

Pluralism's Question to Christian Missions: Why Jesus at All?

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In Spring of 1997 the Mormons dedicated a new temple in St. Louis, Missouri, and the Bahai community opened their place of worship. Already "at home" before that in St. Louis were Hindu and Buddhist temples and several mosques, plus some twenty additional religious communities alongside those called Christian. And St. Louis is heartland U.S.A. When I was a seminarian here in the fifties it was Lake Wobegon. You were either Lutheran or Catholic. Well, there were some of the other mainliners, but St. Louis was a Catholic and Lutheran town. Not so any more. Religious pluralism is here in the heartland.

So the missionary question has come home to roost. Why Jesus? Why is Jesus necessary—for anyone?

It is a truism to say that the person of Jesus, what he did and said—and what was done to him and said about him—is at the center of what Christians bring to the mission field, whether it is in St. Louis or in Singapore, in Chicago or in Calcutta. When Christians do that, the question inevitably arises in some form or other from the receiver: "Why Jesus? What do you witnesses for your Lord offer with this Jesus that is not already present in our current state of affairs without Jesus?"

The most succinct answer to that question—already from the New Testament times—was the one Greek word *euaggelion*. Rendered in English that is Good News. These two four-lettered English words are at the core of the answer to “Why Jesus?” With Jesus comes something Good and something New.

An amateur’s overview

For twenty years I’ve been roaming as an amateur—maybe even as an alien, since I’m supposed to be a systematic theologian—within the American Society of Missiology, and its international counterpart, the International Association of Mission Studies. I’ve learned that answering the “Why Jesus?” question nowadays inevitably pushes you to take a position about Jesus in relation to other religions in today’s marketplace. Today’s missiologists, the folks who do mission study as their daily work, talk about three options: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

Exclusivism says: Jesus is the only savior. No other savior, no other religion, saves at all. There is only one way to the top of the mountain of salvation.

Inclusivism says: Jesus is the salvation in all its fullness; the salvation offered in other religions is not contrary but included in what Jesus brings. All the roads up the mountain are in some basic sense Jesus-ways. The way that calls him by name illuminates best what the other ways are all about.

Pluralism says: Jesus is one way up the mountain; there are many other ways going up there, and they get you to the top, too.

Recently missiology studies are challenging this “establishment” threefold set of options. One example is S. Mark Heim’s 1996 book *Salvations*. Note the plural “s.” Heim says not all religions are climbing the same mountain. There are many

different mountains of salvation. Jesus is the way to the top of the Christian mountain. But Buddhists are climbing a different mountain. Nirvana is not the kingdom of God. That said, Heim does not dispute that Buddhism is the way for achieving Nirvana. Hinduism has its mountain, and so forth. But these are different mountains, different salvations.

A fundamental axiom in missiology today. Setting Heim aside for the moment, it seems to me that the dominant paradigm in the threefold set of the earlier “-isms” is rooted in the scholastic tradition of Western Christian theology. Even with such roots in a distinctively Roman Catholic theological tradition, it is widely accepted across today’s ecumenical spectrum. I suggest that the axiom underlying all three options in the triad is the formula: *gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfecit*. Literally: grace does not remove or abolish nature, but perfects it. For us that says: What God’s grace (including the Good News about Jesus) offers is not a replacement for what is naturally present but a fulfilling of what is already there. God’s grace latches on to something already good, though not as good as it could be, and by appropriating what is already there God’s grace brings it to completeness, to 100% full-goodness.

All three of the going “-isms” build on this nature-grace premise. Exclusivism uses it to say: What’s new in Jesus is that only in him is saving grace present to bring lost human nature to the perfection God intends for it. Inclusivists, starting from the same premise, see the grace present in Jesus also present in other religions, and in all cases grace is bringing nature to perfection. What is “good” in Jesus and distinctively new is that he is grace in absolute fullness, the perfect fullness of God’s grace. Pluralists see grace present in all religions, perfecting human-kind and the world in a plurality of ways. There is nothing so distinctively new or good in Jesus that is not available elsewhere as well.

This grace/nature axiom is regularly linked in today's mission theology to a revelationist framework for all of theology. God's self-revelation is understood to be what all religious searchers are seeking. If religions were to be rated, the one offering more of God's revelation would be preferred. But at present that very point is what's disputed. Yes, even the exclusivist will grant God's self-revelation in some other religions, but will deny that it is sufficient for salvation. The inclusivist and pluralist find more of God's self-revelation in other religions, even granting—as pluralists do by definition—that it is sufficient for salvation. When revelationist-minded Christians are asked "Why Jesus?" they respond: "In him we Christians have experienced God's gracious self-revelation in all its fullness. Thus we call Jesus Lord."

The reformers' alternative. Sixteenth century Reformation theology did not directly dispute the nature-grace axiom, as far as I know, but in its Lutheran confessional writings—and in Luther too—it basically replaced it. One reason for the replacement was that there was no biblical term that fit what Greek philosophy called "nature." A second was that a "grace" which perfected such "nature" was not what the New Testament called the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," a.k.a. "the power of God for salvation to those who trust it."

In its place (for relating what was good and new in Jesus to what God was already doing throughout human history) Lutheran theology offered its own axiom of the distinction between God's work designated "law" and God's work designated "gospel." In the earlier Lutheran confessions of 1530 and 1531 the paired terms are law and promise, St. Paul's favored set of opposites. This alternate Reformation axiom has scarcely been exploited, even by Lutheran missiologists, for its mission theology potential. What follows is an attempt to get started on the project.

Every ideology, every -ism, every religion offers to help people move from a bad situation to a better one, from perceived "un-heil" (not-healed) to "heil" (healing). All claim to have "good news" for humankind. Implicit in such offers is the conviction that people need help, that they've got a problem, a serious one.

Using the alternative with St. Paul as partner. From the earliest times disciples of Jesus used the word "gospel" (=good news) as the label for what they had received in their own encounter with Jesus and what they had to offer. Their good news was good and new for other people as well. They too had to answer—and had an answer—when asked: What was "good" about Jesus, and what was "new" about him?

The question in New Testament times came from two different directions: the Jewish faith community and Hellenistic religions. Christians in those days had to show how their good news measured up to these long-time favorites. To give some initial content to these two options I shall use St. Paul's own designations in 1 Corinthians. Judaism sought "signs" (signals for fulfilling God's law, ethical power) while Hellenism looked for "wisdom" (insight into the world we live in; how things really are, with an ethic appropriate to such wisdom). And each of these two offered their own good news for how to achieve what was sought.

People already practicing (and trusting?) these two options were not easily persuaded that the Christian good news was either good or new. St. Paul in the N.T. documents promoted the Christian gospel to both groups. He did not always succeed. Look at his track record in the book of Acts, or in his epistles. He was not an obvious winner either in Jewish synagogues or in Greek forums around the Mediterranean basin.

In the epistles from his hand we see him working out theological support for the goodness and the newness of the Christian gospel vis-à-vis these two major competitors. These epistles are not verbatim reports of his missionary witness to people committed to these two basic alternatives. Rather they are addressed to audiences who already claim to be Christian, but who in Paul's diagnosis of them are often moving back (have already moved back) into the Judaism or Hellenism where once they were at home. Doubtless he had given a clear answer to the question, "Why Jesus?" What is good and new in Jesus?" in his original missionary preaching to these audiences. Yet it apparently didn't stick, so he is constrained to do it again. In many instances from his epistles we see that his mission congregations ostensibly see nothing so new or so good in Jesus that it cannot be merged with the good news they enjoyed in their previous Judaism or Hellenism.

In Paul's theology throughout his epistles, even when we grant the important differences of their various contexts, he claims at least two "new" elements in the message he preached. Of these two only one is actually "good news," and the other is basically "bad." Yet you don't enjoy the goodness of the good news unless you come to terms with the badness of the bad news. It's like a wonder drug for some rare disease. If you are afflicted with that rare disease, you won't see how good the wonder drug really is unless and until you come to terms with how bad the disease is that afflicts you. And it may even be that only after being healed will you say: "I now see how sick I really was."

One new element within Paul's preached theology is a deeper diagnosis. Paul sets the gauge on his theological X-ray machine to get a picture *de profundis*, out of the depths, at the deepest level of human need for salvation. That X-ray exposes "un-heil" to be more drastic than either the Judaism of his own earlier years had acknowledged or the Hellenism of the world he traveled

in had discovered. That deeper diagnosis was itself new, though hardly good. But it was a piece with, a corollary to, the more profound good news he proposed alongside it. That was, of course, the gospel of Jesus, the good news about Jesus, for Jews and for Greeks, something both *good* and *new*. This Jesus was “good enough,” he claimed, to meet and treat the diagnosis *de profundis* that finally God’s own X-ray brings to light.

It might be argued that in Paul’s own life he first encountered the goodness of the Good News in his Damascus encounter with the risen Christ, and then extrapolated how bad the bad news must be. But we do not have enough clear signals in Paul’s own writings to reconstruct how that all happened. At one place he does ‘fess up to the fact that he “didn’t know what sin really was,” until he bumped into the “Thou shalt not covet” commandment (Rom 7.7). Paul surely had learned that commandment on his way to being “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil 3.5). Perhaps both came at once: Christ gifting Paul with faith-righteousness at the same time as the scales fell from his eyes to see his own original sin, a life of coveting the law’s righteousness.

In Luke’s report of Paul’s sermon to a Jewish audience (Acts 13.39)—even if not Paul’s *verba ipsissima*—we have in one sentence a summary of the good and the new about Jesus that does recur throughout Paul’s epistles: “Through him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.” This could well have been Paul’s linchpin for answering the Why Jesus question to Jewish audiences. As good as the Law of Moses is—and Paul never denigrates it—there is one thing it was incapable of doing: justifying sinners. That good and new thing comes with Jesus.

Some help from Westermann. Without getting into an extensive excursus on the full meaning of “justifying sinners,” we are helped by recalling Claus Westermann’s insight into Hebrew

anthropology so evident in the Psalms (and articulated in Westermann's commentary on them). Humans are created for living in three primordial relationships:

Relationship #1: to others (relationships to the outside) [R-1];

Relationship #2: to self (relationship to the inside) [R-2];

Relationship #3: to their creator (relationship to God) [R-3].

Primal among these primordial relationships, of course, is R-3. The fractures at R-2 and R-1 result from it. To be healed or not-healed at R-3 constitutes the root of being healed or not-healed in the other two—inside and outside—relationships. And conversely, sickness or health at R-1 and R-2 is symptomatic of the health/unhealthy at the root, the God-side. It is the X-ray of the God-side of our human selves that goes beyond, goes deeper than, what Paul had come to see in the Judaism of his upbringing.

God's promissory words and actions culminating in the Good News about Jesus are the actual healing. A classic articulation thereof is Paul's claim in 2 Cor 5.19 using the language of commerce: "God was in Christ balancing the world's account with himself, not reckoning people's sins against them." The mechanics of the transaction were also economic (v. 21): "God made Christ who had no sin [on his account] to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Luther recognized the fundamental economic picture here when he designated this "der frohlicher Wechsel," the joyful exchange.

Consequences for missiology

So "Why Jesus?" Only in him is God not reckoning sins to sinners' accounts, as God otherwise regularly does. In Jesus the Christ, God offers sinners a joyful exchange: the sin of sinners

is assumed by Christ, Christ's righteousness becomes the sinner's possession. Christians claim that Jesus is necessary for R-3 healing, and they know of no other kerygma that even makes that offer. The Christian gospel claims that healing of this primal fracture is a very costly transaction. It necessitated a crucified and risen Messiah Jesus. Bonhoeffer is right. It is "*teuere Gnade*," costly grace.

With that healing comes an entirely new prognosis, a new future, for the formerly sick one. And therewith comes another aspect of the "newness" of the gospel of Jesus. Especially vis-à-vis the alternative of Jewish religion, Paul hyped freedom. First, the grace in Jesus was a free gift with no prerequisites. Second, the life it engendered, the ethics of life in grace, had no post-requisites, either, no *ex-post-facto* "you gotta's." In ethics that too is good and new.

In dialogue with other healing proposals of our day, whether secular ones from our Western culture or the gospels of other world religions, Christian conversation partners should push the discussion to the R-3 agenda. This is not to be pessimistic, but to hear how any alternate gospel diagnoses this primal malady—if at all—and how it offers healing.

Secular gospels do not address the R-3 malady at all, for they doubt that it exists in reality. If people so claim some "God-problem," secular gospels regularly relocate it to the level of R-2 and diagnose it as illusion or neurosis. Before one can answer "Why Jesus?" here, Christians will push dialogue partners to greater depth in their own diagnosis of the human malady. Otherwise Jesus is indeed unnecessary.

There is a parallel here with classical Buddhism, I believe. Buddhism balks at seeing any genuine R-3 "bad news" at all in human historical terms. That is true, say Buddhists, because the

human “self” is the problem, and any God-figure is but another Self to whom my self is related. Sorry to say, all that is illusion. Buddhism’s diagnosis of humankind’s problem goes only to the point of R-2 desires and R-1 suffering arising from that libidinous root. Here too the Good News of the crucified and risen Jesus is unnecessary. But, of course, the Christian claim is that the diagnosis is too shallow.

In conversation during my guest-teaching stint in Ethiopia (1995) with seminary students coming originally from African Traditional Religions—where R-3 agenda (God- problems) is daily-life experience—I learned that the sacrificial systems for “justifying sinners” in their home culture never liberated them from the system itself. Sin always recurred, and the system of required sacrifice never stopped. With no coaxing, their answer to “Why Jesus?” was like the apostle’s words in Acts 13: “Sins are never *forgiven* in transactions with the spirits; they are paid for. The good and the new about Jesus is sins forgiven and with him comes freedom from the payback system itself.”

Later that year in a seminar in the USA a man was describing how greatly he had been helped in his own healing by “therapy” from psychological and psychiatric professionals. I expected him to conclude from the way he was talking that he had no need for Jesus. But I asked him anyhow: “So what’s your answer, John, to the ‘Why Jesus’ question?” His response (with no prompting): “To get my sins forgiven. Therapy doesn’t do that, can’t do that.”

Some initial conclusions

Back to St. Paul’s words about God’s new economy, namely, God’s balancing accounts with sinners not by counting their trespasses but by accounting sin to the crucified Jesus in the “joyful exchange” and then vindicating Jesus at Easter. This economy is not really a “fuller” revelation of God than is encountered in

God's other trespass-counting economy, including God's economy operating in other world religions. Isn't it rather something qualitatively new and different from what even Christians experience in their encounter with God's other economy in daily life? Does the joyful exchange have any genuine parallel in the goodness that is admittedly present in God's first economy, and also in what God's economy is doing in other religions?

Isn't it fundamental to the Christian gospel that it is genuinely "new wine"? If so, might that not lead to triumphalism in just a different way? Not necessarily. The Christian gospel's claim to having "better" good news is not that "We've got something better than you." No, Christian good news is linked to a realism about a "worse" diagnosis of the human bad news. Sin is more than R-1 loveless behavior, more also than R-2 wickedness in the human heart. Sin's primal reality is the sinner's God-problem [R-3], the chronic malady of not fearing, loving, or trusting God, and substituting self-fear, love, and trust in its place. The Christian claim is: "R-3 healing is needed. R-3 healing is possible. We have a story about how it happens."

That story tells of the crucified and risen Jesus, that suffices to forgive, to justify, sinners with their God-problem. Other religions—secular, new, classical, or even Christian permutations—that ignore or deny R-3 diagnosis have no real need for the gospel's Jesus. If there are any proposals in today's religious marketplace, proposals that diagnose the human malady to its R-3 depths, they need to be listened to. And if a religion doing such depth diagnosis should also claim to have sufficient good news to fix that malady apart from the Jesus of the New Testament, that gospel would be a genuine challenge to the Christian good news.

If alternate religions with their alternate gospels are not

coping with the R-3 reality, they are scaling a different mountain. Heim just might be right—different religions, different mountains. The Good News about Jesus makes no bones about how bad the bad news is. It does not make a mole hill out of the mountain called sin. But it is not pessimism that animates Christian diagnosis about the deadly mountain that needs scaling. It is finally the Christian good news that urges such a diagnosis. It is the good news that on a particular mount outside a city set on Mount Zion, this diagnostic mountain was scaled by the crucified and risen Jesus. That's not to say, "Good for Jesus! He made it to the top!" It's also good for sinners trusting Jesus. Such sinners are now home free, free to scale this mountain into the presence of God—finally free to climb every mountain.

[Pluralism \(PDF\)](#)