

The Religious Wars  
(*"You shall have no other gods before me"*)

How does Jesus save us? Reconciliation. Is Jesus God? No. Do we hate everybody who does not agree with us, or do we pretend there are no differences or that it doesn't really matter? Hmmm ...

Circling around several times in the first two chapters of Colossians, we have picked up some pretty interesting comments from the Great Apostle. Paul was not debating or lining out the topics we have been considering these last three Sundays. He was interested in how things were going with the Colossian Christians, and he was addressing a concern that his friend Epaphras had told him about. There were some leaders and influences in the Colossian community that were trying to tell the Christians that Jesus was not enough to save them, and that there were other more powerful influences they should start paying attention to. (More of that in one of our classes.)

Of course Paul replied, "Malarkey! There are no influences more powerful than Jesus." Whatever you may think, that was a bold stance to take in A.D. 54. There were huge temples and vast religious complexes all over the Roman Empire, but none of them were Christian. We were still a few families meeting in private houses here and there. Paul was the most courageous and outspoken of our leaders, but he had to stop every few days to sew canvas goods for somebody so he could buy food and supplies. And besides, he was in prison at Ephesus. Christian credentials in 54 A.D. were not terribly impressive.

We have a very different situation today, don't you think? In some parts of the world, Christians are still being thrown into prison and dying for their faith. There are more Christian martyrs every year now than there were in the entire first century put together. But that seems remote to most of us. Few of us fear "the state" for religious reasons. And while our prisons are overcrowded, it isn't because of Jesus. Having just begun our little adventure as *The New Church*, we certainly feel small and insignificant, but nobody is trying to stop us. We aren't important enough for anybody to hate us.

So in this lovely time of peace and calm, I have been attempting to raise some issues that I hope will be foundational for *The New Church*. How does Jesus save us? Is Jesus God? And what is our attitude toward

other Christians who don't agree with us, and toward people of other religions who are not in the Christian camp at all? If that is too vague: What is our stance – our attitude – toward Jews and Muslims, toward Buddhists and Hindus, toward American Indian religions and New Age groups and ... suddenly the list is about to get pretty long.

What many of us thought was a too-complicated religious picture back in the fifties now seems like a tame and manageable reality in comparison to the huge proliferation of religious beliefs and groups today. And the truth is, what's left of what we thought were sane and responsible religious institutions (or denominations) back in the fifties is all in turmoil and upheaval today. At first we thought it was just the so-called "mainline" denominations; after all, they deserved it because they had stopped paying attention to their foundations. But in the last fifteen years, the mayhem has clearly spread to evangelical and fundamentalist churches as well. Everybody seems to be participating in the confusion, and struggling with the flotsam and debris of things tearing loose from their moorings. Some of the reaction I get for challenging the Virgin Birth, the Second Coming, or the creeds has little to do with the information being presented. Lots of people are simply tired of the confusion and mayhem. They want something solid to hang onto – something that won't keep changing on them – even if it is superstitious nonsense at the core.

Whether we like it or not, there is much confusion and are a lot of wild opinions floating around in our world today. We do need to have some starting places to work out of – some stances that are foundational enough for us to hold hands around, and some understandings we can at least learn and grow from. Fortunate or unfortunate, in this regard *The New Church* will take some leads from me or it will die very quickly. We do not have to end up where we start out, though lots of religious people seem to prefer that journey. But we *do* have to start out somewhere. So I can claim that I take my lead from the Holy Spirit and from Scripture, but the fact is that some will believe this and some won't. If enough do, with the Spirit's help we will move on together. If not, well, I will have had the fun of giving it my best shot.

So I have been preaching these three sermons not only for those who are already with us, but for everyone who may join *The New Church* as time goes on. Of the three sermons, I am pretty confident about setting forth the precepts for "How Does Jesus Saves Us?" and for "Is Jesus God?" But today is not so easy. One reason it's not so easy is because

a great many people are trying to make it look really easy. Another reason is because others are convinced that the whole thing is entirely impossible.

The subject is: How do we talk with, and what kinds of things do we say to, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Muslim, a devout Jew who wants to talk about religion? (Did I just cheat?) And what do we say to a Seventh-Day Adventist, a Pentecostal, a Fundamentalist? (Yes, I have left out many important groups, since I am only illustrating.) To begin with, I would not have much conversation with most people in any of these groups because they would not want to have a serious or open conversation with me. As a rule of thumb, if I get into a conversation with anyone about religion and they make it clear that they have no capacity to listen as well as to speak, I am out of that conversation very quickly. No good can come from it. Therefore, if I am going to be in such conversations myself, I must have an honest and sincere desire to listen myself. In all that follows, we will assume that both sides have a desire for an honest conversation and for honest sharing.

One more aside before getting into the topic. In what follows you will hear me struggling between principles of “love” and principles of “idolatry.” Those are both huge and very real issues for me. However, I have discovered that many people in our time have no struggle with concepts of idolatry. They don’t understand why I’m acting like there is some kind of problem here, because they don’t see any problem. To me this seems hard to imagine, but after so many conversations, I take their word for it. They have no problem with idolatry because they have no God – except, of course, the one they have made up in their own head. To them, God is just a composite of wishful thinking. Their God neither approves nor disapproves of anything beyond the whims of how they are feeling at the moment. Betrayal or idolatry is not a serious issue if your God is merely a vague, oblong composite of personal hopes and desires. But I suspect that many of us have had and continue to have experiences with a God we have not made up, but, rather, have encountered. Betraying, ignoring, or insulting this God is not a minor matter. And not because we fear punishment, though it is true that if we go against the precepts of the true Creator, life will not work out well for us. This is not the only issue. We honor, respect, appreciate – worship – God, *if we truly have a God*. To please God is the highest aim in life. To disappoint or displease God is the most serious problem we ever have. So for those of us who are in truth religious, idolatry is a real issue – the granddaddy of all sin.

So back to our subject: As it happens, I have had deep and serious friendships with a Jewish rabbi, a Buddhist monk, a Seventh-Day Adventist pastor, a Catholic priest, a Hindu teacher, a Unitarian pastor, a Muslim leader, an avowed Atheist, a Mormon elder. I have had casual conversations from time to time, as most of you have, with a wide variety of different sorts of people from various backgrounds. But that has very little to do with what I want to say here, and very little indeed to do with what I just said. What I said was “deep and serious friendships with ...” I just thought you should know that.

So what is at issue here? I am hopeful that every member of *The New Church* will be open enough and willing enough to engage in serious conversation (serious does not mean glum) with people from all sorts of different religious backgrounds and persuasions. Only, I also hope that we will never take such things for granted, or assume that they will be easy or automatic. Unless we are tripping lightly over the surface – which, by the way, is usually the case with such conversations – we will need respect, concentration, and a willingness to learn. But such conversations will always bring with them a certain amount of tension.

The tension is a matter of idolatry versus love. We believe (I hope) that Jesus loves all people. And we believe that Jesus reveals the heart and mind of the Omnipotent God who also loves all people and sends Jesus to make this clearer to anyone who will trust and believe Him. Only, of course, Satan has sidetracked much of the mission and ministry of Jesus by turning Christians and Christianity into just another religious institution that cares about its own and ostracizes or condemns all the outsiders (for whom Christ also died). Nevertheless, the love of Christ is still a Christian belief. So, as a Christian, I may know absolutely that Jesus loves a Buddhist friend of mine. But that in no way covers the probability that my Buddhist friend wants very little to do with the love of Jesus, and has entirely other beliefs and constructs that he is paying attention to and that seem to him in every way superior to anything Christianity has to offer.

Sooner or later I will run into the same kind of problem from my side. How deeply can I share in a religious exploration with a Buddhist or a Hindu friend without becoming idolatrous? “*You shall have no other gods before me.*” That is buried deep in my soul. For me, of course, this means having no other gods besides the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: Yahweh. And in my mind and heart, Jesus is the fulfillment of Judaism, so there is no conflict between Yahweh and the God revealed

in and by Jesus the Christ. But am I so mindless or unaware that I don't know there is a conflict here for any religious Jew? The great dichotomy of the New Testament between Law and Gospel lives on. No honest Jew I have known has a high regard for the Apostle Paul or his theology, to put it very mildly.

Now, I am not so small-minded that I cannot conceive of the probability that Yahweh, in truth, has a higher identity than our Judeo-Christian heritage implies for most people. In actual fact, our Judeo-Christian heritage makes it clear that Yahweh *does* have a higher identity – and a broader concern and love for all the children of the earth – than our institutions and practices have ever caught up with. But clearly neither Jews nor Palestinians nor Catholics nor Pentecostals have known how to honor this in any practical or consistent way. Most certainly the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has a higher identity than any of us ever comprehend. But our problems are not merely theoretical. And we are not just imagining them. We live in a limited realm but in a very real world, and I am not so mindless that I do not realize that when millions of normal Muslims say “Allah,” they do not mean the God revealed in and by Jesus Christ. And in fact, to suggest such a thing would be abhorrent and egregious to them.

The Christian God of my understanding loves Muslims. However, the Muslim God does not love me unless I become a Muslim. But am I not in a very small minority of Christians when I make such a claim about God's love? The Mormon God does not love you unless you become a Mormon. If you think this is in error, you have never had an honest conversation with an honest Mormon. Sadly but essentially, this is true of most Christian groups. Catholics, Evangelicals, Fundamentalists – in short, somewhere around 80% of Christendom – believe that the love of God is conditional upon conversion. Of course, there are numerous liberal churches and groups claiming that the “religious wars” are wrong and unnecessary – that we should all just kiss and make up. And they are drawing a lot of “good-hearted” people into their memberships because most humans do not like conflict, and we would like to think that all the animosity is unnecessary. Nevertheless, our Lord taught us that a house built on sand cannot stand. A lot of the rhetoric about how the religions of the world should get along better with each other is just hooey – a “peace that passes over misunderstanding.” This level of “good will” does not last, and does absolutely no good when we need it the most.

The New Testament version of idolatry, at its apex, is to have other saviors in the place of Jesus. The fiercest loyalty of my life is a love-bond with Jesus. If anything or anyone attempts to weaken or challenge the gratitude or authority that Jesus has earned in my life, that influence will be severed. I have earned nothing from Jesus, but Jesus has earned it all with me.

Now, in many liberal camps in our time, there is no problem. All religions are the same, or at least of equal value. All roads lead to God, and it makes no difference which one you are on. You can hear such comments all over the place in our time. Quite simply, they are not true. Because of Jesus, I *do* trust that God loves all of us, is after all of us, and is quite able to save all of us who will allow it. Very quickly, however, that goes beyond my understanding. By my understanding, God is saving us by resurrecting us into the eternal realms where we will go on growing and learning and loving each other – and loving God. But we will be who we are, and relationships will continue to be central to what is going on. Yet I have just described what would seem more like “Hell” to a Hindu or a Buddhist. If I tried to tell my Hindu friend that God personally loves him and that this is where we are headed, the response would be a profound shudder of despair. Or, more likely, a kind and determined effort to teach me the profound error of my ridiculous views. This, of course, assuming that we have gotten past the normal, polite pabulum of most cross-religious conversations.

I am simply trying to point out that when we engage in potentially meaningful encounters or relationships with people from other religious stances (Christian or non-Christian), we do sometimes find ourselves trying to keep some kind of balance between the love Jesus is teaching us and the specter of idolatry. This is not a figment of our imagination. This is a very real dilemma. In my opinion, people who try to minimize the real issues end up doing more harm than good. Peace treaties with no clear or real foundations never last very long.

As you know, I was raised a Quaker. “Quaker” is a nickname from a bygone age, referring to a spiritual ecstasy that characterized their gatherings in the early days. A far cry from the usually sedate and rather quiet meetings of my experience. In any case, the official name for Quakers is “The Society of Friends,” often simply “Friends” for short. There is the story of a large meeting of clergy and influential leaders of all the various denominations of a large eastern city. The atmosphere was ecumenical, and the purpose was to see if there could not be some

healing of all the divisions and differences of the many Christian groups represented. Various people spoke, but it was quickly obvious that each person thought the real solution would be for all the other groups to join them. In that vein, there were many not very veiled comments about how this or that denomination was a clearer and more faithful expression of the Christian Faith than any of the others. Finally the representative of “The Society of Friends” rose and spoke as follows: “Gentlemen [this was some years ago], it is very clear that all of us have our pride in our traditions and in the expressions of our Faith. It also seems clear that the real truth of how we are each right or wrong will not be finally revealed until we all reach the other side. But while we are here on earth, why can’t we all just be Friends?” When the laughter had subsided, the meeting broke up and everybody went home.

In any case, I long ago gave up on the notion that everybody would become Quakers, or that the religious wars would cease. There are too many vested interests, and there are too many real issues dividing us. Pretending it is not so is not some kind of superior spiritual perspective. It is naive, stupid, and dangerous. History shows that pacifist movements are always at their popular peak just prior to the next big war. Pacifist movements do not prevent war, in this world. They merely keep some people unprepared for what is coming next.

So let me tell you a true story. I attended the University of Redlands, in Redlands, California. My sophomore year I ran into a fellow named Allen Marsh – a Presbyterian student heading toward the ministry, as I was a Congregationalist heading toward the ministry. (The United Church of Christ had not been born yet.) Allen and I became dear friends. Mariana, by the way, had also come into my life at this point, so you can check with her if you doubt any part of this story.

One of the more interesting missionary efforts in southern California at the time (and still today) was called the Self-Realization Fellowship. Just to abbreviate, it was an offshoot of Hinduism. They had and have a beautiful retreat center on the cliffs near Encinitas, overlooking the ocean. They invite visitors to come and enjoy the grounds and, if interested, to attend lectures there. Allen became interested and then enthralled with the teachings and approaches of the Self-Realization Fellowship. As I went off to Andover Newton Theological School, Allen went deeper and deeper into the Self-Realization Fellowship. He formally joined them, took vows, and eventually went to India to study. By the time I came back to southern California to serve my third church, in Altadena,

Allen had become a major leader in the Self-Realization movement, and was living at their world headquarters in Eagle Rock, California.

As I said, Allen and I had been dear friends at the University of Redlands, so when I found out that he lived not far from Altadena, I got in touch with him, and Mariana and I made a date to visit him. We sat in the library of this beautiful mansion on top of a hill in Eagle Rock. We had greeted each other warmly. We were chatting and laughing and catching up with what we had each been doing in recent years. After approximately an hour of very pleasant conversation, Allen suddenly stood up and said, "I can't do this. I am breaking every discipline and vow that I have been working on for ten years. I am really sorry. You probably can't understand. But we are re-forming attachments that are no longer appropriate for me." And he walked out abruptly. Allen died a few years later, but I never saw him again.

What Allen did was entirely appropriate to his religion. I should have known better, and I did understand better than he realized. But only after he walked out on us did I put it together like I should have to begin with. What was the problem? We weren't swearing, drinking, telling dirty stories, or plotting to overthrow any governments. We were just reminiscing and laughing together, catching up with what we had each been up to. But it was reminding us both that we had been really good friends. That was not a problem to my religion. But that kind of love – that kind of attachment – was a serious problem in Allen's religion. When he suddenly realized that he was returning to a kind of laughter, affection, and friendship that he had turned away from in order to follow his faith, he was alarmed and ashamed. Oops! I am so sorry, but all religions are *not* the same! If anyone thinks so, they do not know what they are talking about.

You probably cannot tell from what I have said so far, but it is my hope and my dream that the members of *The New Church* will always be eager and willing to speak and share openly with members of other Christian groups and with members of other religions. But on what basis? Is there some common denominator that would allow us to have such meaningful conversations? I believe there is. Only, we would have to be clear enough in our own minds – and stay disciplined enough in our conversations – to stay in the area where genuine sharing is possible, and not wander into territory where we know we will disagree endlessly, often hotly, and to no purpose.

What is the core and key – the *summum bonum* – of our own spiritual experience and WAY? Some would say that “Love your neighbor” is the epitome of all we believe. Some would say that “Love of Jesus” is the central foundation. Still others would claim that the “Love of God” (with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength) is the greatest commandment. I too believe this. But where is the terrain that allows us to honestly and meaningfully speak with others outside of our own camp? (Robert Browning thought the *summum bonum* was in the kiss of one girl. But then, what would we expect from a Taurus?)

The true foundational core of following the WAY is our absolute allegiance to following the guidance and receiving the comfort and help of the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord. That construct is blatantly Christian. For me it will always be so. And in no way do I consider what follows to be a loophole. But in my experience of prayer and seeking the presence of the Holy Spirit, I do notice an opening into realms beyond all my definitions. On the Damascus Road, Paul heard the Spirit say to him, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” That identification was crucial to Paul, and to me also. But I do not consider that the Holy Spirit is limited by or limited to the physical manifestation of Jesus of Nazareth. In my own “Damascus Road” experience, I was under a pepper tree a few miles east of Whittier, California, and a very long way from Damascus. An exceedingly powerful, very kind and caring “Being of Light” was there beside me. I was going to say “standing beside me” but that was just my assumption from the more familiar images of the world of my expectations. How did this Being of Light become in my mind the Holy Spirit of Jesus? Well, coming out of my background, my traditions, and my expectations, that is the only identification I know how to make. And if you try to use this honest reflection to leverage me away from my conviction that it was Jesus, I can promise you it won’t work.

But I do have the question: If I had been raised in India, would I have interpreted this experience to be contact with Krishna? If a Muslim, would I have considered it a revelation from Allah? Muhammad did. And so on. One of the things that seems clear to me is that people all over the world have spiritual experiences, spiritual encounters. It is quite logical to think that if God made us all, God would put some spirit within each of us that could connect and communicate with the Holy Spirit of God. And in a limited, physical world, we would each explain and interpret our spiritual experiences according to the religious traditions and explanations that we knew about. I mean, how could we try to explain or understand according to things we do not know about?

In any case, *there* is our opportunity, if we are careful and awake. We know, from Jesus, that God loves everybody. We therefore expect that everybody *who will allow it* will have spiritual experiences, spiritual awareness. Only, they will not all use the same language or the same images to talk about it, if they talk about it at all. Such things do not go easily into words for any of us. The Taoists have a saying: “Those who speak, do not know. Those who know, do not speak.”

We can nevertheless begin to ask not “What do you believe?” – which goes into theological debate – but “What are your experiences of spiritual awakening?” Not always – far from always – but sometimes we will run into people who have had profound experiences with whatever they call “God.” And those experiences will be in some ways reminiscent or identifiable to us. And on this level, we can talk to each other, share with each other, learn from each other. That is, if both of us are willing to speak honestly, and willing to listen sincerely.

“How has God helped you?” “In what experiences have you been most aware of God’s presence?” “Are there ways in which God has changed your life?” Even these will often need careful translations and allowance for different wording. And such questions can also seem impertinent, or feel like we are after some preconceived answer. But it is the possibility for communication across language and tradition barriers. In my experience, by the way, such communication, however delightful, will usually end up closing down again as the conversations eventually and inevitably hit the barriers of fundamental belief differences. I still think it is well worth the effort. It also, at least in my case, opens up a spiritual bond I never would have imagined could exist between me and some people so very different from me in theological constructs. And that connection, once discovered, is never entirely erased.

I sometimes look back, with sadness and remorse: What would have happened between me and Allen Marsh if I had been more awake and aware? I was so blind and deaf, I don’t even remember his new name – only his old one. But what if, instead of returning to our past, I had asked him more about his spiritual encounters, more about his experiences of awakening? Would we have had more than one conversation? Would I have learned to know something of the new Allen? And even though our notions of love had grown far apart, would that not have been more truly loving, at least on my side?

Have you followed any of this? Both the warnings and the possibilities? Perhaps we shall see.