

A Biblical Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions

Introduction

Mr. Howard Burkle, a United Church of Christ professor of religious studies, postulates these often-asked questions: “Can Christianity accept itself as simply one of the world’s many religions? Can it regard other religions as valid alternative pathways to salvation? Can it do this without giving up its conviction that Christianity is unique and decisive for the salvation of humankind?”

Burkle’s answer to these questions is a definitive “yes.” However, the Bible-believing Christian must reply with an equally resounding “no.” Christianity is like no other religion in its basic tenets: the crucifixion and resurrection of God, who was made man. It can, therefore, accept no other way as a legitimate means to reach God.

The Bible supports this conclusion. Christ said of Himself, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). John also records, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36). Similarly, Luke wrote, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Since Christianity is unique and incompatible with other religions, how should Christians respond to those of different faiths? What should be the proper biblical attitude toward those who adhere to and teach heretical doctrines?

Essential Content to Share with Other Faiths

Believers often deal with non-Christian religions in one of two extremes. The first extreme (noted above) is syncretism, while the second is isolationism. Syncretism is an “all roads lead to God” perspective that places the way of salvation offered by Christ no better or worse than the means of salvation provided by any other religion. Isolationism, on the other hand, denies any interaction with those of different faiths since it is based on a “once you’ve got what you are looking for, why look elsewhere?” kind of attitude. Both extremes should be avoided. The better approach is one of engagement or dialogue.

Romans 1 is perhaps the best chapter to show God’s view of other religions. Verse 18 reveals that the religions of the world have come about not because of man’s *ignorance* but because of his stubborn refusal to believe what God has already revealed about himself: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness *suppress* the truth” (italics mine). This rejected truth relates explicitly to an innate knowledge of God’s existence as the powerful creator of the world (v. 20). This truth is common to all persons, each of whom can see the order and beauty of the universe. This is also why an atheistic civilization has yet to be discovered.

Therefore, when seeking to reach someone from another religion (or an atheist), the most important concept to teach is the correct view of God Himself. Who is He? This can be especially illustrated in the creation account, for here we see an all-powerful, totally righteous God who creates only good things—and the best of the “good things” is man himself. God has made us in His own image and as a result desires fellowship with us. This focus on creation can help us lay the theological foundation on which to build a proper understanding of salvation in Christ.

Basic Behavior to Show to Other Faiths

A proper, biblical attitude towards non-Christian religions concerns far more than simply content. This is why we call it an “attitude.” In all our seriousness about Christ being the only way to God, we must be careful to communicate this narrow teaching with love and a non-judgmental spirit. Non-Christians must see a great deal of graciousness in us. We must declare truth lovingly while reserving God's right to judge.

Christians have a very defined and exclusive message. Communication of this narrow message calls for the utmost tact. We must be committed to proclaiming the truth, but even truth can wear an ugly garment. This is where the over-used cliché, “Love the sinner but not the sin,” has merit. While doing this, we must be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19b). We must keep our focus on the right issue—not belittle the person who follows a false system, but expose the error of the system itself.

Paul's careful approach to the Greek philosophers of his day showed this proper approach to pagan religion (read Acts 17). He explained to these men of Athens in terms they could understand—and yet he did it in a way that they were not offended. The issues were made clear, though not as straightforward as they could have been (which would have turned his listeners off). These people worshipped a God whom they knew nothing about, and Paul became a spokesman for that God. He did not harangue them. He gave evidence for his claim; while some sneered, others believed. Interestingly, Luke's account of Paul's speech never uses any names for Jesus Christ. The message was more important than a name.

Conclusion

In summary, a biblical attitude towards non-Christian religions begins with the truth. The fact is that Christianity cannot compromise its uniqueness to become compatible with other religions. God never asked us to be compatible—only to be separate and distinct. This uniqueness is not something for which the Christian should apologize, though. He should communicate the message of Christ first in terms of the character of God and always in a spirit of love and humility.