

**The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World**  
**Part 2: If Christianity Isn't the Only Way, Why Be Christian?**

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Scripture: John 14:1-6

## **I. Inclusive and Exclusive Identity**

It's easy to miss something pretty important about our Jewish and Christian Scriptures, and I'm speaking as someone who's spent a lot of time wrapped up in those pages. It's this: the Devil knows the Bible just as well as any of us, and probably better.

Think back to that time in the desert when Jesus was fasting. The Devil stops in for a visit to tempt Jesus away from his path. Before trying to get Jesus to jump from the temple, the Devil pulls out Scripture like a lawyer with a loophole: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" (Luke 4:9-11)

Now, if Jesus had been the type to take every single word in the Bible at face value, as if it was all spoken straight to him, he might have jumped. But that's not the story, and it's not the lesson.

Don't get me wrong – I'm not saying the Scriptures don't matter. They do, and Jesus proves it by quoting Scripture right back at the Devil. What Jesus shows us is that he doesn't hang his hat on just one or two lines pulled out of their setting. He sees the big picture, finding the message for him in the whole sweep of the Scriptures.

Why do we need to remember that even the Devil can spin a Bible verse? Because we can be easily tricked by verses pulled out of context. The slickest trick? Convincing us that a tiny snippet of Scripture is the end-all and be-all, and any other take on it is flat-out wrong. And if you ever start to wonder or waver, that same voice will be there, suggesting that to even consider another viewpoint is to flirt with heresy, and well, you know where that road leads...

I get it; talk of the Devil can make some of us squirm. It used to make me squirm, too. But ignoring it doesn't sit right with me either. I didn't give much thought to an actual, evil entity like Satan until I realized Jesus did. So, I thought, why not "Give Satan a chance"? And the nightly news. Isn't it amazing how much evil is committed by people who are absolutely certain that they know what is right, often justifying their actions with Scripture? Yes, Satan knows his Bible, too, and quotes it frequently.

Believe it or not, the traps the Devil sets don't even need you to believe in his existence to work their magic. In fact, they work better if you don't! Let me show you what I mean. Remember the little game we played at the Easter Sunrise Service? For those who weren't there, you just need to count the 'f's in the following italicized statement. It sounds simple, but it's eye-opening. Here it is:

*In the final analysis, all interpretations of Scripture are subject to the "Rule of Love." This rule finds its origin in the commandments Jesus identified as being first and foremost: (1) To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and (2) to love our neighbor as ourselves.*

How sure are you about the number of 'f's you found? Are you as sure as you are about your most deeply held beliefs? If not, count the 'f's again and again until you are positive. You'll find the answer at the end of this sermon, along with why most of us don't get it right.

So, you played the game. Are you surprised by the result? It wasn't the Devil misleading you but your own brain, conditioned by how we are brought up to read in our culture. No, if you're looking for the Devil, you'd find him if you became convinced that if anyone came up with a different number than you did, they are not only wrong, but obviously don't love Jesus and therefore are on the slippery slope to hell.

Of course, none of us are going to draw such a dramatic conclusion from little game. But many Christians do this with respect to our sacred Scriptures. They think there is only one interpretation – theirs. Anyone who disagrees is obviously not a "true" Christian. We would do well to remember that, if so many of us can be so certain about how many 'f's are in a simple statement and get it wrong, we might very well be off track about other things, maybe even our beliefs about Jesus, or our reading of the Scriptures.

Let's look at our Scripture focus these last two weeks: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) How many Christians are convinced that there is only one way to interpret this passage – that Jesus is saying it's either his Way or the hell Way – and that their interpretation is God's Own Truth? How many are so certain of their interpretation that whomever believes otherwise is accused of being on the slippery slope to hell?

Hmm, who might lead a person to be so certain that they know God's Own Truth from a single line of Scripture, condemning anyone who holds an alternative interpretation ...? In the words of The Church Lady on Saturday Night Live, "Could it be .... *Satan?*" You decide.

Last week, we discussed a different angle on Jesus's statement. Instead of seeing belief in Jesus as a goal that gets us into heaven, we understood it as a path that reflects the values of heaven. The path of Jesus is not a belief, but a Way of Life that connects us to God – what I call a "4G" Way of Life. One that involves the three **G**reat Loves (Love of God, our neighbors, and ourselves), and a generous dollop of **G**race. This isn't to say that any road will get us to God, but neither is it to say that other faith traditions don't walk a similar path. Jesus talks about heaven having "many dwelling places" (John 14:2) and acknowledges that he has "other sheep not of this fold" (John 10:16). Could this mean other faiths follow a "4G" Way of Life are also on the path?

This begs the question we tossed around last week in our sermon talk-back sessions: If following Jesus isn't the only way to connect with God, why stick with this path? Why not pick another?

I'm glad you're asking because it's a question that gets right to the heart of my doctoral dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary! Of course, you *can* pick another. If you do, I will only wish you well on your journey. Yet there are also reasons why someone would

choose Christianity over other faiths, and why people from other faiths may not choose to convert to Christianity. What I learned while writing my dissertation describes why – though I promise not to read from it! Instead, how about another quick game to makes the point I arrived at after 250 pages?

Consider this sequence:

3 3 3 M 3

What stands out? The 'M,' right? That was what my dissertation said, too, in a nutshell.

Ready for one more? Which element or set is most distinctive in the following series:

a ab abc abcd abcde

Take your time. Think it over for a couple minutes before moving on. Don't just consider the right answer. Ask yourself *why* it is the right answer? Extra credit if you can identify the underlying difference between what makes "M" most distinct, and what makes your answer here the most distinct.

## II. The Thing About Jesus

If you picked 'a' as the most distinctive, it's probably because you're so used to thinking of uniqueness or distinctiveness in an exclusive sense, as the "only one." Yet, by this standard, 'a' is actually the *least* distinctive element in the above series. It occurs in every single set!

'abcde' is the most distinctive. Not just because of the letter 'e' but because this set contains *more of the available possibilities* than any other set does. Isn't it interesting how distinctiveness may increase, not decrease, through commonality with others? This is distinctiveness through inclusivity.

So, what does this have to do with Jesus, you might ask? Well, if you think Jesus is less special because other faiths also connect with the divine, you might be viewing his uniqueness as an 'M' among '3s' – standalone and unmatched. But suppose you accept the idea that other paths also lead to God. In that case, maybe your view of Jesus is more like 'abcde' – inclusive, yet still distinctive.

Here's where I stand: I don't claim Christianity is the only path to God, it's just the path that has been the most profound for me. I see Jesus not just as an 'abcde' glimpse of God, but more like an 'abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy' – a full spectrum. This isn't to say others can't find equally deep insights in their own faith traditions. I myself have benefited from many of their insights and seek to integrate them in my own life. It's just that, for me, Jesus and his teachings connect me with a God who loves me, and you, better than anyone else. Even more, Jesus inspires me to love you, and everyone else, more fully than other spiritual leaders do.

So, for me, Jesus is both exclusive, like that single 'M' that stands out, and inclusive, like the comprehensive 'abcde.' Yes, it sounds odd to have it both ways, but love is like that, isn't it? When we really love someone – or something – we cherish their uniqueness, but we also love them for the qualities they share with others.

Take my marriage with Melanie, for instance. We've been married for 35 years, and she's still my 'one and only.' In my eyes, Melanie is that 'M' amidst the '3's – irreplaceable and unparalleled. Not because she's the sole woman in the world, but because she's the one for me.

What makes Melanie my one-and-only is actually related to characteristics she shares with other women. She's pretty. She's intelligent. She has a great laugh that I never get tired of. She's compassionate. She tends to be more generous toward others than I am. She's an incredible mom. Also, I've never experienced love from another woman that makes me light up quite like her love does. I could go on about Melanie – and perhaps she would like me to – but I think you get the point. She's the only one for me not because she's my only choice, like an 'M' amidst the '3's, but because my experience of her is an 'abcde' kind of experience.

This is how my faith in Jesus works, too. He's my 'one and only' in the realm of spirituality. Could I connect with the divine in another faith? I'm quite certain of it. Yet, though I've studied them, I haven't walked their paths as an adherent, so I can't truly say for sure. And just like in my marriage, while there might technically be other matches out there, I don't feel the need to explore because the love I already have is fulfilling.

If I want to deepen my connection with God, I don't need to switch faiths. I can learn from them. If another tradition offers wisdom on living a compassionate, '4G' life, I can integrate that into my own practice. I don't have to abandon my path with Jesus to appreciate and learn from the wisdom of others.

So there you have it. My choice to stick with Christianity isn't because there are not alternatives; it's about love and loyalty. It's about finding that full 'alphabet' in Jesus that resonates with me, and being open to enriching that experience with the beauty found in the diversity of faiths around us.

How about you? Do you stick with Jesus because he is the only Way and there is no alternative, or because your love for him, and his love for you, makes him your one-and-only?

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**Answer to the “Are you sure?” exercise: 7**

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If you guessed less than 7, chances are your brain did not register an “f” when you read the word “of” above, which occurs twice.

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