbeliever for it is to divert his attention from Him who alone can save. There is no other Gospel.

The teaching of the Bible on this subject is very clear. You must be a Christian to go to Heaven. There is no salvation outside the Christian Church. Only through Jesus does anyone have access to the Father; only in Jesus can one find the true God who alone is able to save us. Nobody comes into the church apart from Jesus. Is Christianity therefore an exclusive religion? It says, "Only Christianity! You cannot be a Buddhist; you cannot be a Muslim; you cannot be a Hindu; you cannot be a Mormon; you must be a Christian. Only Christians go to Heaven. All others go to Hell." Yes, Christianity is an exclusive religion. And to many people that seems negative.

But Christianity contains a beautiful paradox. Although it is truly exclusive, it is at the same time the most inclusive religion in the world. Many other religions claim to be inclusive, but by requiring a satisfactory keeping of the law, they effectively exclude everybody.

Christianity, on the other hand, although it does indeed offer salvation only to those within Christendom, it excludes no one from Christendom. No one is told, "You may not be a Christian." No one is told, "You are the wrong color or you speak the wrong language or you are the wrong sex or you are not intelligent enough or even you are not good enough." Christianity

is open to everybody. This is the message that must be proclaimed whenever we talk about the Church's mission; this has been the message of the Christian Church for the last 2,000 years: God's grace is universal; it is offered to everyone; it is meant for everyone.

St. Paul says, "Through the Gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 3:6) St. Paul says, "Whoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13) St. Paul says that God, "...wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4) And again, "The grace of God which brings salvation has appeared to all men." (Titus 2:11) St. Peter says, "The Lord is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:13)

God's grace is universal. That's why wise men, who were not Jewish, came to Bethlehem (Matthew 2); that's why Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39); that's why certain Greeks came to see Jesus (John 12:20 ff.); that's why St. Paul became an apostle to the Gentiles – because God's message of grace is meant for everybody. What does Jesus' Great Commission say? "Go and make disciples of all people." (Matt. 28:19) Πάντα τα έθνη the Greek says – all the peoples. Christianity is not a Western religion; it is not an Eastern religion; it is a faith for all the world, promising mercy and grace to everyone through Jesus the Savior.

Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out." John 6:37) Now that's not an exclusive faith at all, is it? And it's not incorrect to say that we really ought to be excluded. We certainly haven't done anything to deserve God's salvation. We know His commandments and we routinely ignore them. We know how we ought to live; we know how we ought to treat other people; we know how eagerly we should be reading and listening to God's Word and how fervently we should be seeking to serve Him and obey Him in everything He desires – and we know that we don't even come close to what we should be.

Yet, God says, "I do not exclude you. Everything you should have been, my Son has been. Everything you should have done, my Son has done. And He did it for you. My grace covers you; my grace is universal; it's meant for everybody."

"But," we think to ourselves, "it's not just what I haven't done. It's what I have done." Every one of us here this evening could with total honesty make the confession of the prodigal son and say, "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you and am no longer worthy to be called your child."

But God still says, "I do not exclude you. Whatever sins you have committed, regardless of what they are, have been borne by my Son on the cross. For your sins of lust, selfishness, maliciousness, adultery, murder and even blasphemy – my Son died. He did not die simply for mild sinners; He died for all. He did not die just for some of your sins; He died for all of them – from the time you were born until the time you die, His blood washes you clean from every sin.

Therefore, I do not exclude you. There is only one way in which you can be excluded and that is if you do not believe Me when I tell you that I love you, that I sent My Son to die for you, that for His sake I forgive you and that I give the kingdom of Heaven to all who look to Him for salvation. You see, my grace is universal; it's meant for everybody; it's meant for you."

God's universal grace – is a theme that ought to be proclaimed by every preacher in every church of every land because there is no human being for whom this message of love and salvation is not meant.

How different from some organizations that instruct their members not to reveal the secrets of the order since those secrets are meant for only a select few! When I was at the seminary in Springfield, Illinois, preparing for the ministry, I worked at a funeral home and was often able to observe Masonic funerals. I remember on one occasion approaching one of the Masons present and asking him what was the significance of the white apron he wore around his waist. His answer? There was none; without a word he turned around and walked away. The secrets of the Masonic lodge are not to be revealed to the uninitiated!

What a contrast to Christianity which wants the truth of salvation to be proclaimed to all people! Jesus said to His disciples, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15) All the world should hear the message of God's love and forgiveness in His Son Jesus Christ! All the world should know that although salvation is found in no other, it is most certainly found in Jesus who offers to all who trust in Him forgiveness for all sins, victory over death and Hell, and an eternal life of joy and glory.

Paradoxically, this all-inclusive message will only be preserved when we insist on the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. When Christians become embarrassed about Christianity's exclusivity, when they wish to open up the possibility for salvation also for those who do not believe in Jesus, as Pope Francis recently did, they effectively close the door of Heaven to everybody. For if salvation is proclaimed or offered apart from Christ, it is offered as a salvation that can be obtained only by works. And if salvation is to be by works, it cannot be by grace. As St. Paul says, "If it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work." (Rom. 11:6)

But if salvation is to be by works, we are lost every one of us, which is precisely why God sent His Son into the flesh. It was the only way to redeem us. This Son came; He took our place in keeping the law; he took our place in overcoming all temptation; he took our place in bearing shame and reviling and punishment and suffering and death and all consequences of sin because he became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

It is the mission of the Church to proclaim this message. It is a message about God's mercy; it is a message primarily about God's forgiveness of the sinner through His Son Jesus Christ.

In Jesus and only in Jesus God's mercy was poured out upon us and is always offered to us. Paul says in I Corinthians, "No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is

Jesus Christ.” There is no other Gospel. Still – many people look to other gods for salvation. And in our country this is happening more and more.

It doesn’t really make any difference where you’re looking, if you’re not looking to Christ. When the Children of Israel sinned in the wilderness, God sent snakes as a punishment to bite them. When the people were bitten, they would soon die – but God instructed Moses to set up a snake on a pole and whoever looked upon that snake would live. The people could look wherever they wanted, but only if they looked to the snake would they live. They could choose to look at Moses or at the mountains or at the sun or at their feet. They wouldn’t live unless they looked at the snake. And so it is for us. That snake on the pole pointed forward to Jesus. Salvation is found only when we look to Jesus hanging on the cross for us and risen from the grave.

You can look to yourselves if you want to, you can look to the charismatic cult leaders, to money, to medicine, to other gods called by other names – it’s all the same – it’s all idolatry – it will all help you about as much as if you worshipped Odin or Thor – it will all help you about as much as if you took a krone, put it on the shelf and prayed to it – because In all the world there is only one name given us by which we must be saved – and that is the name of Jesus. He alone took our guilt upon Himself – Mohammed never did it. He alone was nailed to the cross for our sins – Buddha never did it. He alone has taken our place under the law – Sun Myung Moon never did it. He alone has conquered death through His resurrection – no one else has ever done it. He alone can save us. To look anywhere else for salvation is futile.

| On Christ the solid Rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.

Most people today find this Christian position a very offensive one. Most people prefer to think, “You have your beliefs, I have mine.” But Christianity says, “No, only in Christ.” Christianity says, “Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Matt. 7:13) There is no other name. There is no other Gospel.

Only in Christ. Only in Christ did God become man. Only in Christ do we see one who keeps God’s law on our behalf. Only upon Christ did the Father pour out His anger at sin. Only in Christ, through His death and resurrection, has Satan been defeated. Only Christ has the power to give eternal life. Only Christ was anointed by the Spirit and sent by the Father to bring this life. Do you see what blasphemy it is to look in hope to another when only Christ has saved us and opened Heaven for us?

That’s why St. Paul says, “No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 3:11) That’s why St. Peter says, “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) That’s why we sing in church, “On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Christ, the solid Rock, remains always at the center of our confession as Lutherans and as God's people. With the Son of God at the center, faith will live and grow and the Church's mission will always be clear: Proclaim Christ – His person, His work – that sinners may be brought to faith, nourished, strengthened, and preserved in that faith unto the end – unto eternal life. There is no other Gospel than this one, the one with Jesus at the center, and with Him at the center, offering hope to the world.

By Rev. Daniel Preus

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Soli Deo Gloria

ⁱ Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 704.

ⁱ *The Lutheran Hymnary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1935) hymn 81, stanza 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Lutheran Worship*, hymn 368.