

Christian Witness in a World of Many Faiths

Identity & Doctrine Series



Responses to some common concerns and questions

But isn't it rude to tell people of other faiths about Jesus? Actually, large blocks of population in today's world consider open confession of faith and public piety to be good things. Perhaps rudeness arises in the way in which Christians talk with others, rather than because of the content of the message.

Because the Christian message is "the gospel of peace," Christians must look for peaceable ways to tell it. Authentic Christian witness comes exposed and vulnerable, and resists any hint of coercion, manipulation, deception or verbal violence. It gives the listener full freedom to make an individual response to God. The messenger can speak without anxiety, because she leaves the encounter in God's hands. Christian witness includes listening carefully to what others are saying about their faith, while taking the opportunity in friendly relationships to tell the good news of Jesus Christ.

Hasn't Christian mission often gone together with colonialism and triumphalism? When Christians in the past acted in violent or arrogant ways towards people of other faiths, they did so in contradiction to the New Testament vision of witness. Those violent or arrogant attitudes do not invalidate the task of gospel witness; rather, they are in fact judged by it. And today's Christians bear the responsibility to set the record straight. The cross is a symbol not of conquest, but rather of God's suffering and unconditional love.

What about love and tolerance? Christians do indeed aim to respect people who believe differently than we do. We are also loyal to our Lord Jesus Christ, and we take a stand on the truth which God has revealed through him. And part of the respect we show to others is to tell them the good news in a clear and friendly way. If the gospel is indeed the one message which can save people, what can it mean to withhold it?

The measure of our regard for others is the extent to which we point the way to the blessings which we enjoy. Lesslie Newbigin wrote that if the astonishing historical events reported in the gospel truly took place, then to remain quiet about them is treason to our fellow human beings.

A positive restatement

Religious diversity is a reality of today's world. But that is not a reason to be silent about the truth which God has revealed to us. We should recognize the differences in faith among our friends and neighbours, and treat those who differ from us with love and respect. We should listen carefully to their expressions of what they hold dear. And we should take the freedom to share with others the "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" which are in Christ. To do less would put in question our love for Jesus, and for those around us. ■

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Faith and Life

Christian Witness in a World of Many Faiths

The New Testament vision of the Christian life is one in which believers bear an open, peaceable witness to Jesus Christ. This is the way Christianity spread during the first three centuries of its existence.

Christians confessed Jesus Christ as the Lord of the universe. They urged the people they lived among to accept and believe the good news of how God had opened the way of salvation for humanity. They invited people of all religious and cultural backgrounds to join them in the Body of Christ, the Church. They were convinced that showing love to others meant letting them share in the blessings they enjoyed.

In recent years some Christians have questioned the Bible's vision of witness. Their confidence to speak openly of their faith is stymied by a number of powerful ideas in western society. One is the widespread notion that there is no one single truth. Another is the feeling that Christians are arrogant to make exclusive claims for Jesus Christ. A third is the current definition of 'tolerance' as a belief that all religions are roughly equal in content and value.

Christians do indeed desire to respect, and live at peace with, people of other faiths. In fact, the gospel provides the only solid foundation for peaceful coexistence among people of different backgrounds. Therefore, Christians want to be true to the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ. They want to be loyal to the one who loved them and lay down his life for them. They want to take seriously the Bible's formula for passing on the blessings of God to others.

Consider how early Christians shared in witness verbally and by their lifestyle.

The first Christians lived in a society in which people were presented with a wide variety of spiritual options. The New Testament was written with the difficult issues of religious plurality in mind. But the early Christians and the New Testament did not see the variety of faith commitments as a reason to keep quiet about Jesus.

The book of Acts is the record of the thoughts and actions of this tiny minority group. Among the many stories of bold, peaceable witness are Paul's encounters with non-Christian religious and political authorities. When Paul stood powerless in shackles in front of the ruler Felix, he didn't hesitate to speak of Jesus. Felix objected that Paul was trying to persuade him to be a Christian "in such a short time" (Acts 26:28). Paul calmly replied that he would be happy to see Felix—as well as everyone else who could hear his voice—become a follower of Christ.

What did those first believers know that we are not taking into consideration? Or, perhaps, what is it about the spirit of our age which makes it difficult for us to think and act as they did? Why are our responses to the plurality of religions around us different from the first Christians? First of all, what is Christian witness?

Here are a number of solid principles, giving N.T. content in strong statements.

Christian witness is not a matter of blindly insisting our religion is right and others wrong. Rather, Christian witness is based on a desire to be authentic to the truth of Jesus and realistic about other faiths. An investigation of the world's religious traditions reveals that they are not the

same in many of their most important doctrines. The gospel offers truths to humanity which in fact are not on offer in other faiths, among them: God's self-revelation in the incarnation of the Word, salvation from sin through the death of Jesus, and eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Good news, not 'good views': The gospel presents itself not as a philosophy, good idea, or wise opinion about spiritual matters, but rather as an event in human history. The Gospel writer Luke claimed to be writing an orderly account based on eyewitness reports (Luke 1: 1-4). The message is open to objective investigation.

Paul wrote that this good news message has power within itself to save everyone who believes it (Romans 1: 16). That's why he called the gospel a message of "first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3).

Under true lordship: Christians confess that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, and that there is no other Lord. Jesus is the person through whom the Creator God has revealed himself. In Jesus, all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. Christians invite those they live among to accept and live under this true lordship.

Logic of mission: The death of Jesus on the cross is God's way of providing a means of salvation for the whole world. It is the supreme expression of God's love for humanity. Christians want the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection to reach all people. Paul asks how people can access these blessings. His simple logic is that first a messenger must be sent; the messenger tells the gospel to the people; the people believe the message and call upon the Lord Jesus, "who richly blesses all who call on him" (Romans 10:12-15).

Obedience to an assignment: Jesus told his disciples that they would bear witness to him all

over the world. He commanded his followers to make disciples of people from all backgrounds. This includes preaching the gospel faithfully, and nurturing new believers. Christians today want to prove obedient to this assignment.

Developments in western societies which make Christians hesitate

But some Christians are not able to affirm Christian witness. Recent years have seen a loss of confidence among Christians in the truth of the gospel. This makes them hesitant to speak openly with others about Jesus. Confidence is weakened by a general skepticism in western society about truth claims of any kind. Truth is said to be personal and relative, determined by each individual cultural setting.

As western countries become more religiously diverse, many begin to ask questions about the relationship of Christianity to other faiths. One popular way of responding to the diversity has come to be known as religious pluralism. This is a philosophy which gives a value to faith in general and declares all religions to be true in their own ways. But religious pluralism denies Truth to any single faith. Like any philosophy, the presuppositions which support religious pluralism could be examined.

This philosophy appears to solve the question of differences in a multi-faith society by pronouncing all religious commitments equal. But religious pluralism fails to grapple with the religions as they actually present themselves, and it avoids the thorny reality of ultimate claims which contradict one another. It also clashes with the biblical witness to Jesus. The New Testament is quite comfortable in finding the Truth in Jesus Christ, and expresses the hope that all people come to a knowledge of that truth.

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