

Many Rooms, One Way: Preaching John 14 in a Pluralistic Society

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John 14 is the heart of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. In this wonderfully rich text Jesus promises his intimate followers that he goes to prepare a place for them in his Father's house, that he will come again and take them to himself so they can be where he is, that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and that to see and know him is to see and know God whom Jesus knows as Father. He urges his disciples to believe in him and promises that those who believe will do the works that he does and even greater ones, because he will do whatever they ask in his name. He teaches them that the true measure of their love for him is keeping his commandments, and he promises to those who keep his word that he will come to them in the person of the Paraclete (the Holy Spirit or Spirit of truth) to live in them and enfold them in the love of the Father and the Son. The Paraclete will remind them of all that he has said and will teach them everything. As he is going away, Jesus leaves them with the assurance that he is coming to them. "Let not your hearts be troubled," he repeats (14:1 and 27), "and do not let them be afraid," and then, "Rise, let us be on our way" (14:31).

These words of reassurance have sustained Christians in every age and culture, but their familial intimacy has also led Christians to view others as outsiders, because the text adds: "No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6b). This affirmation has become problematic now that the entire planet is a multicultural neighborhood. The riches and the major problem of John 14 are concentrated in the first part of the chapter. This article will invite readers to look closely at John 14:1-7 with eyes sensitized by exposure to other cultures, including those in many a preacher's own congregation, town, or city.

The Problem: One Way

In today's pluralistic, multicultural world, how can an informed Christian respond to Jesus' claim, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6b)?

The most obvious way to respond is simply to believe it. Many in every generation have said, "You better believe it, since those who don't are condemned already to eternal separation from God," and they cite John 3:36 as a proof text. Some may even revel in the childhood chorus that used to be (still is?) learned at Sunday School: "One door and only one, and yet the sides are two. I'm on the inside; on which side are you?" Few readers of this journal would ever dream of such an abrasive response, but few would simply dismiss this exclusive claim of Jesus Christ. A significant number of Presbyterians insist that it is an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. This position smacks of sectarianism, but its exclusiveness is characteristic of all three religions of the Book adhered to by the sons and daughters of Abraham.

Its earliest expression lies at the heart of Israel's Torah. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Deut. 6:4, NRSV) and "you shall have no other Gods before [or besides] me" (Exod. 20:3, RSV, NIV, NRSV). Israel's greatest prophets inveighed against the worship of any God but Yahweh (e.g., Amos 2:4; Isa. 2:8-9;

44:9-11; Jer. 2:1-13) at the cost of rejection, derision, imprisonment, and death (Heb. 11:37). The issue was idolatry, and in the presence of idolatry Yahwism was and is an exclusive faith.

This exclusiveness is echoed in Christianity. It comes to expression in John 14:6b and elsewhere. Peter, in his impassioned speech to the Council in Jerusalem said, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The conviction that there is no salvation outside faith in Christ underlies Paul's anguished inner theological debate in Romans 9-11 over Israel's rejection of the Gospel.

Exclusiveness is also characteristic of Islam, whose fundamental credo is "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet." Radical monotheism in theology often leads to radical exclusiveness in practice, whether it is Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. (Incidentally, Christian monotheism is not radical enough for Jewish and Muslim tastes.) In ancient Israel, exclusiveness served as a guard against idolatry, which is still a danger today. So long as Jesus' exclusiveness is directed against the real and present idolatries that beset American culture, John 14 will preach in Christian churches in a way that does not attack other faiths but does attack genuine threats to God's way, truth, and life.

Consider Mammon. From the perspective of global capitalism, to "do well" is to have money. Global consumerism exalts material ease, the accumulation of wealth, and the enjoyment of the things that money can buy as the good life. But Jesus says, "I am the life; you cannot serve God and Mammon."

The great god Mars dictates the common wisdom that if an enemy strikes you, the thing to do is strike back harder until you have destroyed that enemy; and if you believe enemies are about to strike you, hit them first. Jesus says the way to deal with enemies is to turn the other cheek and make them into friends. Our national budget proclaims to the world our belief that security and peace are achieved by military might. But Jesus calls us to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness (or justice), with the promise that our legitimate needs will be met (Matt. 6:33), and in John 14:1 and 27 adds that God gives peace to those who trust him.

Our culture says that notions like these are at best a naïve pipe dream and at worst a flat lie. But Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me."

These ideas are merely suggestive of an interpretation based not on what lay behind the text (the authorities in Jesus' own religion who sought to come to God by another way) but upon what is in front of the text (a contemporary culture whose idolatries need to be excluded from the community of faith). Exclusiveness is legitimate when, through it, we bring the Word of God in Jesus Christ to bear upon idolatry in contemporary culture.

Exclusiveness has become a serious problem in today's world, however, where there are many ways to God, many truths about ultimate reality, and many ways of life. Conflicts between and among the three major exclusive faiths have been and continue to be among the bloodiest in the world. The more new technologies of communication expand, the more difficult it becomes to ignore or dismiss the rest of the world with its manifold truth claims and lifestyles. Many, therefore, reject all exclusive religious truth claims on the basis of the adage, "There are many paths to the top of Mount Fuji."

There are important theological reasons also for viewing John 14:6b as a problem.

Moses and the prophets abhorred Israelite worship of the gods of the nations, but Old Testament texts never suggest that Balaam, or Job, or Naaman, or Cyrus were separated from God. Many Jewish authorities in the time of Jesus and of the Fourth Gospel excluded Samaritans and Greeks from their community of faith, but Jesus did not.

The Apostle Paul was distressed to see that Athens was full of idols (Acts 17:16), but rather than attack Greek religion head-on, he found in it one element he could use as a basis for preaching Christ to them. Let me be clear: Neither Moses and the Prophets, nor Jesus or Paul would give any credence to the notion that all religions are equally valid as a way of relating to God. It is significant, however, that the target of the exclusive dictum in John 14:6 is not other religions, but an exclusivist interpretation of Moses that viewed Scripture as a way to God and rejected God's incarnate Word.

How then is a preacher to grasp the nettle of John 14:4b in a way that is faithful to Jesus Christ and also true to the inclusive picture of Jesus elsewhere in John and the other Gospels? How can one preach the exclusive claim of Christ expressed in this verse without fanning the flames of religious hostility in a pluralistic world?

It seems to me that at least four avenues of approach to these questions are available to the interpreter. I outlined them as follows in *Preaching the Gospel of John*.¹

First, the text is directed to Jesus' disciples: For Christians there is no other way to come to God. Other religions are neither affirmed or rejected here. Second, "No one comes to the *Father*," that is, to the intimate relation with God which Jesus enjoyed, except through Jesus. The text does not exclude the possibility of other ways of knowing God, but no other is as full, as deep, and as warm as the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. Third, "...except through *me*," that is, except through the Father/Son/Holy Spirit reality which Jesus embodied while he was in the flesh and which the Holy Spirit leads believers to recognize in Christlike individuals of other religions or of no religion as "the light which enlightens everyone" (1:9). Fourth, accept what this verse affirms about Jesus as the way, truth, and life, but reject what it denies about other approaches to God. Commit to Jesus' way, remain agnostic about other ways, leaving to God the acceptance or not of their credentials.

I do not find the first option very helpful, because in a pluralistic society the conflicting claims of many faiths cannot be avoided, and the wording of 14:6b excludes any other way to God than that of Jesus Christ.

The second and third of these options both seem true to me. I must confess, however, that I really cannot know how full and deep and warm other ways of knowing God might be, since Jesus' way is the only one I have experienced. The third option takes into full account the cosmic Christ concept evident in the Prologue to John, the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:6-11, the christological confession of Colossians 1:15-20 and other texts. It is also attested by my experience of encountering Christlike individuals in other cultures and faiths.

I like the honesty of the fourth option that recognizes the plain meaning of "No one comes to the Father but by me," and I appreciate an aphorism of F. D. Maurice that H. Richard Niebuhr loved to quote: "Maurice had a principle, gained from J. S. Mill, that commends itself to us. He affirmed that men were generally right in what they affirmed and wrong in what they denied. What we deny is generally something that

lies outside our experience, and about which we can therefore say nothing.”² My discomfort with this option for interpreting John 14:6b is partly because it depends on a reconstruction of the historical situation behind the text (mutual hostility between Johannine Christians and Jewish authorities) and mostly because it makes those who hold it arbiters of which words in the Bible are words of God.³

The Riches: Many Rooms

If the pluralistic world in which we live makes the problem of exclusiveness in John 14 more acute, it can also yield rich exegetical and homiletical insights we might not have seen in a culturally homogenous context.

A cross-cultural perspective illuminates our understanding of the root meaning of “believe” in the first verse of this chapter and throughout the Gospel. Belief in the existence of God and the truth of the Gospel’s affirmations about Jesus is one thing; trust in God and entrusting ourselves to Jesus in faithful discipleship is another. In 1954 Congress inserted “under God” into our pledge of allegiance to the flag to proclaim to the world and ourselves this nation’s belief in God. Our money (bills as well as coins) also asserts “in God we trust.” Polls show that the vast majority of American citizens believe in God in the first sense, but do we in fact trust in God for our national security and personal welfare? Asking those of other cultures in our own society and listening closely for echoes from the news media of other countries can help us answer that question more honestly. Seeing ourselves as others see us allows us to read and to preach Jesus’ words in John 14:1 with keener understanding.

Sensitivity to cultural pluralism also helps us solve a problem of translation in John 14:1. Should *pisteuete* (believe) be translated as an indicative or an imperative, since the same grammatical form serves both functions? John’s first readers were already part of a multicultural community that included Samaritans (John 4:39-42) and Greeks (John 12:20-23), Gentiles as well as Jews.⁴ Samaritan readers would have come to believe in Jesus on the basis of a long heritage of faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as revealed in the Torah or Pentateuch. Gentile readers may have believed in a number of gods in the Greek and Roman pantheon before believing in Jesus. All of these could well understand the first *pisteuete* (believe) of John 14:1 as an indicative (“You believe in God”) and the second *pisteuete* as an imperative (“believe also in me”), which is the way the King James and some recent translations read the text. Most recent translations read both forms as imperatives (“Believe in God, believe also in me”), which resonates as a call to faith in the ears of skeptics and those of whatever religious background, as well as an appeal for deeper personal trust in Christ on the part of Christians, then and now.

The metaphor of many rooms in the Father’s house gains fresh meaning when preached to groups from diverse cultural backgrounds. It suggests that when we go to live with God we will be welcomed into a room whose decor is familiar. To the community that first read this Gospel, it might have meant different rooms for Jews and Greeks, for Samaritans and Romans, for believing members of the Sanhedrin like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, as well as for Galilean fishermen like Peter and Andrew, James, and John. There might be a room for each of the ethnic groups and languages mentioned in the Acts account of Pentecost. Each of the countless sub-cultures of countless lands and times since then might find its own room in the Father’s house, with furnishings, colors, pictures, and music to make them feel at home.

It could, of course, suggest a place with uniform decor in which ethnic and social distinctions have all disappeared in a sort of tapioca pudding blandness with plenty of room in the pudding for everybody. Perhaps neither the persons nor the appointments would be culturally separated, but every room might have a rich mix of both. In any case, reading and preaching the text in a pluralistic world conjures up a vision in which each culture will find a place prepared by Jesus and all will feel at home in the Father's house.

This reading of the text might seem like a stretch to the Evangelist, who may have understood Jesus' words as interpreted to him by the Holy Spirit to mean only that there is plenty of room in the Father's house for all of Jesus' disciples. Surely it does not mean that the disciples at table with Jesus that Thursday night would each have a mansion in the celestial city (as the King James translation might suggest), nor even that each of them would have a private room in God's big house, though that would not be inappropriate for those in slave cabins in the old South or in crowded slums around the world today.

My experience of other cultures includes towns and cities in the southern United States, a coal camp in eastern Kentucky, university campuses in the South, New England, France, and villages and cities in central Africa. I have observed that the picture of heaven conjured up in the minds of disciples when this text is read in each of these settings tends to be furnished with elements drawn from their own culture as they have experienced it or as they yearn for it to be. It is seldom conceived as a totally alien place, and I think that is consonant with the intention of Jesus and the Evangelist in a text designed to bring reassurance and comfort to troubled disciples.

God has planted in the human heart a yearning for home that underlies Jesus' promise of many rooms in the Father's house. The desire to be at home with God is not culturally specific. Isaac Watts may have been influenced by John 14:2-3 when he paraphrased the close of Psalm 23: "O may Your House be my abode, and all my work be praise. There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come; no more a stranger, or a guest, but like a child at home."

The traditional understanding of the place where Jesus was going, to which he will take us when he comes again so we can be where he is (14:3), is a heaven that leaves our human partitions on earth undisturbed. But in the Gospel of John the promise of eternal life in the future is realized now in the lives of believers (John 3:36a). The Good Shepherd invites us to live in his fold here and now!

See how a multicultural context enriches our understanding of this text today. The promise of many rooms in the Father's house is truly good news in a world of high walls and closed doors, where even those in one room tend to gather in small groups to love each other and talk about everybody else. So where is Jesus taking us, and, in the words of Thomas, how is the way to get there?

Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6a), and it is salutary to remember that Jesus' first stop on his way to the Father's house was the cross. There, in laying down his life out of God's great love for the world, Jesus opened the door for everyone, in every culture, time, and place, to come into the Father's house. That invitation transcends the divisions and hostilities of a pluralistic world. Not everyone will accept it, but it is the high privilege every minister of the gospel to say to anyone who will listen, "Welcome home!"

Notes

1. Lamar Williamson Jr., *Preaching the Gospel of John: Proclaiming the Living Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 182 and 313.
2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951; Harper Torch Book Edition, 1956), 238.
3. Williamson, *Preaching John*, 314.
4. Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), passim.