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Beyond our Sectarian Identity

JOHN YORK

“I AM the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” —John 14.6

I’m delighted to be with you for this occasion. My thoughts today are taken from a presentation I made this past January at our preaching workshop. The theme of the workshop was *Preaching and Interfaith Dialogue*, and I was assigned the task of asking how to conceptualize such conversations in light of the oft-quoted I AM statement of Jesus. The experience in many ways was more than I bargained for. I found myself not just exploring the apparently exclusivist claims of Jesus in John 14.6—and the competing narratives and understandings of other religions—but also many of the competing narratives within myself. The really difficult part has been to name all of my own contributions to exclusivism and the great distance that exists between my understanding of Gospel and whatever it is that John the writer had in mind when he wrote this text.

I said at the time that a better name for my lecture was “Confessions of a Recovering But Often Obstinate Sectarian Exclusivist.” For the longest time I believed that in the marketplace of religious ideas, my Christian understandings were right and the ultimate trump card over all else—the springboard for all debate and occasionally some evangelism. Within the Christian stream itself, the views espoused by my tribe were the superior understandings. Even in graduate school at Emory, where it quickly became apparent that anyone still believing in the resurrection was my sister or brother in Christ, I still loyally insisted that my tribe had more right answers than other tribes. I stayed in Churches of Christ, I told myself, because every group has their weaknesses and we still have more right answers—or at least I could say that I know this family’s dysfunctions (which was to say quietly, “And they are not as bad as *yours!*”).

I choose to think that I’m not alone in that arrogance—that most people who choose the church of their choice do so because it fits them. In our consumer culture of “attractional” church, the group we choose is directly related to what we personally believe is the best church, the right church with the right commitments, or at least the right set of practices for me (and my family) to be encouraged and affirmed. Identity through differentiation has been the trademark of Protestant denominationalism for the last two hundred years in America. Christian faith has been understood primarily as a set of beliefs to be argued with a concurrent set of practices to be observed. Until the last thirty-five years or so, people became Christian and joined a particular church group based either on generational family loyalty or on the basis of rational argument. Now we live in the world of competing experiences where, instead of doctrine being debated, it is worship experiences that are the “attractional” link. Orthopraxy has been tied to felt needs and social cohesion—finding a place to fit in and, in some sense, belong.

Within the competing denominational tribes there has been a fairly explicit dualism. In one group (the “liberals”) great attention has been given to social justice and the moral compass has been centered on harm/care of the disadvantaged. On the other side (the “conservatives”), the primary focus has been on purity—primarily doctrinal purity, but also moral purity in specific circumstances with specific labels for those not

conforming. This dualism has often become its own form of exclusivity. In this context, “interfaith” dialogue looks like a debate between so-called mainline and evangelical affiliations.

Alongside this view of faith and church has been a way of reading texts. For a variety of reasons, our enlightened access to Scripture as an objective, easy-to-read, anyone-can-have-a-copy-and-read-it-for-himself-or-herself approach has produced an often helter-skelter privileging of some texts over others. Yes, a wide variety of interpretive tools may be brought to the conversation, but how texts get weighted in relation to one another is one of the powerful forces of differentiation. We know this about almost any topic. If it’s salvation, then Romans 10.9 and John 3.16 are pitted against Acts 2.38 or Romans 6.3–4. If it’s the role of women, I Timothy 2 is held high over the head of I Corinthians 11 or Galatians 3.28—or vice versa. And in the case of my own tradition, for the longest time Acts and Paul’s epistles were, in general, privileged over the four Gospels. There was not room for, or interest in, interfaith dialogue when we were consumed with intramural debates about which texts win the day.

Perhaps most dangerous of all in my world of sectarian exclusivism was a means of differentiating among human beings—creating various hierarchies that assigned value to the other. Sometimes this was done along the lines of socio-economic difference (those “rich people” you know); sometimes education (I know what it feels like to be completely discounted because I’m an “academic snob”); often race and ethnicity; certainly gender; more recently national citizenship; and—most obviously for our immediate discussion—religious loyalty. One gets the strong feeling these days that to be Christian but undocumented is to be not quite human, even if Jesus is Lord.

Again, very personally, I must confess my own blindness to the ways in which our modern, materialist/mechanistic understanding of life itself has turned every aspect of life into goods and services for consumption. It has become the unconscious understanding of what it means to be a successful human and a growing church. Consciously or not, we have tended to believe that “if we build it, they will come”¹ is not about mythical baseball fields, but about church programs and buildings and success-filled promises.

Now that you are either completely depressed, lost, or asleep, let’s talk specifically about John 14.6. The verse is one of the writer’s many uses of the divine *ego eimi*—the divine I AM remembrance of Yahweh at the burning bush in Exodus (3.14): “I am,” Jesus says, “the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.”

The problem, of course, is that contemporary citations of this text seldom spend time in the larger context and, even when the context is mentioned, quoting this verse quickly moves to pronouncement. A literalist reading of this verse typically assumes some exclusivist understanding.

In pure proof text form minus any effort at context, Acts 4.12 is often attached to John 14.6. There, Peter is quoted saying, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.” Combined together, the resultant exclusivism seems obvious. But is it what the original writers intended, and should it be our own argumentative outlook today?

John’s gospel account sets our eyes on the relationship of Father and Son from the opening prologue: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and tabernacled in our midst.”² Jesus is not showing us generic God, but *Father*. The context of the last discourse—and chapter 14 in particular—repeatedly announces the intimate relationship of Father and Son. To see one is to see the other (14.9); the Son and the Father are one (14.10). The home the Son is going to prepare is the house of the Father (14.2). They dwell together (v.3). Those who keep the commandments become home to the father and son (14.23). The coming of the Paraclete extends the promise of presence and life, even in the physical absence of Jesus, because Father, Son, and Spirit are always empowering presence (14.16–17). Yes, these words are spoken to the inner circle of disciples, but John obviously intends his overhearing audience to participate fully in these promises. This text is not talking about who gets in or gets left out of Heaven when we die. It is about an invitation to intimate awareness and connection and relationship as revealed in and through Jesus and the Paraclete.

1. A variation of “If you build it, he will come,” the line made famous in the 1989 baseball movie, *Field of Dreams*.

2. John 1.14

We could say the same thing, by the way, about the importance of context with Acts 4.12. In context, the question raised is by what power or in whose name was this paralyzed man “saved” (healed). The answer is there is no power or name other than Jesus by which we must be saved. Yes, Luke is playing on the word *saved* in such a way that we should think beyond physical healing—just as he does with Jesus in the Gospel account. But we cannot miss the content of *salvation* in this particular context as primarily making a physically disabled human being whole. To jump from that to the premise of full exclusion for all who do not participate in Christian initiation rites is a significant leap!

Once we have at least attempted to live within the context of John 14.6 and/or Acts 4.12, there is still the “Now what?” What is it that followers of Christ should do, not do, or say? Here is where my own ability to step out of the enlightenment/post-enlightenment world that I am completely enmeshed in becomes both nearly impossible and absolutely essential.

Some of us lived through a time when salvation was defined by personal escape from hell and promised entrance into heaven either when we die or at least at the last judgment. But for many, the loss of hell as a major threat, combined with the loss of rabid sectarian exclusivism, seems like the death of evangelism. Witness the downright hostile reaction to Rob Bell’s book, *Love Wins*. If love wins, and God is going to invite everyone and everything into whatever “heaven” is in the end, then the urgency of mission seems lost. It does, however, make for pleasant interfaith dialogue because we don’t have to debate anyone anymore.

Somehow, I still believe more is at stake in John 14.6 than this. It has to do with moving beyond our Western, modern, enlightened—however we need to describe it—relegation of religion to my mind. In the case of this I AM statement my job as evangelist is to convince you to think rightly about these words (I am the way, the truth, the life; no one comes to the Father except through me) and agree mentally with the assertion that the brand of Christianity I’m attaching to these words is accurate. Gospel is cognitively announced and received. Whatever it is that we are excluding others from when we quote these texts, faith is a privatized collection of doctrines held in the mind, occasionally coming together with those others who have decided to choose the same collection as me, meeting together for worship that “fits” me once a week.

But in the world and context of the Gospels, especially John’s account, as Gail O’Day says, Jesus is both *access* and *embodiment* of life with God.³ *Belief* in John’s account is much more than mental assent to a set of doctrinal propositions. This is not a doctrine to argue but an embodied relationship to be lived. I’m reminded of the words mythically attributed to Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel; when necessary use words.” We’ve become accustomed in the last few years to the language of incarnational living, to having an incarnational view of Christian life and faith. But we must also have a more organic view of life itself.

I’m convinced that the Gospel is first and foremost the healing of relationships—that the mystery of atonement is not articulated well with judicial metaphors in our time because law and justice have become impersonal, objectified realities unattached to relationships in our world. These atonement metaphors fit in the world of covenant relationships and sacrifices, an organic world in which all of life was connected. In an organic world *blood* is more than a term that drives a doctrine called *substitutionary atonement*. It is *LIFE*. In that fully connected world, Jesus comes as the embodiment of the fully relational life. He gives full humanity—the wholeness of relationship with other human beings—to people who have lost it or never had it in the first place. In overcoming death, he takes down the final barrier to relationships—not just among human beings or between human beings and deity, but all of creation.

Because Jesus has shown us God as Father, because he embodies life with God, we come to the table of human interaction as Paul suggests he himself was changed by his encounter with Christ—while he used to see the world only with fleshly eyes, now in Christ everything is a new creation. How we see other human beings can never again be exclusive. This is not a new level on the hierarchy that leaves us above other human beings until they see it our way: it is organic, incarnational living that does for others what Jesus did. That means that texts like John 14.6 are not articulated as proof texts of superiority. They must be invitationally lived. It is that lived invitation, the embodiment of way, truth, and life that we bring to the world, especially in our conception of evangelism and church. Rather than a text that defends and even sanctifies sectarianism, we are invited with Jesus to become living testimony to God’s gracious gift of access, to what in the end (even in

fate-driven movies like *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*) is all that really matters: relationships. Rather than being a proof text that stops interfaith dialogue or intra-faith conversation before it starts, Jesus invites us into the shared life of all creation with him—an inclusive invitation that opens us to embodied life in the Spirit. That, my friends, is good news!

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