

The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World

Part 3: Christ in All Things

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Scripture: John 1:1-4; 14:6

Today, we celebrate Confirmation Sunday. The term "confirmation" refers to affirming the vows made during one's baptism. Traditionally, those baptized as infants now choose, as young adults, to affirm or reject the decisions made on their behalf by their parents. Incidentally, two of our confirmands, not previously baptized, chose to be baptized recently in a deeply meaningful ceremony at the ocean. Today, they reaffirm that decision made freely and willingly.

Throughout their Confirmation studies, our youth have explored the teachings of Jesus, the history of Christianity, and the significance of the Church. Yet, there are common teachings in many churches that we have consciously omitted. First, we have not asserted that Christianity is the sole valid path to God. Second, we have never claimed that failing to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior would condemn a person to eternal torment in hell.

I can't speak for what our youth may have heard from others, but if they have used our teachings as a guide, they have embraced the teachings of Jesus not out of fear of damnation but through a genuine connection with His message.

Now, I ask you: What honors and glorifies Jesus more? Is it a commitment driven by fear of eternal punishment or one made freely out of love and respect?

It's a common misconception that the message of Jesus is so fragile that it requires the threat of hell to sustain it. In truth, a faith that needs to be defended against the threat of damnation is a fragile faith indeed. Many leave this constrained view behind when they realize the broader spectrum of spiritual paths, often feeling resentful towards what they perceive as spiritual coercion.

In my experience, when people are free to explore and engage with other faiths without fear of hellfire, they not only gain respect for these other paths but also deepen their appreciation for their own Christian faith.

It seems the more one genuinely seeks God, the more God is revealed, in Christianity or any other faith. This echoes the words of Jesus: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7-8) Perhaps Jesus really knew what he was talking about!

However, changing ingrained ways of thinking, especially those tied to fear of eternal damnation for diverging from familiar beliefs, can be challenging. If you find yourself struggling with this shift, know that this series is not intended to diminish your faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, but rather to broaden and deepen your faith in him.

Thus far, we've been examining a particular passage from the Gospels – John 14:6, where Jesus declares, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." Our exploration reveals that this statement isn't a threat but a revelation of a Way of Life that brings us closer to God. This Way of Life, though it is also reflected in other faiths, does not detract from Jesus's authority or identity; instead, it confirms it. These faiths illustrate that the Way of Life Jesus taught is perfectly aligned with God's reality.

The reason why I am a Christian, rather than an adherent of these other faiths is because, to me, Jesus's life and teachings, and his death and resurrection, show me the fullest expression of this Way of Life that connects me to the divine. Yet I would expect my interfaith friends to make this same claim regarding their own faith. In the end, the question isn't which faith does it better, but which faith helps you live most fully in relationship with God.

It's crucial to understand that developing a relationship with God is not merely about believing in Jesus. Belief is just the start. Living the life Jesus taught and embodied is the goal. Remember, even the Devil believes in Jesus. During their encounter in the wilderness, the Devil's challenge wasn't to deny Jesus's divine anointing, but to divert Him from the path he was meant to teach – a path centered on loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and receiving and giving God's grace. The Devil's belief in Jesus as God's Anointed isn't in question; his rejection lies in the Way of Life Jesus was meant to embody.

Indeed, if the Devil had not believed in Jesus but had wholeheartedly lived according to the teachings of Jesus, he would not have been known as the Devil. Instead, he might have been seen as one of those described by Jesus as "sheep from another fold" – individuals who follow Jesus's path of love and righteousness without necessarily identifying with the Christian religion.

If you're still grappling with the idea that followers of other paths might be aligning with Jesus's teachings, consider a perspective from C.S. Lewis, whose faith in Jesus is widely recognized, perhaps especially among Evangelical Christians. In the final book of his Chronicles of Narnia, a soldier named Emeth, who has worshipped a false god named Tash, encounters Aslan, who represents Jesus. Emeth fears punishment for his lifelong devotion to Tash, but instead, Aslan surprises Emeth. Here is Emeth's account:

Then I fell at his feet and thought, Surely this is the hour of death, for the Lion (who is worthy of all honor) will know that I have served Tash all my days and not him. Nevertheless, it is better to see the Lion and die than to be [the Ruler] of the world and live and not to have seen him.

But the Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, "Son, thou art welcome." But I said, "Alas Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash". He answered, "Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me."

Then by reasons of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, "Lord, is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and

Tash are one?" The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, "It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then, though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, Child?"

I said, Lord, thou knowest how much I understand. But I said also (for the truth constrained me), "Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days."

"Beloved," said the Glorious One, 'unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek."

This narrative reflects the profound theological concept that seeking truth sincerely, even under a different name, leads to the divine reality that Jesus embodies. John's Gospel supports this, stating, "In the beginning was the Word ... All things came into being through him." (John 1:1,3)

This understanding allows us to recognize that Christ can be found in all things and that the path He taught transcends names and forms, leading directly to God and eternal life. This is why thinkers like C.S. Lewis – and indeed, I myself – can assert that Christ's presence is evident across various spiritual paths. It is not the label but the essence of the path that guides us to God.

Do you merely believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, or do also seek to live the Way of Life he invites you into? Belief may make you a Christian, but if you seek to be Christlike, you must walk the path of Love and Grace.