

How Many Ways Are There to Heaven?

By Brian A. Schulz

“Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.” (John 14:6) NASB

These words spoken by Jesus have rendered an assortment of reactions within humanity. To some these words rouse comfort and hope; to others anger and consternation; and still to others a blasé’ indifference. The question that springs forth from an examination of this verse is simply this; Is Jesus the only Savior? There are three primary philosophies that each provide their own explanation; Pluralism, Inclusivism, and Exclusivism.

Pluralism at its most basic form states that there is truth in all religions. No one religion can exclusively presume to answer adequately all the spiritual questions posed by man. Within pluralism the key concept that governs is tolerance. Those who hold to this doctrine frown upon any who hold to the doctrine that there is only one way to attain salvation. Pluralism also states that man is judged on the basis of how one keeps their preferred religion. Furthermore, the authority for final matters of religion rests solely on human autonomy.

Inclusivism is based on the premise that general revelation is sufficient to bring one to salvation. The Gospel has a much wider meaning than just the ‘good news’ of the New Testament. It refers to any light accessed through general revelation and ‘god’ in any form, by any name. Faith is necessary, but Jesus does not have to be the direct object of one’s faith. Karl Rahner, a prominent German theologian, believed that God’s offer of grace is mediated through non-Christian religions calling them ‘anonymous Christians.’

Exclusivists believe that human beings and the universe in which they reside are the creation of God, and God has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ in scripture. Exclusivists believe that truth, absolute propositional truth, is a primary characteristic of the word of God. With this understanding, Christianity roots itself in the exclusive/distinctive nature and person of Jesus Christ. Salvation of man is based upon God’s terms and not man’s, and the Bible clearly demonstrates God’s redemptive plan culminated in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Therefore, exclusivists claim that Jesus Christ is the only savior of man where explicit faith in Jesus must be expressed without any ambiguity or duplicity.

The most basic idea at work in this entire discussion is whether man is above the Bible or is the Bible above man. If one believes that the Bible is the inspired, authentic, inerrant, authoritative word of God then submission to its contents must be the driving force for deriving one’s theology. Allowing the text to speak what it has to speak without bias or presupposition is the key dynamic that has to take place. If one truly can approach the text in this fashion then it is easy to determine the words of Jesus penned by John are true; “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.” It just doesn’t get any simpler than that.