

# **Christianity and Other Faiths**

## **Jesus Is the Only Way**

We believe that the saving grace of God in Jesus is the only means of reconciling humanity with God. Although salvation is available to all, only those who put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ have the assurance of eternal life.

## **God's Universal Witness**

God has not left anyone without a witness to the Creator's goodness and power. Due to human rebellion, people have chosen to suppress the truth. While elements of truth may be found in other religions, Scripture warns against false teaching. Christians treat people of other faiths and philosophies with respect, but lovingly and urgently proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation for all peoples.

## **Sovereignty of God**

God loves the world and does not want anyone to perish. In sovereign grace, God may communicate with people in ways that are beyond human comprehension. The Bible teaches that those who reject the gospel are under divine judgment; the eternal destiny of those who have never heard the gospel is in God's hands. Our task is to proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation to all people in all cultures. The Judge of all the earth will do what is just.

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Genesis 18:25; Psalm 19:2-4; Ecclesiastes 3:11; Isaiah 46:1-10; 55:8-9; Ezekiel 33:1-20; Jonah 1-4; Matthew 8:5-13; 25:31-46; 28:18-20; Mark 7:24-30; Luke 9:51-56; 12:47-48; John 1:12; 3:16, 36; 4:8-42; 12:12-26; 14:6; Acts 1:8; 4:12; 10:1-8, 34-36; 14:16-17; 17:22-31; Romans 1:18-24; 2:1-16; 10:9-21; 11:33-35; 1 Corinthians 3:11; 12:3; 1 Timothy 2:4-5; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 20:15.

**ARTICLE 17**

# Christianity and Other Faiths

## COMMENTARY

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As growing cultural and religious diversity continues to change the makeup of many of our communities, it is important to consider questions regarding Christianity and other faiths. Article 17 of the Confession of Faith deals with these issues.

### **Jesus is the Only Way**

The first section of Article 17 makes three major points. First, it rejects a pluralistic view of religions by declaring that “Jesus is the only means of reconciling humanity with God.” Second, it notes that “salvation is available to all.” Third, it identifies those people who “have the assurance of eternal life.”

### **Rejection of Pluralism:**

In North American culture, pluralism has become the dominant way of thinking about religious faith. Pluralism is the view that the major religious faiths (and perhaps all religious faiths) are equally valid paths to God. Scripture is clear in rejecting pluralism.

Jesus’ understanding of himself was that he alone was the path to God. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus clearly regarded himself as the way of knowing God, rather than going to the mountain in Samaria or the temple in Jerusalem (John 4:8-26). John 14:6 records Jesus saying explicitly, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” It is clear that the early church believed Jesus was the only way to salvation (Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 9:15; Hebrews 12:24). Regarding Jesus as the only way to God is consistent with and a fulfillment of the Old Testament recognition that Israel is God’s chosen people. Access to God comes through a particular people—the nation of Israel—in the old covenant, and through a particular person—Jesus Christ—in the new covenant. Finally, the practice of the early church is a clear rejection of pluralism. A variety of religions flourished under Roman rule and culture. The church called both Jews and pagans to turn to Jesus the Messiah and submit to his lordship.

### **Salvation Available to All:**

While the gospel came to the Jewish people first, it is not limited to them (John 4:22; Acts 10). God actively desires that all people be saved (1 Timothy

2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). The vision of the new heaven and the new earth is one in which people from every nation will be present (Isaiah 66:18, 22-23).

### **Assurance of Eternal Life:**

It is clear from Romans 10:9 and 13 that those who place their faith in Jesus will be saved. Thus they have the assurance of eternal life. However, these verses do not say that *only* those who put their faith in Jesus will be saved, allowing for the possibility that others may be granted eternal life. If others are granted eternal life, they are unaware of it. Thus they do not have the *assurance* of eternal life. This suggests the issue of the fate of those who have not heard the gospel. That will be addressed in a later section of this commentary.

### **God's Universal Witness**

The second section of Article 17 treats two issues: the content of other religions and the persons who profess other religions.

#### **The Content of Other Religions:**

God is made known outwardly to all people through creation (Psalm 19:1; Acts 14:17; Romans 1:18-20) and inwardly to all people through a moral conscience (Romans 2:15) and a sense of the divine (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Though God makes Himself known, not all people are consciously aware of God. The corruption of sin blinds many to God as revealed in creation and conscience (Romans 1:18-23). Still, at Athens, Paul recognized a searching for God on the part of followers of idols (Acts 17:16, 23) and philosophical systems (Acts 17:18) and allowed that there may have been an elementary knowledge of God even in pagan religions (Acts 17:28).

According to Paul, the knowledge of God that is acquired through creation and conscience is sufficient for people to be “without excuse” for failing to acknowledge God (Romans 1:20; 2:14-15). It appears that this knowledge of God can, in principle, lead to salvation, if people live according to the law they have (Romans 2:6-8, 14-16). Paul is clear, however, that all people have sinned against God and stand guilty before God (Romans 3:20, 23).

#### **Persons Who Profess Other Religions:**

Disciples of Jesus are called to treat others, including enemies, with love (Matthew 5:44; 22:39). The pluralistic culture often interprets love and respect as prohibiting disagreement. The gospel of Jesus Christ, however, is often offensive (1 Corinthians 1:23). It demands one's ultimate loyalty, rejecting all previous loyalties (Mark 10:29-30) and is a “two-edged sword”

which may cause internal turmoil for the person hearing the gospel (Hebrews 4:12). So love and respect do not demand that we refrain from disagreement or potential offence as we present the gospel. However, as Paul did in Athens, we must try to identify points of contact between what people already believe and the gospel of Jesus (Acts 17:16-34). British theologian Alister McGrath invites Christians to look for these points of contact with non-believers. Points of contact are those elements of a person's worldview that coincide with a Christian worldview. Don Richardson, in such books as *Peace Child* and *Eternity in Their Hearts*, provides fascinating examples of points of contact with a variety of different cultures. If the believer can identify some points of contact, these can provide a way of inviting a non-believer to consider other elements of the gospel.

### **Sovereignty of God**

The third section of Article 17 addresses two issues: the fate of those who reject the gospel and the fate of those who have never heard the gospel.

#### **Those Who Reject the Gospel:**

The Bible is clear that those who reject the gospel of Jesus are condemned by God (John 3:18; 1 John 2:23). Condemnation by God is eternal separation from God (2 Thessalonians 1:9) and is a "second death" (Revelation 2:11; Revelation 20:6).

#### **Those Who Have Never Heard:**

This topic involves a very difficult question. Is it possible for those who have never heard the gospel to be saved? As noted earlier, it is in principle possible to be saved by works of righteousness, but no one will in fact be saved that way since all have sinned. If salvation is possible for those who have never heard the gospel, it will be salvation by faith. As noted earlier, knowledge of God from creation or conscience is sufficient for accountability to God. Is having faith in God as known only through response to creation or conscience sufficient for a saving faith?

To bring some order to our thinking about this issue, let us consider two statements:

(A) The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus provides the only possibility of salvation for human beings.

(B) A person must have explicit knowledge of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and must explicitly put his or her faith in Jesus in order to be saved.

These statements may seem to be two ways of saying the same thing, but there is a significant difference between them. Statement (A) describes the event that makes salvation possible. Statement (B) tells what a person must believe in order to receive salvation.

Consider three views on the fate of the unevangelized. Pluralism holds that both (A) and (B) are false. Inclusivism holds that (A) is true but (B) is false. Exclusivism holds that both (A) and (B) are true.

Pluralism holds that there are many ways to God, all equally valid. As noted earlier, Mennonite Brethren reject pluralism.

The inclusivist holds that (A) is true but (B) is false. That is, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the source of the salvation for anyone who is saved. However, it is possible for someone to be saved by Jesus without realizing it is Jesus who is saving them.

Inclusivism reminds us of the distinction between general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is the information about God that is available to all through observation of creation. Special revelation is the direct revelation of God through Jesus and through the words of Scripture. Everyone receives general revelation. Some people do not receive special revelation. According to the inclusivist, people who have never heard of Jesus may be saved if they respond appropriately to the knowledge of God that they have gained through general revelation. Nonetheless, if they are saved, they are saved because of what Jesus did on the cross.

The exclusivist says that both (A) and (B) are true. That is, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the source of salvation, and in order to be saved a person must explicitly acknowledge that Jesus is the Saviour. If a people have never heard of Jesus, they cannot be saved because they cannot explicitly put their trust in Jesus. General revelation alone cannot be sufficient for salvation. Special revelation is necessary.

Since inclusivism and exclusivism agree that (A) is true, that salvation is only possible through Jesus, the question is whether or not (B) is true, that only confessed faith in Jesus can save. Some texts seem to support exclusivism by suggesting that explicit knowledge of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is necessary for salvation. John 3:18, for instance, says, "...those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (NRSV). Similarly, 1 John 5:12 says, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (NRSV).

Some texts, such as Romans 10:9 and Acts 4:12, are often used to uphold exclusivism but do not really support it. As noted earlier, Romans 10:9 and Acts 4:12 say that all who believe in Jesus will be saved; they do not say that only those who explicitly believe in Jesus will be saved.

On the other hand, some texts seem inconsistent with exclusivism. First Timothy 4:10 says, “For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe” (NRSV). This suggests that some might be saved without explicitly believing in Jesus. Furthermore, the Old Testament patriarchs and others mentioned in Hebrews 11 did not have explicit knowledge of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Similarly, people who have never heard the gospel are for all practical purposes in the same position as the people prior to the advent of Christ. It was possible for them to put their faith in God through the revelation given them. Some such believers, such as Melchizedek (Genesis 14:17-20) and Jethro (Exodus 3:1), were outside of the line of Abraham. In the same way, some who have not heard the gospel of Jesus may nonetheless have faith in God. We are not privileged to know all of the ways that God makes His saving grace available to human beings (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Article 17 wisely does not endorse either inclusivism or exclusivism since there is not a conclusive answer to the question of the fate of the unevangelized. As recorded in Abraham’s conversation with God regarding the fate of Sodom, God will judge justly (Genesis 18:25).

**ARTICLE 17**

# Christianity and Other Faiths

## PASTORAL APPLICATION

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With increasing frequency, pastors and church leaders in North America face questions about the relationship of Christianity to other faiths, as the communities surrounding our churches become more religiously diverse. A useful way to describe the growing diversity of faith commitments in North America is “religious plurality.” This is somewhat different than “religious pluralism,” a term often used to state a philosophical position which considers all faiths to be equal paths to God. (See Article 17 Commentary.)

### **Motivation for Mission**

While we do not agree with religious pluralism, Article 17 approaches the reality of religious plurality in a positive way: it states that “salvation is available to all.” In other words, the good news of Jesus Christ which we know from the New Testament is also good news for people who are committed to other faiths. The way of salvation which God opened for us through the death of Jesus is open to people of other faiths as well. This approach encourages believers to strongly affirm Jesus as the Only Way.

The phrase “the assurance of eternal life” indicates one of the dimensions of salvation which Christians have the privilege of sharing with people of other faiths. Scripture speaks clearly to this hope, which comes through the gospel alone. But this is just one of many aspects of salvation in the New Testament which could be highlighted. One could also speak of the defeat of the powers of evil, sin, and death, liberation from the oppressive power of the enemy, and the abundant life that Jesus promises to those who follow him.

Pastors and church leaders can help congregations strengthen their motivation for mission by providing preaching and teaching on the truths which propelled the first Christians to evangelize their world. Mission is motivated by our desire to proclaim God’s sovereign authority in the world, God’s love for the world, and God’s desire that no one would perish but all come to repentance. The Scripture passages listed in support of Article 17 suggest good starting points for such encouragement.

The article sounds a definite call to action, stating at the end of the second section that the Christian way is to “lovingly and urgently proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation for all peoples.” Similarly, the end of the third section describes proclamation of the gospel among all peoples as “our task.”

## **Living Among People of Other Faiths**

Article 17 was drafted partly in response to demographic developments in North America, where people of many religions are moving into the communities surrounding our churches. It is useful to note, however, that Mennonite Brethren churches in other parts of the world, such as India and Congo, emerged in the midst of competing faiths. They continue to function as minorities in their societies. Many in these churches have already thought through important questions about other faiths, and may be in a position to help their MB sisters and brothers in North America.

The Bible offers many helpful resources for questions surrounding people of other faiths. The New Testament was written at a time when the Christian population was a tiny minority in the midst of competing faiths. The witness to Jesus recorded in the Gospels, the Christological confessions in the letters of Paul, the bold evangelism of the first Christians recorded in Acts all took place in a multi-faith atmosphere. All of these biblical stories thus become very relevant for the situation which is emerging in North America.

For example, Philippians 2:5-11 provides a solid foundation for preaching the divinity, incarnation, and exaltation of Jesus. Similarly, Colossians 1:15-20 is a great launching pad for preaching Jesus' pre-existence, supremacy, and role in creation. Hebrews 1:1-4 proclaims the centrality of Jesus in the way God has spoken to the world, and Romans 10:9-13 makes unmistakably clear that Jesus is Lord of all people. The Gospel of John announces the truth of God's one way of salvation through his son Jesus Christ.

## **Non-Biblical Approaches**

Another reason that the question of other faiths has become more urgent is that some Christians are attracted to non-biblical approaches to religious plurality. One popular solution is an idea of "tolerance" which says that to be kind to people of other faiths, Christians need to say that all religions are equal. This secular notion copes with religious diversity by stating that all religions are true and none false. In this non-Christian view, Jesus becomes only one saviour among many.

But this runs counter to the witness of Scripture. The central teaching of the New Testament is that Jesus is Lord of all, and that there is no other Lord. (See article by John E. Toews listed in the bibliography.) The danger in accepting secular solutions to religious plurality is that they can lead to denial of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Christians begin to choose non-biblical views over the New Testament witness to Jesus, there is cause for alarm. The challenge for church leaders is to help our congregations think of their non-Christian friends with love and generosity, while still holding firmly to the truth about Jesus.



### **Attitudes Toward Other Faiths**

Article 17 takes a cautious approach to the question of truth in non-Christian faiths. But it affirms that “God has not left anyone without a witness to the Creator’s goodness and power” (see Romans 1:20), and lists Acts 10 (Peter and Cornelius) and Acts 17 (Paul in Athens) as helpful passages for this question.

A good idea for shining further light on this question is to consult Mennonite Brethren who have experienced world religions first-hand. Invite speakers from African and Asian MB churches, or missionaries who have studied other faiths and lived among people of other faiths, to interact with your congregations.

### **Respecting People of Other Faiths**

Article 17 is straightforward, however, on the Christian attitude toward people of other faiths. It says that we are to treat them with respect. This opens the way for many practical expressions of respect and friendliness.

First, we can express cross-cultural neighbourliness. Cultural differences with people of other faiths can provide contact points for building good relationships. Mennonite Brethren are a culturally diverse, global fellowship. This cultural diversity is not something which poses a problem for us. Rather, it is something we can affirm and celebrate. As we show appreciation for the cultures of others, we build a strong foundation for discussing spiritual issues where there may be disagreement.

Second, we can engage in interfaith conversation at the local level. In the context of friendly relationships, Christians should confess their faith to others and listen carefully to how others describe their faith. Both of these actions show respect to people of other faiths. Avoid stereotyping or caricaturing other faiths. Rather, learn to know other faiths as their practitioners themselves experience them. Many people of other faiths are grateful when Christians show a strong faith of their own and do not hesitate to speak openly of it.

Third, we can take opportunities to cooperate on social issues. Christians and people of other faiths frequently find themselves on the same side in public issues of morality. Many people of other faiths share the very important perception that human life is lived in response to a Creator God who gives humans laws for their behaviour. This can lead to similar views on such issues as abortion, sexual morality, and the education of children. Standing together with people of other faiths on these social issues is another way that Christians can treat others with respect.

## Trusting in God

Some worshippers in our congregations struggle with questions about the eternal destiny of those who have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. Article 17 does not give an answer to that question, but leaves it “in God’s hands.” It counsels trust that God will do what is right.

As the article suggests, it is good to maintain a measure of modesty concerning how much we humans know about God’s ways in these matters. However, Christians should act upon what can be clearly known from Scripture. Strong motivation for mission is based on the deep conviction that the good news about Jesus is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Its foundation is the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe. It is a response of gratitude to God for saving us through the death of His Son, and a desire that the blessings we enjoy should reach people of other faiths as well.

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