

The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World

Part I: 4G Faith/5G God

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Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church

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Scripture: John 14:1-13 (NRSV)

I. The “4G” Way of Life

On February 26, 2011, a brief video was posted on YouTube to promote a forthcoming book that, within hours, sparked a firestorm. Some prominent evangelical leaders, including John Piper, raised an immediate outcry. Piper simply posted a three-word Twitter message that bid “Farewell” to the video’s creator.

By the end of the day, the video was the tenth-hottest topic on Twitter. In less than a week, thousands of blog posts had been written in response and countless forums had engaged in heated debate about it on Facebook. Within a month after the video’s initial posting, more had probably been written about this video, the book it was promoting, and its creator than had been written concerning Martin Luther in the entire decade following his posting of the 95 Theses. Quite impressive considering that the book, called *Love Wins*, had not yet been released! (Incidentally, Guillermo tells me this congregation studied *Love Wins* following its release.)

At the center of the controversy was the book’s author, Rob Bell, then pastor of Mars Hill Church in Grandville, Michigan – one of the fastest-growing evangelical churches in the country. The simple statement that set off all the alarms was Bell’s suggestion in the video that a non-Christian like Mahatma Gandhi may *not* be burning in Hell.

Many Christians believe that when Jesus says in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me,” Jesus is claiming that belief in him as Lord and Savior is the only way to God. They further believe that, apart from this belief, even sincere people of other faiths like Gandhi are destined for eternal torment in the fires of hell.

Some of you may hold this belief. If you do, then proposing any alternate way of interpreting Jesus’ words may feel uncomfortable, or even unsettling. It may strike you not only as a theological error, but apostasy – undermining the Bible’s authority and that of Jesus himself.

If this is how you feel, I hope not to provoke you in this worship series, but to put you substantially at ease. What if Jesus is not talking about a specific *belief* that connects us to God, but a *Way of Life* that connects us?

Curiously, a rabbi friend of mine in Portland, Oregon, may help clarify. Last week, Rabbi Brian Mayer sent me a copy of his freshly-published book called, *Rabbi Brian’s Highly Unorthodox Gospel*. In it, Rabbi Brian tells the story of preaching a sermon to his Jewish colleagues and

professors in seminary that could just as well be preached to a group of Christians if you change the details slightly. Here's the story:

A rabbi overhears a shepherd whistling, then saying to God, "God, I love you. I love you so much that I would care for your sheep for free." The rabbi approaches and says, "My dear shepherd, allow me to help. I love God so much and want to teach you the proper blessings, and I will do it for you for free."

They study until they are satisfied that the knowledge has been transferred. The shepherd stops whistling and instead says the right blessings at the right time. "Praise God who remembers," when seeing a rainbow. "Praise God who creates the vine fruits," before drinking wine. "Praise God who brings forth bread from the earth," before eating bread.

But the shepherd didn't remember which prayer was for what. And, embarrassed, he never said the prayers or whistled to God again.

The citizens of heaven, the story goes, weep, for they miss that most beautiful, pure prayer: his beautiful whistle.

Rabbi Brian concludes,

My friends, we have gotten our path and the goal confused. We are prioritizing Judaism, not the whistle.

We count how many people at the service bend their knees and stand on their toes at the proper, prescribed time, and what percentage pray in Hebrew.

But being Jewish isn't supposed to be the goal. It's supposed to be the path.

When we make *belief* the goal – whether it be Jewish belief, Christian belief, Muslim belief, Hindu belief, and so on – rather than the path, a host of unintended consequences normally result. These consequences are not limited merely to someone stopping whistling their love prayers to God.

Sometimes extreme examples make the point more clearly than subtle ones. For instance, if Christianity offers the only route to God and salvation, then what are we to make of the holocaust? When Hitler rose to power, 97% of all Germans were Christian. So, most Nazis claimed Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Does this mean that the Christian Nazis were connected to God more deeply than the Jews and other non-Christians they imprisoned, tortured, and killed? Does it mean that the Christian Nazis went to heaven when they died, while those they exterminated have barely even begun to experience the torture and torment that awaits them eternally in hell?

This may not be what you believe, but it is certainly what many Christians at the time believed. Of course, this is an extreme example of what can happen when you confuse Christianity for being the goal rather than the path.

To be clear, I am not claiming that anyone who believes that Christianity is the only true faith is a Nazi. To be perfectly clear, a great many of Christ's most faithful followers today believe that Christianity offers the only way to salvation. These believers often do extraordinary work among the poor and hungry, the sick and the desperate, and even work hard to promote racial justice. Yet, what makes their lives such breathtaking examples of Christian discipleship is not their specific beliefs, but the specific Way of Life they embody – one of extravagant love and truly amazing grace.

No, Christianity is not the goal, but the path. It offers a Way of Life that connects us to God, should one actually practice it. The earliest Christians understood this clearly. In fact, Christ's earliest followers did not call themselves "Christians." We first called ourselves followers of "The Way." Outsiders would later call us "Christians." The name eventually stuck.

"What is this all-important Way of Life," you ask?

Happily, Jesus tells us. When asked point-blank what is the greatest commandment of all, Jesus responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:27)

In this succinct summary, Jesus identified what I call the "**3 Gs**." That is, the three "**G**reat Loves" that are crucial to the Way of Life he taught: Love of God, Love of Neighbor, and Love of Self. This last one often drops off people's radar, but if you are to love your neighbor *as yourself*, then what good does it do if you hate yourself and treat your neighbor similarly?

The point Jesus was making is that these three Great Loves (3Gs) are to be practiced together as a coherent whole. If connection with the Divine is what you seek, you can't just say, "two outta three ain't bad," choosing to love only God and yourself without loving your neighbor. That's what Nazis did. They thought they could love God and themselves without loving their Jewish neighbor (or their gay neighbor, or their physically challenged neighbor, etc.). And all hell broke loose. Likewise, you can't just love God and your neighbor without loving yourself. When you do that, your life becomes a living hell.

Of course, who among us ever practices all three Great Loves simultaneously? None of us do. At least, we don't for very long. If we're being honest, we rely quite heavily on a 4th "**G**" when it comes to connecting with God and living the Way of Life Jesus teaches. The 4th "**G**" is **G**race. By **G**race, our imperfections are covered by God's perfection. By **G**race, God's imagination covers for our lack of imagination. By **G**race, God's generosity covers for our stinginess, and God's belief in us covers for failure to believe in ourselves.

No, if you cannot receive Grace – or give Grace to others – good luck connecting with God! Grace is a critical component of Christ's Way of Life. So it's a "4G" Way of Life, not just a "3G" one.

Before moving further, I invite you to test all this out in your own experience. Take a couple of minutes to consider a time or two when you have felt most connected to God. Were the

“4Gs” not present in some way – especially if the experience lasted for longer than a nanosecond?

II. A “5G” God

The title of this sermon is “4G Faith/5G God.” You may be wondering what the 5th “G” is. The 5th “G” stands for “**G**reat Awakening.” It’s what happens when you begin to practice a “4G” faith and discover you aren’t the only one.

By way of example, I’ll conclude with a story about a Christian who, in contrast to John Piper and others who condemned Gandhi to hell, learned from Gandhi how to more faithfully and effectively walk in the “4G” path of Jesus.

On Palm Sunday, 1959, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s congregation at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, was especially eager to hear him preach. Not only was this Sunday one of the highest holidays of the Christian year, but King had been absent from the pulpit for the last five weeks as he toured the Middle East, India, and Sri Lanka.

Just one week earlier, King had literally stood atop the Mt. of Olives, surveying Jerusalem’s Old City down below and retracing Jesus’ journey into the city and up to the Temple where he overturned the tables of the money-changers that historic day.

Given King’s oratorical acuity, and his first-hand experience of the very places where Jesus had ridden and walked on Palm Sunday, one could logically expect that this would be a Palm Sunday sermon for the history books.

It was. But not for the reasons King’s congregation would have expected.

A scan of the worship bulletin would have revealed that Dr. King had other plans that morning. His two chosen texts were not the traditional Palm Sunday texts at all. His selections were these:

John 10:16: “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold.”

John 14:12: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on me, the works that I do, shall he do also. And greater works than these shall he do because I go unto my Father.”

King began his sermon acknowledging the awkwardness of passing over the Palm Sunday story. Then he continued,

But I beg of you to indulge me this morning to talk about the life of a man who lived in India. I think I’m justified in doing this because I believe this man, more than anybody else in the modern world, caught the spirit of Jesus Christ and lived it more completely in his life. His name was Gandhi ...

As it happened, King's trip abroad had included not just time in India, but a significant visit to Gandhi's ashram in Ahmedabad.

Years earlier, King had been inspired by Gandhi's success with nonviolent resistance in the liberation of India from British rule, and began using nonviolent resistance as a strategy in his earlier civil rights work, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955.

However, King's 1959 trip to India deepened his understanding of Gandhi's philosophy. While Gandhi was no longer alive when King visited the ashram, he met with a number of Gandhi's close associates, including Vinoba Bhave, a social reformer and the person commonly viewed as Gandhi's spiritual successor. The specific philosophy and techniques King learned from Gandhi's Hindu followers were later employed directly in King's work for civil rights.

When King returned to America, he began speaking of having a dream of a day when "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood" – just as those Indians who had long been oppressed by the British were now doing with their former overlords. King began speaking of a day when all God's children – "white men and black men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics" would join hands and sing together, "Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last." King's dream, of course, was inspired directly by Jesus, the Good Shepherd. But the specific practices he employed to realize his dream were learned from sheep who were "not of [the Christian] fold."

In fact, in King's Palm Sunday sermon, he explained his choice of the "sheep not of this fold" and "greater things than these" passages this way:

I believe these two passages of scripture apply more uniquely to the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi than to any other individual in the history of the world. For here was a man who was not a Christian in terms of being a member of the Christian church but who was a Christian. And it is one of the strange ironies of the modern world that the greatest Christian of the twentieth century was not a member of the Christian church. And the second thing is, that this man took the message of Jesus Christ and was able to do even greater works than Jesus did in his lifetime. [That is, liberate an entire nation from captivity without spilling the blood of its captors.] Jesus himself predicted this: "Ye shall do even greater works."

This is what happens when sheep from two different "folds" do not fight or condemn one another to hell, but actively listen and learn from each other how to more effectively live a "4G" Way of Life. It provokes Great Awakening. Followed by great change.