

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

God's Truth in an Age of Lies part Two

The Challenge of Pluralism

Written by Bob DeWaay

"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)

"For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1Timothy 2:5)

Nothing puts Biblical Christianity at odds with modern culture more dramatically than its claim to have the exclusive way to God. Somehow it seems arrogant, intolerant, and naive to think that **only** through a relationship with Jesus Christ can one find eternal life. Passages such as the two cited above compel Christians to say that Jesus is the only way. The problem is that it is commonly accepted that people may believe anything they choose as long as they do not suppose that they are right and others wrong. In our modern culture, everyone gets to be right. It is considered impolite even to imply that other religious beliefs are invalid, being based on something less than the truth of God. This popular notion is called "pluralism." In this issue we will explore how it affects our culture and what Christians can do to maintain their faith in the midst of it.

Several years ago I attended an orientation session for parents of first year high school students. I visited the classroom of the person who was to be my daughter's English teacher. The young, bright, articulate man had the attention of a group of parents as he explained his philosophy of education. He asserted that many students who came from Junior High had the notion that they knew some things to be true and that many questions were answered. He considered it his job to explode that myth and get them to see that the world was full of mystery and unanswered questions -- that giving up

their confidence in knowing the truth was the way to personal growth. "There are no right and wrong answers," he assured us and he was hoping that by the time they completed his class the students would understand this.

The response of the other parents was surprising to me. They nodded in approval. I was thinking that if there are no right and wrong answers, why are we paying this "teacher's" salary? The kids entered kindergarten knowing no answers and now that they have painfully worked their way to high school they learn there **are** no answers. What a compelling argument for public education!

I have a newspaper cartoon that shows the devil and his wicked cohorts welcoming some new arrivals to hell. The caption reads, "You'll find that there's no right or wrong here. Just what works for you."¹ I gave it to my daughter to show her English teacher. He was amused until he realized that his philosophy was being satirized.

This philosophy, **pluralism**, has gained ascendancy in our culture. James W. Sire says, "Pluralism is multiple-choice lifestyle... [and] has become one of the central features of the Western world."² His book shows how it confronts unsuspecting Christians as they attend college, often leading to crises of belief. The attack is not against the idea that it is permissible for an individual to be Christian, but that a Christian assert the exclusive claims of the gospel or question the validity of other religious claims that contradict Christian teaching. This strikes at the very essence of the gospel, demanding that it be private and kept within the individual when its very name ("gospel" comes from the Greek "*euaggelion*" which means "the proclamation of glad tidings") demands public proclamation.

The issues we face seem "new" since Christianity once had a significant, public role in our society. As Sire describes the current situation, "No religion is dominant in culture at large; none is

authoritative, yet each of them is viable. To raise the question of which of them is true is to violate social mores."³ One must choose one's faith from a smorgasbord of beliefs and religions and having chosen not suppose it to be more valid or true than the religions others choose. This tolerant approach is seen to be a way of preserving social peace when there no longer exists a public consensus about truth and morals.

"Tolerance" and the Rejection

The problem is that pluralistic "tolerance" is transparently **intolerant** to Biblical Christianity. In some ways we have come full circle to the situation Christians faced in the Roman empire during the first two centuries of church history. The Romans tolerated many religions and "gods" but not Christianity. Tertullian, who wrote from 195 to 220 AD, brilliantly defended Christianity before paganism in his *Apology*. While decrying the Roman toleration of various wickednesses, irrational religious claims, "gods" who were merely humans who had deity conferred upon them posthumously, religious festivals of immorality and base conduct, etc., he asks why Christians are singled out for persecution although they behave as good citizens. For example, Tertullian shows how Romans often characterized Christians whom they knew to be good citizens: "A good man,' says one, 'is Gaius Seuis, only that he is a Christian.' So another, 'I am astonished that a wise man like Lucius should have suddenly become a Christian."⁴

Likewise today, we read of otherwise honorable public servants who are deemed tainted because they are involved with the "religious right" (meaning evangelical Christians). Tertullian complained, "Truth and the hatred of the truth come into our world together. As soon as truth appears, it is regarded as an enemy."⁵ This he said about the Roman response since Christ came into the world during the reign of Tiberius. Goodness and truth are singled out for hatred and rejection in a pagan world that tolerates almost everything else.

Can Everyone Be Right?

Pluralism espouses tolerance of all beliefs. The problem is that the acceptance of one religion entails the rejection of another. Tertullian had decisively shown that the Roman “gods” lacked the qualities of deity. He quotes their response: “But they are gods to us,’ you say.”⁶ Like today, they reserved the right to have whatever “god(s)” they chose and not have their validity questioned. It is and was a social no-no to challenge the truthfulness of someone’s religious beliefs (unless they are Christian beliefs). The trouble is that personally chosen “gods” with no transcendent, eternal being are by nature disposable and dispensable.

Tertullian challenged second century pagans on this matter:

Seeing you worship, some one god, and some another, of course you give offence to those you do not worship. You cannot continue to give preference to one without slighting another, for selection implies rejection. You despise, therefore, those whom you thus reject; for in your rejection of them, it is plain you have no dread of giving them offence.⁷

Gods who were personally chosen from a plethora of man-made deities need not be dreaded since they have no power to punish those who have rejected them. The pagans of Rome must have realized this since Tertullian humorously states, “The family deities you call Lares, you exercise domestic authority over, pledging them, selling them, changing them -- making sometimes a cooking-pot of a Saturn, a firepan of a Minerva, as one or other happens to be worn done, or broken in its long sacred use, or as the family head feels the pressure of some more sacred home necessity.”⁸ If too many guests arrive for supper, Saturn can be made into a kettle with no fear of Saturn raising a stink about the disgrace he thus suffers! The gods of a pluralistic society are disposable.

Peter preached concerning Christ -- “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). He was not given to compromise about

religious issues in the name of social respectability. If the claims of the gospel are true, then they must be heeded if judgement is to be averted. Unlike Saturn, God does have the power to judge those who reject Him. Paul told the pagan, Athenian philosophers, “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30,31).

Peter was preaching to Jews and Paul to Gentiles yet both made the same exclusive claim. The only way to salvation is through Jesus Christ. They did not allow the cultural forces against their teaching to dissuade them from proclaiming it boldly. The God to be served is the One who will ultimately be the judge. He has given evidence to all that is sufficient to make the human race liable for eternal judgment if it is ignored or rejected. Pluralism says that we can all believe what we choose and we ought not to ask questions about such things as “truth.” Obviously Christians must be at odds with pluralism.

The Irrationality of Pluralism

James Sire writes of his encounters with pluralism on college campuses. He seeks to demonstrate to students that three common beliefs about what happens after death cannot all be true.⁹ These are: the bodily resurrection of the dead to eternal life or eternal punishment, reincarnation, and extinction. He writes of his encounter with students who claimed, “those who believe in resurrection will be resurrected; those who believe in reincarnation will be reincarnated; and those who believe in extinction will become extinct at death.”¹⁰ Sire correctly points out that this “is tantamount to making each person a god.” One’s beliefs create his reality. As odd as this should seem to us, more people are adopting such views. It is a way to make pluralism and relativism work.

The problem is that people are not gods and that beliefs do not create reality. If the world suddenly became every-

thing that its five billion inhabitants believed it to be, chaos would be too weak a term to describe the result. Even if the power to determine reality applied only to issues of the afterlife (as those students thought), there would be a huge problem with justice. For example, if a cruel tyrant like Hitler sincerely believed in heaven, yet murdered millions of people and never repented, then heaven would be his reward. All hope for final justice would have to be relinquished.

Such a state of affairs would mean that actions in this life are eternally inconsequential. If a person is clever enough to get ahead by cheating, stealing and abusing his relationships and not get caught, he would have no worries unless he **believed** in eternal judgment and hell. Only those who believed in the possibility of an unpleasant eternity for evil doers would need to fear such a destiny. Eternity is too late to wait to find out what a delusion this notion is.

Pluralism may seem to make for good social etiquette, but it lacks rationality. Contradictory religious claims cannot all be true. Jehovah Witnesses claim that Jesus Christ is a created being; Christians worship Him as eternal God. One or the other is wrong. The law of non-contradiction which is basic to human reason says that, “A does not equal non-A at the same time and in the same relationship.” A created Jesus who came into existence at a point in time cannot be the same as an eternally existing one. The early church knew this and rejected Arianism (the heretical predecessor to Jehovah Witness Christology) after many battles during the fourth century. The only way to have it both ways is to reject rationality and Scripture.

What Is and

When discussing pluralism we need to distinguish between what is and what ought to be. Another way of saying this is to differentiate between what is **descriptive** and what is **prescriptive**. Pluralism argues that many beliefs do exist. This we must acknowledge. However, the pagan conclusion that therefore all beliefs are **valid** is not true. Not everything that exists is commendable and not every articulated religious belief is

true. By being satisfied with the descriptive only we have given up hope coming to the knowledge of the truth. Some people believe Elvis is still alive -- it does not make him so nor does it rule out the possibility of determining his biological status (some one told me that the politically correct term for the dead is "metabolically challenged").

The phenomenon of examining every possible belief and behavior without making value judgments is growing in our society. The professional pollsters have never been busier. Another evidence of this is the "shock talk" shows in which people with strange behaviors are invited to expose their ways to the multitudes. There must be a dozen TV shows of this genre now broadcast. Every bizarre twist of human sexual behavior is probed before audiences that hoot, holler, applaud, condemn, -- whatever each person wants to say. Then a requisite professional psychologist appears who tells us what it all means and how we can learn to be more supportive and tolerant. The psychologist also helps any panelist with a noteworthy aberrant lifestyle understand what constitutes "healthy or unhealthy" means of dealing with how they are. In the end the host exhorts all involved to be understanding and tolerant.

The fact that so many of these shows have sprung into being so rapidly tells me that they are tapping into the current social values -- pluralism, relativism, individualism and privatization -- which James Sire calls the "four forces of modernity."¹¹ Beliefs and morality are relative to the individual, personal, and private. Though "private" in the sense of their source of validity, they are publicly espoused, even flaunted so that others learn not to make judgments about such things. The public is as curious about the bizarre as it claims to be tolerant.

The effect of this is to desensitize our consciences about Biblical morality. It is supposed that if we all know the details of what is, however strange or perverted it may **seem** to us, we will eventually realize that these things simply **are** and should not be considered sinful. We may choose not to be simultaneously "married" to a man and a woman like the person on the talk show, but neither should we make those who are feel like

they are doing anything wrong. This is the message that covertly comes through the process and is overtly stated by the psychological priesthood that oversees these "services." Having rabid sounding members of the audience shout at the people about how bad they are only reinforces the idea that judgments ought not to be made about "lifestyle" choices.

What Is Can Be Wrong

We live in a fallen world. Therefore, what exists is not necessarily right. Description tells us about what is, prescription about the remedy including the notion of what ought to be. In some arenas, the pagan society still makes such distinctions. For example, mass murderers are not to be tolerated. The fact that any judgements of right and wrong are made shows us that we need a **basis** for such judgement. The rejection of Biblical truth has left the society with no basis but common consensus. The category of intolerable behavior as defined by common consensus is rapidly shrinking. The relatively recent experience of Nazi Germany shows us that common consensus can even tolerate mass murder. The Creator has given us the prescription for the woes of humankind in His Word.

David F. Wells notes many similarities between the pagans of Biblical times and our current culture.¹² One applies to the present discussion:

It is obvious that the pagan mind had no moral categories superseding the relatives of daily life. Pagans made no appeal to moral absolutes. They determined what was right experimentally . . . the supreme norm is always the status quo, whatever that might be and however it might change, because nature, in all of its workings, is viewed as a reflection of the working of a higher being or order of beings. Pagan religion sought to bring society into harmony not with moral absolutes but with the rhythms of life.¹³

Today we have video technology to help us keep in touch with these rhythms of life as experienced by people who have cast off all Biblical restraint. The gradual, mind dulling effect is to get us to accept almost anything as normal or at least tolerable in a pluralistic society.

What Can We Do?

Several years ago I worked with a group that sponsored an apologetics conference. We brought Norm Geisler to our city to be the keynote speaker. He did a marvelous job of analyzing the current religious situation and providing Biblical critique.

I still remember a question about how one reasons with a New Ager who claims not to believe in rationality. His simple answer involved the following illustration. You are asleep in your bedroom when awakened by a robber who breaks through a window. You have a loaded gun under your pillow just in case of such situations and point it at the robber. He says, "I am sorry but you cannot use that, I don't believe in guns."

"Reason," Norm explained, "is valid even for those who do not believe in it -- so use it anyway." What a great admonition, -- I still think of it often as I discuss these matters with people immersed in the irrationality of our modern world. Reason is valid because God created us as rational creatures, able to distinguish between fact and fiction, what can and what cannot be. We know that you cannot have a square circle and that an apple is not an orange. If someone denies this, they are wrong.

Like wise, Jesus Christ was publicly crucified and appeared publicly raised from the dead; therefore the gospel is public truth. Paul used it with philosophers who scoffed at the idea of a resurrection and Peter used it with his Jewish brethren to whom a crucified Messiah was a stumbling block -- a stone of offense. The truth applies to all people and the public is the proper audience for it. Paul said, "*God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent*" (**Acts 17:30**). The offensive weapon in our armor is, "*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*" (**Ephesians 6:17b**). Following Norm Geisler's advice, use it!

The argument that pluralism is the way things are should not cause us to give up the good fight of the faith (**1Timothy 6:12**). It does tempt us to change **how** we present the gospel and we need to be careful about this. Pluralism allows Christians to believe the gospel, as long as they make it their private experience, just as all other religions have private experi-

ences. I can say that I have experienced Jesus as my Lord (a true statement) and may not ruffle pluralistic feathers (so far -- in the first three centuries Christians were condemned even for this). If I say the Jesus is **The Lord** I have offended pagan sensitivities. Therefore the danger to the Gospel is that we make our faith a private matter that is shared publicly only in the context of letting others know where we are personally. Pluralism says that I get to be a Christian and my neighbor a Hindu and no discussion about who is right should enter the equation.

David Wells discusses this matter: The early Christians did not preach their *experience* of Christ; that would have been to promote a form of religion like any other form of religion. Rather they preached the Christ of that experience. They preached not what was internally interesting but what was externally true. God had raised him from the dead . . . The bells that rang in celebration of God's conquest over sin, death, and the devil also summoned every competing religious view into judgment.¹⁴

Its public truthfulness is what makes the preaching of the Gospel to every person the commission of the church. We cannot give up because the pagan world has other ideas. The turn inward for religious experience is a betrayal of Biblical truth. It is tempting because it alleviates so many conflicts, but it is fatal because it amounts to a return to paganism.

Again, David Wells in his hugely profound and timely book helps us understand the issues:

The Bible is not a remarkable illustration of what we have already heard within ourselves; it is a remarkable discovery of what we have not and cannot hear within ourselves. Thus our inward sense of God and our intuitions about meaning are irrelevant in any effort to differentiate biblical truth from pagan belief. It is how we apply ourselves to learn what God has disclosed of himself in a realm outside ourselves that is important.¹⁵

Truth is external and objective so it can be declared authoritatively to others. If it were only personal preference, it would have no authority for anyone else. The forces of modern paganism work more forcibly upon us than we realize. We learn to compromise and accommodate by the responses of those around us.

What we can do is remain true to what Biblical Christianity is, untainted by the pagan culture and thought patterns. This requires a dedication to the study of Scripture. This study must be done with the goal of understanding the Author's intended meaning, not looking for our own. It must be done with the purpose of being conformed to the image of Christ which involves our beliefs, our actions and our relationships. It also involves the understanding that we are called to teach others. Christianity is not a private religion, but a publicly displayed work of God. We need to use our sword and not allow ourselves to be robbed by the world just because the world tells us that it does not believe in the sword of the Spirit -- the Word of God. We surrender needlessly.

Conclusion

As this article goes out around Christmas time, we are immersed in a strange mixture of paganism, tradition, "Christian" symbols of questionable origin, and a sense of acceptance in the world that is normally hostile. But what are they accepting? -- our message that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate, who came to provide the **only** way to the Father? No, they are accepting the personal, inward, warm feelings gleaned from cultural patterns of the past. Many are depressed and sorrowful because the holiday brings memories of families that are now broken, or homes that should have been something they were not. The pluralism that allows an annual public celebration minus the **Truth** to which it once bore witness gives no hope to people who are thus left to themselves.

In contrast, the Gospel declares that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. It requires sincere faith in God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and relinquishing our self-proclaimed right to believe and do anything we want. It involves accepting the grace of God to deliver us sinners who are helpless to deliver ourselves. It involves the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit who causes us to be born again from above. It promises eternal life to those who repent and believe. This is the good news that is to be proclaimed to every person on planet Earth. May God bless you in being part of that proclamation.

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End Notes

1. From a collection from Edward Koren in "Caution: Small Ensembles" (Pantheon).
2. James W. Sire, Chris Chrisman Goes to College, (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1993) 21.
3. ibid. 22.
4. Tertullian, Apology, ch. III.
5. ibid. ch. VII.
6. ibid. chap. XIII.
7. ibid.
8. ibid.
9. op. cit. Sire, 52.
10. ibid.
11. ibid. 20-23.
12. David F. Wells, No Place For Truth, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 264-270 & 279-282.
13. ibid. 268.
14. ibid. 277,278.
15. ibid. 279.

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