

The Supremacy of Christ

Ajith Fernando

Pluralism has become a dominant philosophy today. Eastern religions have adopted a strong missionary stance, and New Age thinking has made huge inroads into different spheres of Western society. The evangelical movement, especially in the West, seems to have lost its cutting-edge commitment to the radical truth of the gospel. There is now, within Christianity, a great deal of skepticism about the possibility of knowing truth. A 1991 poll by George Barna claimed that 67% of North American people believe there is no such thing as absolute truth. Even more surprising, 53% of those claiming to be Bible-believing conservative Christians believe there is no such thing as absolute truth.¹ With such major shifts occurring in the minds of many Christians, there are now numerous circles in which pluralism and relativism are considered necessary for understanding religious truth.

The philosophy of *pluralism* lies at the heart of the New Age movement and of some so-called Christian theologies. It fits in well with Buddhist and Hindu thought, too. We are not talking here of the pluralism that allows for the existence of political, ethnic and cultural differences in a society or a church. Rather, we are referring to a philosophical stance that recognizes more than one ultimate principle, and therefore claims that it is not possible for us to recognize any one system of thought as absolute truth.

Religious pluralism espouses a new idea of revelation. Over the years, Christians have understood revelation as God's disclosure of truth to humanity. They believe He discloses truth both generally, in ways accessible to all people through nature and conscience, and specifically, through the scriptures and in Jesus Christ. According to religious pluralism, truth is not *disclosed* to us, but is *discovered* by us through our experience. The writings of the different religions are then understood to be different discoveries—through human experience—of the one God. Since the different religions are viewed as different expressions of the Absolute, each is believed to contain facets of the truth.

Most careful students of religion, however, recognize that different religions rotate on different axes. In truth, the similarities between Christianity and other religions are in the peripherals, not the essentials of the faith. It is simply not correct to say that all religions teach essentially the same thing. Those who promote pluralism today must



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reckon with the fact that this attitude is completely opposite to that of the New Testament Church. New Testament preachers and writers responded to the pluralism of their day with strong affirmations of the exclusiveness and supremacy of Christ. Paul's ministry in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) and the Epistles to Colosse and Ephesus are good examples of this. While a view of Christ that denies His supremacy may gain followers all over the world, the life and work of Jesus Himself show there are reasonable grounds for believing that Jesus is indeed supreme.

Jesus as Absolute Truth

Into this environment of uncertainty about truth, biblical Christians come with the assertion that we can know absolute truth. We claim that we have found it in Jesus, that Jesus is the Truth. He says, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). When Jesus says He is the truth, He means He is the personification or the embodiment of truth. Jesus says not only, "What I say is true"—meaning "I am true"—but "I am the truth," the ultimate reality. This revelation is not something discovered primarily by experience. The pluralist says that Christian revelation is actually just a record of the religious experiences of a given people. We say it is ultimate truth disclosed by God and not primarily discovered by humankind.

Jesus substantiates His claim to be the Truth in the verses that follow John 14:6. He first explains what it means to claim that He is the Truth: it means He is equal with God. Verse 7 says, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him." To know Jesus is to know the Father. Leon Morris points out that when Jesus says we can know God, He "goes beyond anything that the holy people of old normally claimed.... Jesus brings to those who believe something new and outstanding in religious experience, the real knowledge of God."²

Jesus then makes another strong point in John 14:7. He says, "From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him." Jesus claims that the disciples have seen God the Father. William Barclay comments that "it may well be that to the ancient world this was the most

staggering thing that Jesus ever said. To the Greeks, God was characteristically *The Invisible*. The Jews would count it as an article of faith that no man has seen God at any time."³ Yet, Jesus claims to be equal with God and says that when we see Jesus, we see God the Father.

From the teaching of Jesus in John 14:6-7, we conclude that *absolute truth can be known because the Absolute has become concrete in history in the person of Jesus* (see also John 1:14, 18). Herein is the argument for our belief in absolute truth. We say Jesus is God; therefore, to know Jesus is to know the Absolute. Our belief in the absoluteness of the Christian gospel is an extension of our belief that Jesus is God incarnate. It is interesting that John Hick, who is perhaps this generation's most prominent pluralist, rejects the Christian doctrine of incarnation.⁴

A Personal Response to the Truth

Now we come to the question of how, and in what sense, we know absolute truth. If truth is a Person, then we will know the truth in the way we know persons—through facts about them and through relationship. We know the Absolute through a relationship because that is how He has chosen to communicate truth. He did it personally. Therefore, to enter into the knowledge of the Absolute, we need to get to know God through "a personal response and commitment to Christ's Person."⁵ This opens the way to knowing absolute truth.

E. Stanley Jones tells the story of an unbelieving doctor who lay dying. A Christian doctor sat beside him and urged him to surrender and have faith in Christ. The dying doctor listened in amazement. Light dawned. He joyously said, "All my life I have been bothered with what to believe, and now I see it is *whom* to trust."⁶ Belief is entrusting ourselves to Jesus. We love Him as our friend and follow Him as our Lord. This is the reason the basic call of Christ is not "Follow my teaching" but "Follow me."

Because we know the Absolute personally, we can say that we know absolute truth. This knowledge is not only personal and subjective. At the heart of the Christian gospel are some objective facts. The gospel of Jesus is about certain events in history, including

certain claims Jesus made. There are propositions in God's revelation about which there can be no compromise, and the truth about Jesus' relationship with God is one of them. For example, in John 14:11, He commands His disciples, "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me."

The Words of Jesus Affirm His Absoluteness

In John 14:10b Jesus explains how we can believe His claim to be equal with God and therefore believe He is absolute truth: "The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing His work." We would have expected Jesus to say, "the Father speaks through me." Instead He says, "the Father who dwells in me does His works." This is because, as Archbishop William Temple put it, "The *words* of Jesus are the *works* of God."⁷

What Jesus is saying here is that we must take His words seriously because when He speaks, God speaks. His words affirm His claims to deity. The authenticating value of the words of Jesus lies in two areas. First, their relevance and penetrating insight suggest that He who is speaking is no ordinary person. In His words lie God's answer to life's problems. Second, His claims about Himself leave us with the inescapable conclusion that Jesus views Himself as equal to God.

In the twenty centuries since Jesus lived, many people have concluded that Jesus' claims about Himself are true, simply by reading the Gospels. I heard a story of a young non-Christian man who was studying English using one of the Gospels for reading. He suddenly stood up in the middle of a lesson, paced up and down the room and said, "These are not the words of a man, these are the words of God!" Jesus says that His words themselves ought to convince people.

The Works of Jesus Authenticate His Words

Jesus, however, knew that some people would not accept the startling claims He made about Himself. So he said in John 14:11, "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father

and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles [lit. works] themselves." He meant that if we consider His works, we will be challenged to take His words seriously.

The first way to look at His works is in the context of His spotless life. Even those who do not accept some of His claims generally agree that Jesus lived an exemplary life. If He was a good man, then should we not take seriously what He consistently said about Himself?

A second way of looking at the works of

When we come to Jesus, when we enter into a relationship with the Truth, we realize that we are in touch with the Absolute.

Jesus is in the context of His miracles. In the Gospels, the miracles are often presented as evidence to support the claims of Christ. When the people murmur about Jesus' statement to the paralytic that his sins

are forgiven, He heals the man so "that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:8-11). When the Jews accuse Him of blasphemy, saying "You, a mere man, claim to be God" (John 10:33), Jesus says in His response, "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may learn and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (John 10:37-38).

If a person truly considers the works of Christ, he or she must come to grips with His claims of absolute supremacy because His works authenticate His words. I have a friend in Sri Lanka who was a devout Buddhist and a voracious reader. One day he went to his city's public library and checked out a book on the life of Christ. After reading it, he realized that Jesus' life was unparalleled in human history. He knew he had to do something about the claims Jesus made. He went in search of someone who could tell him more about Christ. This contact with Christians led to his becoming a fervent follower of Jesus Christ.

If we believe that the Gospels give an objective account of the life of Christ, then we cannot take the views of the modern-day pluralist. The absolute lordship of Christ does not emerge from a few proof texts in some isolated passages in the Gospels. It shines through all

of it. If we take out those passages that contain teaching about the absolute lordship of Christ, we are left with no life of Christ at all. The same material that gives evidence to His being a good man also gives evidence that He is Absolute Lord. It is impossible to say that Jesus was good but not absolute. The view of the pluralist on this matter is untenable.

Of course, pluralists may reject the historicity of the gospel records and thus dismiss the claims made for Christ in the Gospels. Many pluralists say that these statements were not made by Jesus Himself but were invented by the Gospel writers, based on their subjective experiences and their ideas about Christ. It is beyond the scope of this article to respond to this view. However, let me state here that there is a strong case for the historical reliability of the gospel records, a claim amply demonstrated in several recent books.⁸

A Comprehensive Case for Absoluteness

Different people are attracted to different aspects of the case for Christ's absoluteness.

The case is comprehensive. Once they open their hearts to one aspect, the others soon fall into place. The final appeal of the gospel is the cumulative effect of all these aspects. Others have taught the things that Jesus taught. Recently a leading Sri Lankan lawyer presented what many considered a convincing case against the uniqueness of Christianity by showing that the ethical teachings of Jesus are also found in the other religions. That is true to a certain extent. However, the teachings of Jesus are not the sum of the gospel. Those ethical teachings are inextricably linked with Jesus' claims to absoluteness.

The completeness of the gospel is the feature that makes it exclusive. Jesus was the perfect example of a holy and loving human being. He taught sublime truth, claimed to be equal with God and performed miracles to substantiate those claims. Most importantly, He sacrificed His life, claiming He must die to save the world. God gave proof of this scheme of salvation by raising Jesus from the dead. This last point is the clincher. The most unique

Ten Qualities of Jesus' Words *Ajith Fernando*

1. **His teaching is profound, yet simple.** Bishop Stephen Neill says, "The quality of ordinariness runs through much of the teaching of Jesus. It is this, perhaps, which has given His words the extraordinary power to move the hearts of men and women through almost twenty centuries."⁹ The temple guards, sent to arrest Jesus, returned without Him. When they were asked, "Why didn't you bring Him in?" they responded, "No one ever spoke the way this man does" (John 7:46).
2. **He speaks with great authority.** Shortly before His ascension, Jesus tells His disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18). The way He speaks befits one who can make such a claim. About His teaching He says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matt 24:35). After the Sermon on the Mount, "the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matt 7:28-29). R. T. France says, "Any other Jewish teacher made sure that his teaching was documented with extensive quotations from Scripture and with the names of his teachers added to give weight to his opinion; his authority must always be second-hand. But this is not so with Jesus. He simply laid down the law."¹⁰
3. **He claims to have the authority to forgive sin.** When He forgives the sins of a paralytic and the people question His right to do this, He proves it by performing a miracle. He says He is doing it "that [they] may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10).
4. **He not only tells people to "Follow my teaching," He says, "Follow me" and demands total allegiance.** He says, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt 10:37-38).
5. **He takes on titles given to God in the Old Testament.** Psalm 27:1 says, "The Lord is my light and my salvation." Jesus says, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). Psalm 23:1 says, "The Lord is my

thing about the gospel of Jesus is His death and resurrection for the salvation of the whole world. This ultimately separates the gospel from the rest of the religions of the world.

The Joy of Truth

We can experience an intense joy over truth in this era of the New Covenant. When we come to Jesus, when we enter into a relationship with the Truth, we realize that we are in touch with the Absolute. This is firm ground. This is what people are thirsting for in this confusing age. What a joy the discovery of such truth is! It gives us an eternal foundation on which to build our lives. This, in turn, brings a great security that is a springboard to lasting joy.

Jesus succinctly described this experience when He said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). As we experience the truth, we find freedom from dependence on this unstable world for fulfillment, freedom from the dehumanizing power of sin and freedom to dwell in the sphere of eternity where springs of eternal joy

(Ps 16.11) will satisfy our deepest aspirations. Recognizing Jesus as the Truth is an experience unmatched by experience with other faiths. It is an experience with the eternal God, and only the eternal God can give us eternal joy.

Jesus as The Way

If Christianity is Christ, then His cross is the greatest key to understanding Him. The space given to the last week before the crucifixion is evidence of how important the disciples considered His death to be. It occupies about 30% of Matthew, 37% of Mark, 25% of Luke and 41% of John.¹¹ The English theologian P. T. Forsyth says, "Christ is to us just what His cross is. All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what He did there.... You do not understand Christ till you understand His cross."¹² When Jesus says in John 14:6 that He is the way, He means that He will become the way through His death, as the context of this verse (John 13:33-14:5) reveals.

What the cross of Christ achieved is so vast and so deep that numerous interpretations

shepherd." Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11).

6. **He considers Himself worthy of receiving the honor that is due to God.** Isaiah 42:8 says, "I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols." He says, "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (John 5:22-23).
7. **He claims to have a unique Father-Son relationship with God.** He calls Himself God's Son, and He calls God "my Father." "My Father" is not the way Jews usually referred to God. They did speak of "our Father," and while they might use "my Father" in prayer, they usually qualified it with something like "in heaven" in order "to remove the suggestion of famil-

arity."¹⁴ The various references to God as Father in the Gospels show that Jesus intends to convey He has a relationship no other human being can have with God.

8. **He claims to be the judge of humankind.** He says of Himself in John 5:27, "And [the Father] has given Him authority to judge because He is the Son of Man" (John 5:27). Leon Morris points out that "if Jesus was anything less than God [this] is a claim entirely without foundation.... No creature can determine the eternal destiny of His fellow creatures."¹⁵
9. **He says that He will give us things that only God can give.** In John 5:21, He says, "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom He is pleased to give it."

He said He gives "water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). He speaks of giving "my peace" (John 14:27) and "my joy" (John 15:11).

10. **His opponents, the Jewish leaders, understood the implication of His claims.** In a discussion about the Sabbath, Jesus makes the statement, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working." The next verse says, "For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill Him; not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God his own Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:17-18).

Someone said of the words of Christ, "If it is not super-human authority that speaks to us here, it is surely superhuman arrogance."¹⁶

of it have appeared throughout the history of the Church.¹³ Here we describe what it achieved by looking at six concepts found in the New Testament.

1. **Substitution.** Perhaps the most basic feature of Jesus' death is that He took our place and bore the punishment for our sins. He was our substitute. Peter, who first revolted against the idea of Jesus' crucifixion, later wrote two significant statements about this: "He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet 2:24), and "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pet 3:18).
2. **Forgiveness.** The immediate result of the death of Christ is the forgiveness of our sins. His death was necessary for the forgiveness to be granted. Hebrews 9:22 explains, "In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." The message of forgiveness is one of the most revolutionary aspects of the Christian gospel, and it is missing in most other religious systems.
3. **Propitiation.** This word relates to the rituals of the temple, where sacrifices were given to God to turn away His wrath against sin. The rendering of 1 John 2:2 in *The Living Bible* expresses this well: "He is the one who took God's wrath against our sins upon Himself, and brought us into fellowship with God." Propitiation focuses on the seriousness of sin and God's wrath against it, which is borne by Jesus. Perhaps we find this difficult to accept because the doctrine of God's wrath has often been neglected by the Church. Today we are surprised to read descriptions of God like the following: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (Hab 1:13). We have lost the abhorrence for sin found throughout the Bible. Yet, in both the Old and

New Testaments, wrath is part of the essential nature of God.

4. **Redemption.** In the ancient marketplaces, slaves were purchased for a price. Redemption speaks of the purchase of our salvation through the payment of a price for our sins. Ephesians 1:7 says, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." The focus is on the freedom we receive from the captivity of sin through the price paid by Christ.
5. **Justification.** This word comes from the law courts and means "to pronounce, accept and treat as just." It denotes "a judicial act of administering the law—in this case by declaring a verdict of acquittal, and so excluding all possibility of condemnation."¹⁷ Romans 4:25 says, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." Romans 5:16-18 describes what happened in our justification: "The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.... Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men."
6. **Reconciliation.** We can think of reconciliation in terms of family life and friendship. Paul says, "God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:19). Reconciliation is necessary because sin is rebellion against God and results in enmity between God and humankind. Romans 5:10 says, "when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son." The result is "peace with God" (Rom 5:1) and adoption into His family (John 1:12).

The Challenge of the Cross

Jesus is the way to salvation; He came to the world in order to bring this salvation to humanity. This implies that we cannot save ourselves and that there is no other way to

salvation except through Jesus. Christianity, then, is a religion of grace, of God's acting in Christ to save us.

Many who encounter the Christian belief of grace ask, "Should we not save ourselves? Why should another die for us?" Most people would like to save themselves. Stephen Neill has said, "The last thing that modern individuals want is that anyone should do anything for them."¹⁸ The message of the cross cuts at the heart of human pride, the essence of sin. Adam and Eve's sin was that they wanted to save themselves, independent of God. They did not want to be dependent on a supreme God for salvation or for anything else. The same thing happens today. People like to think that they are saving themselves. It makes them feel good and helps to temporarily still the voice of insecurity and emptiness that is theirs because they are separated from their Maker. This may account for the fact that religions like Buddhism, Hinduism and New Age, which offer people ways to save themselves through several lives (reincarnation), are growing even in the West.

Another belief of Hinduism and the New Age movements is that we are all part of the divine. This, too, is distant from the biblical idea that we are guilty before God and in need of salvation. Swami Muktananda had a great influence on Werner Erhard, founder of EST self-help seminars. He expresses well the mood of many people today with his statement, "Kneel to your own self. Honor and worship your own being. God dwells within you as You."¹⁹ New Age analyst Theodore Roszak says that our goal is "to awaken the god who sleeps at the root of the human being."²⁰ Fallen humanity, in its natural state of rebellion against God, would prefer this approach to salvation.

When someone asks me the question, "Should we not pay for our sins?" I usually respond in the following way: the principle of paying for one's sins is found in every religion. The Bible also says, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Gal 6:7). Buddhists and Hindus call this the law of *karma*. The effects of a principle or law can be overcome by a more powerful force, though. Take the law of

gravity. According to this law, if I hold up a book and let go of it, it will fall, but I can use another more powerful force and overcome the force that operates through the law of gravity. By catching the falling book and raising my arm, I can overcome the force of gravity and make the book reverse its direction. When I do that I do not break the law of gravity; I use a force that overcomes its effects.

God did something like this with us. He created us to live with Himself. But, we chose to live independent of Him. By doing this, we

Jesus as He is portrayed in the Bible is not only unique but also supreme. He is our message to the world.

heaped a terrible load of guilt upon ourselves. Those who try to offset this guilt by their own efforts soon find they do not have the strength for it. However much they try, they are not able to tilt the scales of their lives in the direction of their innocence. The Christian gospel says that, seeing our helpless condition, our Creator did not abandon us. He brought into operation the law of love. He let that law save us, but He did so without breaking the law of justice or canceling its demands. What He did in love was done to satisfy its demands. The demands of justice were never ignored or canceled. They were fully satisfied, and the only way that God could do that was by having His spotless Son take the punishment that was due to us.

What we see here is an amazing love. He did for us what we could not do for ourselves. We call this grace, the result of which is salvation. I know of many Hindus and Buddhists who, when despairing of their efforts to save themselves, have found this message of salvation through the grace of Christ to be very good news.

Jesus as The Life

Another important aspect of the supremacy of Christ is Jesus as the life (John 14:6). Eternal life is a primary result of Christ's saving work (John 3:16; 5:24). Jesus often says that this life comes through a relationship we have with Him. In John 17:3 He says, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

In John 10:11 Jesus teaches that the relationship we have with Him is based on His commitment to us: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Then Jesus immediately contrasts that with selfish people who fail us, people who do not have Christ's commitment to us. They desert us in our time of need rather than care for us as Jesus does. He says, "The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep" (John 10:12-13). Jesus knows this world is full of relationships that fail. In fact, the deep wounds caused by people who have disappointed us have a very strong place in our emotional lives. The fact that His loving commitment to us heals us from the wounds we have received in life is an important aspect of the uniqueness of Christ.

In John 10:10 Jesus describes the life He gives by saying, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." It is a completely fulfilling life because of a love-relationship with God. It is not an impersonal pleasure or "kick" that He gives us through specific experiences. All other ways of living fall short of the fullness of life that only our Creator can give. This is what Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) discovered. He was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. After Francis' spiritual awakening in his twenties, his father was convinced that he was insane and denounced him. Francis took on a lifestyle of poverty, but he did not miss the riches he gave up. He said, "To him who tastes God, all the sweetness of the world will be but bitterness." Jesus explains this same kind of fulfillment saying, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). After we come to Him, we do not lose our healthy ambition and restlessness. That would make life boring. In fact, we have a new thirst for God, for His glory and for His ways. The world's hunger, that takes away our joy and peace, is gone for good.

God created us for relationship with Him. Without that, we are as good as dead. As John says, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not

have life" (1 Jn 5:12). When people who are created for life do not have it, they are restless. St. Augustine (354-430) said, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." The noted French inventor and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-62) referred to this restlessness as the God-shaped vacuum found in every human being. The work of Christ in us takes away that restlessness and gives us the fulfillment that we seek from life. This is the subjective aspect of the uniqueness of Christ, and in a world that places so much emphasis on subjective experience, it may be one of the most attractive features of Christianity to those outside the faith.

His Work Forms a New Humanity

God has also formed us for relationship with each other, and the gospel meets this need in a unique way through what we may call the new humanity. One great effect of the work of Christ is the forming of this new humanity, which Paul called the Body of Christ. Jesus talks about this new humanity in John 10. He says, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16).

Some people use this reference to the "other sheep" as evidence that there will also be salvation for those who remain outside the Church. They say that the work of Christ has won salvation for all, both inside and outside the Church. It is most unlikely that the same book that records so much of the necessity of believing in Jesus for salvation should teach that it is possible for people to be saved without such belief. The verb *pisteuo*, "to believe," appears 98 times in John.²¹ In fact, Jesus says here, "they too will listen to my voice." The implication is that they will respond to the gospel. When Jesus refers to "this sheep pen," He seems to be referring to the Jews. That makes the "other sheep" non-Jews. Jesus is saying that His death is going to bring non-Jews into the flock also. This theme also appears elsewhere in John (11:52; 12:20-21). It is implied in the statements that present Jesus as the Savior of the whole world (John 1:29; 3:16-17). The result of bringing the sheep into the fold is creation of a new humanity "in Christ." Paul contrasts the new humanity with

the old in Romans 5:10-20 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-22. These passages say that those who are in Adam experience the consequence of Adam's sin, whereas those who are in Christ experience the consequence of Jesus' saving act.

While John 10:16 teaches that the death of Christ makes it possible for other sheep to come into Christ's flock, the way this will happen today is through the Church going out and bringing them in. John 10:16, then, is a missionary verse. William Barclay, commenting on this verse, says, "The dream of Christ depends on us; it is we who can help Him make the world one flock with Him as its shepherd."²² It is fitting that the description of the death of Jesus in John 10:11-15 climaxes with the missionary challenge in verse 16. The great Scottish theologian James Denney (1856-1917), speaking at a missionary convention, spent most of his talk describing the meaning of propitiation to the surprise of all there. However, this gave him the background needed to drive home his main point at the conclusion. He said that if propitiation is true, then taking its message to the world (missions) should be our priority.

In the last part of John 10:16, Jesus mentions the result of having these other sheep come in: "and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." What we have here is an initial statement about the universal Church that Paul is later going to teach about in some detail. He will use the figure of the Body of Christ to refer to the Church,²³ viewing those who are "in Christ" by faith as belonging to it. Here Jesus is saying that the Gentiles will come in, and they will belong to the same flock as the Jews. If the Jews who were listening understood what Jesus meant by this statement, it would have been a very revolutionary thought for them. They viewed themselves as separate and superior to other races because they were the chosen people of God. "Only by becoming a full citizen could a non-Jew find entry into Jewish religious groups."²⁴ Jesus is implying here that His death would make such

a step unnecessary. A significant feature of the biblical description of the work of Christ is its emphasis on how the Cross and Resurrection broke earthly distinctions between people. This is a theme the Church has often failed to preach and practice, but it is certainly a unique feature that the gospel can offer to a world torn by communal prejudice and strife.

The Resurrection is Proof

Christianity makes claims about the uniqueness and exclusiveness of its founder that no other religion makes. How do we know these claims are true? While we have given several reasons above, the clincher is the resurrection of Jesus. At the conclusion of his message to the inquiring Athenians, Paul says, "[God] has given proof of this to all men by raising him [Christ] from the dead" (Acts 17:31). Despite all of Jesus' teaching about His mission, even His disciples are bewildered by His death. On Easter Sunday, when the women share the news of the resurrection as reported by the angels, Luke 24:11 says, "But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense." Once the disciples know, however, that Jesus indeed is risen, they cannot be stopped. They go straight to the hostile people in Jerusalem and proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah [Christ]. Peter declares that the Resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ [Messiah]" (Acts 2:36). The New Testament, then, insists that the Resurrection was God's authentication of the supremacy of Jesus.

The Creator of the world has indeed presented the complete solution to the human predicament. As such it is supreme; it is unique; and it is absolute. So, we have the audacity in this pluralistic age to say that Jesus as He is portrayed in the Bible is not only unique but also supreme. He is our message to the world. A Hindu once asked Dr. E. Stanley Jones, "What has Christianity to offer that our religion has not?" He replied, "Jesus Christ." 🌐

Study Questions

1. How does Fernando argue that the uniqueness of Christ points to "the supremacy of Christ"?
2. Explain how Christ's death, as described in John 10:11-16, provides hope for a "new humanity."

Endnotes

1. George Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA.: Regal, 1991), quoted in Charles Colson, *The Body* (Dallas: Word, 1992), pp. 171,184.
2. Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 1988), p. 495.
3. William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2 in *The Daily Bible Study*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 159.
4. See John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 167-85.
5. J. Carl Laney, *Moody Gospel Commentary: John* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), p. 20.
6. From E. Stanley Jones, "The Christ of the Indian Road" (1925), in *Selections from E. Stanley Jones* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), p. 224.
7. William Temple, *Readings in John's Gospel* (1939, 1940; reprint, Wilton: Moorhouse Barlow, 1985), p. 225 (italics his).
8. See especially Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Leicester and Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1987).
9. Stephen Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984), p. 67.
10. R.T. France, *Jesus the Radical* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1989), p. 204.
11. Calculated from figures provided in Griffith Thomas, *Christianity Is Christ*, p. 34.
12. P.T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909, pp. 44-45 quoted in John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester and Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 43.
13. For a comprehensive description of the different views that have emerged in history, see, H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 1985).
14. Leon Morris, "The Gospel According to St. John," in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 313.
15. Leon Morris, *The Lord from Heaven* (Leicester and Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1974), p. 36.
16. Quoted in W. Griffith Thomas, *Christianity Is Christ* (1948; reprint, New Canaan, CT: Keats Publishing, 1981), p. 26.
17. J. I. Packer, "Justification," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1984), p. 593.
18. Stephen Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984), pp. 147-48.
19. Quoted in Douglas R. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 21.
20. Theodore Roszak, *Unfinished Animals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 225, quoted in Groothuis, *Unmasking*, p. 21.
21. It is surprising that the noun *pistis* does not appear at all in John.
22. William Barclay, *Gospel of John*, vol. 2, p. 66.
23. See 1 Cor 12:27; Rom 12:5; Eph 1:22-23; 4:12, 15; Col 1:18.
24. Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans; 1988), p. 116.