

“All Paths Lead To Selo”

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John 14:1-14

“I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” [John 14:6]

We reached the summit at dawn. My companions and I were climbing the extinct volcano, Mt. Merbabu in Central Java some years ago. Coming up the Northern slope, we had spent most of the night on dark, unmarked tracks with only the light of the moon to guide us. We arrived bone-weary, thirsty and hungry. We collapsed for an all-too-short rest before descending on the other side.

My traveling companions for the climb were truly incomparable: Gerry and Helene Van Klinken, Australians, now doing human rights advocacy in the Netherlands, and their son Ben; and Ward Keeler and bride. Ward who was then an itinerate academic but who is now a professor of anthropology at the University of Texas, Ward is fluent in Javanese, both the language and culture.

After a rest and after breathing and bathing in the extraordinarily beautiful vistas, we began the descent down the Southern side, hoping to reach the small village of Selo in time to catch the last bus when it passed through that afternoon. If we missed the bus (literally!) we would be stranded for the night on the mountain.

We are above the clouds looking toward the next volcano ~ Mt. Merapi, the world’s most active volcano, puffing out wisps of smoke and poking up through a cottony layer of white clouds ~ the morning sun reflecting off the billowy surfaces. It was gorgeous and splendiferous and mysteriously silent. We were





making decent time until we descended into those morning clouds and found ourselves engulfed in fog. We became completely disoriented. We lost all sense of direction.

Getting increasingly anxious, we happened upon a Javanese farmer cutting grass to feed his animals. So pointing to one footpath going down the mountain and disappearing into the fog, Ward Keeler asked "Does this path lead to Selo?" The answer came back "nge" ~ "yes." Just to be sure, he asked again. Same answer, "nge" ~ "yes."

Knowing well the dilemma presented in Javanese by the cultural aversion to ever saying "no," Ward tested the concept by point up the mountain in the direction from which we had just come. "Is this the path to Selo?" "Nge" ~ "Yes" West? East? North? South? The answer was always the same: "Yes." We were indeed lost. Or....

Apparently all paths lead to Selo.

If all paths lead to Selo, then does it follow by analogy, do all paths lead to God? Could Christians of diverging views from ours be on the path to God ~ just a different path, maybe longer, maybe shorter? Could Catholics and Methodists and Eastern Orthodox and Pentecostal Holiness and Seventh Day Adventists be on the path to God? Most of us would say "Yes" without flinching.



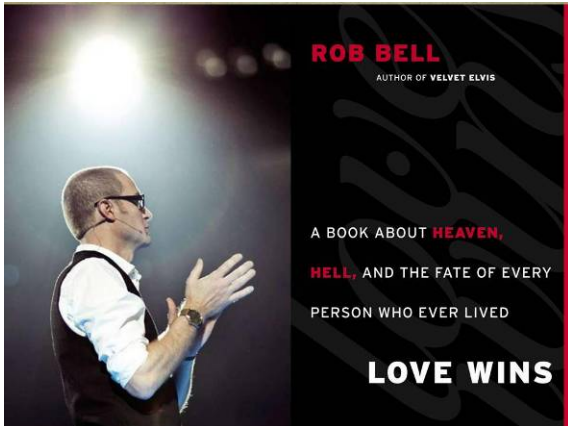
Where do we draw the line? Could persons of other religions, also ultimately be on the path to God? Could Buddhists and Muslims and Jews and Hindus be on the path to God ~ just a different path, maybe longer, maybe shorter? Could even Mormons? . . . I don't know. Where do we draw the line? Better question is: where does God draw the line?

This may seem a rather esoteric problem ~ unrelated to regular everyday questions. But believe it or not, this question comes up quite often in pastoral conversations. In this day of relative diversity, quite

surprisingly to me, many folks wonder aloud and ask their pastor whether their Catholic brother, their Buddhist cousin, their Muslim neighbor is in God's plan of salvation. This is a burning question in daily ministry.

This is a burning question for the whole Church as well. Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill mega-church, has wrestled with this very

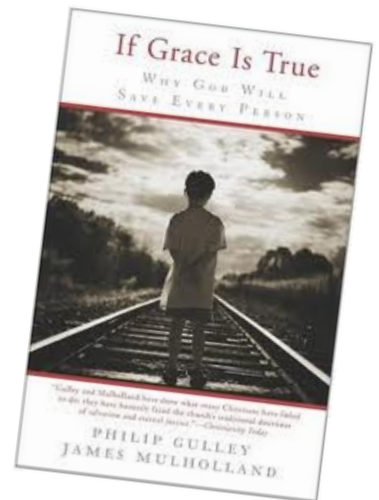
question in his controversial book *Love Wins*.¹ Why it is so controversial is that in it he rejects the idea of eternal torment for among others, non-Christians. He bases this on his view that the doctrine of hell turns the essential Gospel message "of love, peace, forgiveness and joy that our world desperately needs to hear;" instead it turns that great message of love into a



message of fear. He's right.

Another recent book is *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*.² In it Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland, two Quaker pastors, make the case that if God is who we claim God to be, a God of love and grace, then for a forgiving God, all paths lead to God.

- Their first illustration is a heart-wrenching story of a woman plagued with poor decisions and poorer choices who struggled with addictions but who was in recovery and well on the road to getting her life on track when she died. But she hadn't formally or informally accepted Jesus. Where was she in relation to God? Was she a woman on the way back to a gracious God, or was she outside the salvation circle?



The two Quakers conclude that all paths including this woman's lead back to God.

There is a name for the idea that everyone is ultimately in God's salvation plan, that none are condemned ~ since in essence all paths lead to Selo, that following our analogy all paths of faith

ultimately lead to God. That Hell may exist, but if it does it is empty. This idea has a name: **Universalism**.

Universalism has been declared heretical by Councils of the Church down through the millennia starting with the Council of Nicea. However it never seems go out of fashion. Witness the book and books like *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* seventeen centuries after it was supposedly settled.

The Church's answer from at least the Nicene Council on has been a resounding "No!" The doctrines of most Churches teach some form or other of "*outside the Church there is no salvation.*" The default position of Christianity is exclusivity.

The cardinal text put forward in support of these assertions and doctrines is from our Gospel text today, John 14:6:

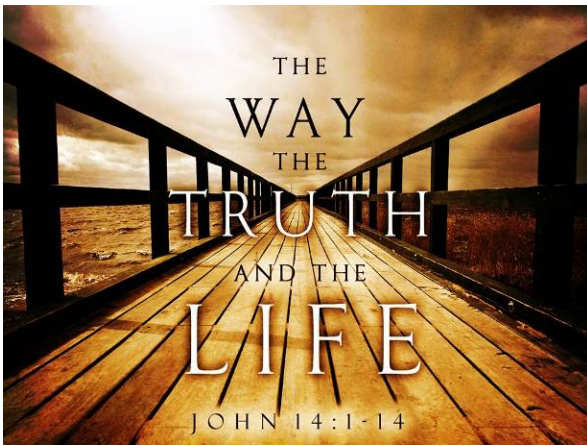
"I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

So we have these two contradictory views. Now, I'm not saying that I endorse the universalist position articulated by Bell, Gullely and Mulholland, but they do have a crimp on a truth ~ at least a part of God's whole truth. They rightly point out a paradox in the traditional understanding.

However, universalism seems to be contradicted by our text today. John 14:6 is the cardinal text supporting an exclusive claim of salvation only through Christ, a "One Way Jesus:" ***"I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*** This very exclusive claim seems to belie the very love and faithfulness of God which is the core of the Gospel message of Jesus.



John 14:6 would seem to exclude Jews, and Mormons, and Buddhists, and Sikhs, and Baha'i's, and Muslims, and Hindus, and all others from God's plan of salvation. This text would seem to erect an iron curtain, an unassailable barrier, an immovable wall around God's courtyard.



And the only way to pass into the garden within is through the door labeled Jesus.

All Christians must indeed take seriously the plain meaning of this text *“no one comes to the Father except through me.”* But is this God’s last word?

What is the first rule of Bible Interpretation?

- The first and most important rule of Bible interpretation: **Interpret Scripture by Scripture** ~ interpret individual Scripture by the whole of Scripture.

Clearly the way back to God from just this text taken by itself means knowing Jesus. But with Scripture interpreting Scripture, Jesus elsewhere in John’s own Gospel makes these inclusive claims:

- John 3:17. Right after John 3:16 (*“God so loved the world. . .”*) the Bible says Jesus came *“not to condemn the world, but in order that the World might be saved”*
- John 12:32: *“And I, when I am lifted up [on the cross], will draw all people to myself.”*
- John 12:47: *“I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.”*
- John 10:16: *“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.”*

How do we reconcile and balance the exclusive claim of John 14:6 (*“no one comes to the Father except through me”*) with these more inclusive claims from Jesus himself elsewhere in John? How do we reconcile the exclusive-sounding claim of John 14:6 with the whole Gospel which is a message of God’s radical inclusion ~ emphatically not a message of exclusion?

The answer, our best answer is to affirm in the strongest terms that Jesus is my savior, our savior and savior of the world. We know that from Scripture. Yet at the same time from other scriptures we must affirm in the same strongest terms that we are agnostic, we simply don’t

know, God has not imparted to us what God has in mind for those “other sheep” of which Jesus speaks. And we know with absolute certainty that we can trust God to do the right thing.

This is the essence of the message of the 214th GA of the PCUSA which wrestled with these seemingly contradictory Bible passages and the question of who is in and who is outside of God’s plan. The GA took into account all the paradoxes we have discussed and made a Biblically faithful and theologically sound claim in *Hope in The Lord Jesus Christ*.

No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of “God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved.” . . . Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.³

The GA document, rather wordy as usual, is summarized well in the words of C. S. Lewis the great defender of Christian Orthodoxy in the Twentieth Century. Lewis gives a succinct and wonderful summary of what we really know about salvation from Scripture:

“We do know that no [one] can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”⁴

Good Reformed Theology. This understanding avoids the tendency of universalism to including too many compared to those God would include, over against the exclusivist’s tendency to include too few.

This understanding from Christian leaders is emphatically not universalism. Where the GA comes out on this is in good company ~ the understanding of the GA and C. S. Lewis is not even as radical as Karl Barth’s belief.

Barth goes to the very edge of claiming universalism but stops short. He concludes that God’s love is the most powerful force in life and death but we humans cannot say, are not privy to the information about who may be punished or whether anyone is condemned by God.⁵



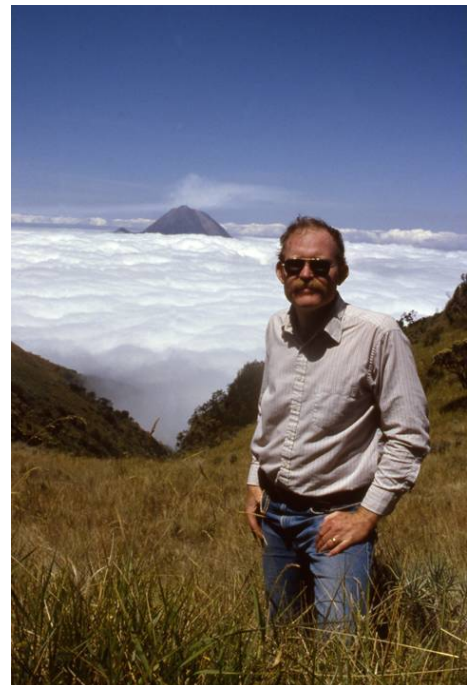
C. S. Lewis explores these ideas even further in *The Great Divorce*. Through a narrative about a soul which travels from hell to heaven, Lewis concludes that our gracious God gives second chances to everyone – even after death! – and that hell is filled with persons who with full information of heaven and hell have chosen to be there. Many others as well take similar views, including several rising lights of Emergent Churches such as Tim Keel of Jacob’s Well Church in Kansas City. Provocative thoughts all!

Do all paths lead to God? The best answer, the Reformed answer, the right answer is “God knows!!” It’s in God’s hands, not ours ~ thank God!! We can speculate about what God will do, is doing with people of other faiths, but it is only speculation. Who really decides? God decides. It is ultimately in God’s hands and God’s hands alone.

In our General Assembly’s words, “Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.”⁶ Whew, it is not our responsibility. Thankfully it is not our decision, not in our hands, not ours to speculate. And we do know what we are called to do: not speculate about others but rather we are only responsible for ourselves: to know God. And we do know God from the Bible to be a gracious, compassionate and loving God. We bear witness to the path through Jesus God has revealed to us.

Back to my tired, thirsty, hungry and lost party on Mt. Merbabu. Isn’t that just like trying to live life on God’s path. Things are so clear on the brilliant light at the summit, but when we try to make that to work in our regular living, it all becomes a great fog and we easily lose our way. We look for guides and get ambiguous answers. We have great difficulty in following the path God has chosen for us.

On that mountain trek, all paths did indeed lead to Selo ~ only problem was the one we chose in our confusion took us so far out of the way that we arrived on the main road an hour too late for the last scheduled bus of the day. But God be praised the last bus was even later.



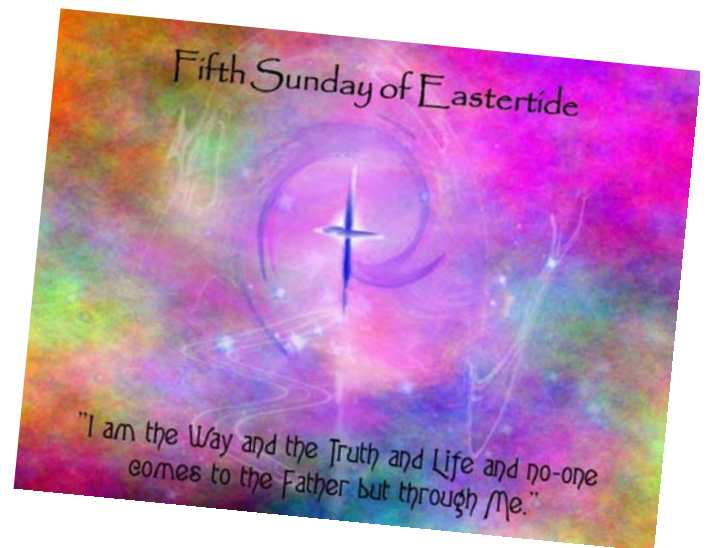


Isn't that just like on God's path? However disoriented and bewildered, lost and late we are, we do reach the bus!! God has called us and chosen us to take the Jesus path. Many have chosen different paths, some in Jesus' name, and some in other alien names. But we are assured that however long or short the route in Jesus' name, we will still make it home safe. As for those on those other paths, we truly do not know. It is in God's hands.

However disoriented and bewildered, lost and late we are in our living, we can still be welcomed safe home!! Even if we get off on the wrong path, God still longs for and works for our return to the right path. We know this to be true because it is all in God's hands, not ours. And we know God of the Scriptures to be a gracious, compassionate and loving God who sent Jesus ahead to forge the path for each of us.

Jesus is the path-finder, Jesus is the way-maker, Jesus is the pace-setter – for all!

How do we know? Because the Bible tells us so.



¹ Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (Harper One, 2011)

² Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (HarperCollins, 2003)

³ 214th GA of the Presbyterian Church USA, *Hope in The Lord Jesus Christ*

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* p. 65

⁵ James Ayers "The paradox of predestination" *Presbyterians Today* 2011 Special Issue: What Presbyterians Believe, p. 52

⁶ 214th GA of the Presbyterian Church USA, *Hope in The Lord Jesus Christ*