

Religion or Relationship?

About seven years ago, I left the sect and was at spiritual ‘ground zero’, where I asked, “Well, what **do** I believe? Does God exist, even?” Thankfully, one thing I did gain from the sect was an increased focus on Jesus in the Gospels – a quick look at my Bible, and you’ll see which bit is most heavily thumbed.

As I was in the process of rebuilding my faith, maybe two years in, I was in my ground-floor office (the ex dining room): “Would you like a cup of coffee?” said a relation by marriage. I stuck my head through the hatch into the kitchen to respond. And a second question followed fairly quickly: “Paul, how did you become a Christian?”

I briefly explained to the two family members, but very quickly the conversation moved to, “How can you say that Jesus is the **only** way to God?” and I can’t remember the exact wording but the essence was that this is an arrogant and unreasonable claim. For 20–25 minutes (still with my head through the hatch!) I squirmed and struggled to justify John 14:7, of which they were able to quote “no-one comes to the father except through me”. But, thankfully, Sue arrived back from Brownies and the subject changed. Phew!

Well, what would **you** have said?! I tried to focus on the fact that it was Jesus as a person that I was so impressed by, and because he was such an amazing person, I had to accept what he said. But it didn’t change the fact that those were his words, and it does seem totally unreasonable, on the face of it: “Christians are right and everyone else is wrong” – end of story!

Fast forward to this past two years, where I’ve (re-)discovered the incredible joy of a relationship with God – the God who IS relationship. And now that I feel so much more secure in God’s amazing love, I have recently felt able to revisit this difficult topic. In my essays, I’ve been mulling over the idea of ‘faithful questioning’ of the Scriptures, rather than just blindly obeying what I’ve always been taught to believe, all these (48) years.

I remember an eye-opening (and eye-watering!) sermon on the parable of the sower. “We’ve heard sermons on this passage SO many times! Will you pray with me that God will actually teach us something new today?” We did, and God did. My summary: “God’s a totally rubbish farmer! He chucks the seed willy-nilly, all over the place – he doesn’t seem to worry where the seed goes. It would have been SO much more sensible to have carefully placed the seed only in the good soil.” But that’s not what God’s like! He loves us SO much that he’ll take every possible opportunity to reach us; he’s willing to ‘waste’ seed just so long as there’s some chance that we’ll respond.

Add to that Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, which has become **such** an important parable to me. But hang on! Why do we call it ‘the prodigal son’? I think it should be called ‘the prodigal father’. Look at the Oxford dictionary’s definition of ‘prodigal’: (1) Spending money or using resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant. (2) Having or giving something on a lavish scale.

Yes, yes, yes! That’s what God is like, isn’t it?... Well, isn’t it?!

Can you see what we've done to that parable? We've turned it the wrong way round. It's not about son – and anyway, what about the other son? It's not about how we need to repent and turn away from our sin. It's about God's grace, his totally unreasonable, unfair GRACE. It's about how he's totally over the top in the way he behaves, searching for the son, and then racing down the road when he gets the slightest indication that the son is heading in his direction. And it's also about how he tries to show his grace to the older brother too – to those who have been “doing the right thing all these years”, and it seems like God's been ignoring us. No, he hasn't! “Everything I have is yours!” says the father. He loves both sons desperately, desperately!

Sorry, this isn't very coherent, but hopefully you see where I'm at. God loves and loves and loves, and gives and gives and gives, totally unreasonably, says Jesus. That's what the father is like. That's the relationship we're invited into. And then it's from the security of that relationship that we can look at – ‘faithfully question’ – some of the Bible passages that we find difficult.

I've run out of time to deal with John 14:7, except to say that, in wrestling with it, I've also looked at the only other ‘exclusivist’ claim that I can find (can you suggest any others?), Acts 4:12 “no other name under heaven...by which you must be saved”, and I've also added in Acts 2:38–40 (esp. v.40). So, here's your homework. Fill in this table:

	To whom is it addressed? And what's the essential message?	To whom do we try to apply it? And what main point do we draw from it?
John 14:7		
Acts 4:12		
Acts 2:40		
Bonus work: (Luke 15:11-31)		

For what it's worth, my notes on the subject are on the next page.

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	To whom is it addressed? And what's the essential message?	To whom do we try to apply it? And what main point do we draw from it? (Please forgive a little over-statement here.)
John 14:7	<i>Jesus' very closest followers, who'd followed him through thick and thin and were about to go through some severe testing. He is the way (the one to follow), the truth (full of grace and truth) and the life (in all its fullness – so feed on him); if you want a relationship (and they did, desperately) with the father then it's through Jesus... and the Holy Spirit, as he says in almost the same breath.</i>	<i>People who don't believe in Jesus (and those who haven't even heard of him?).</i> The only way to be saved is by believing in Jesus. No Jesus, no salvation.
Acts 4:12	<i>The religious (Jewish) leaders. By thinking they had got God all sorted out and by trying to enforce their ideas on other people, they had ended up opposing God and had killed Jesus.</i>	<i>People who don't believe in Jesus.</i> The only way to be saved is by believing in Jesus. No Jesus, no salvation.
Acts 2:40 (+v.38)	<i>“This corrupt generation” = the religious establishment: the ‘Church’ of the day. Avoid religion like the plague! ‘Repent’ = turn away from religion and be baptised = enter into a new</i>	<i>The godless people of today's society.</i> They need to turn their backs on their godlessness and join the church, where people do their very best not to do the kind of awful things that ruin today's society.

	relationship with God (whom you can't see) through Jesus (whom you can see – well, they could have seen, and we have eye-witness accounts to read).	
(Luke 15:11-31)	<i>Everyone with even the slightest interest in Jesus.</i> God loves you more than you could ever imagine, whether you run away from God or whether you stick with him but are super-grumpy! He loves you anyway, and loves and loves!	<p><i>Unbelievers who have turned their back on God and done some terrible things.</i></p> <p>They need to repent of the things they have done wrong, and because God loves them he'll allow them back into his family.</p> <p>And the older son? Well, I guess we need to be careful not to complain when we work hard for God and yet we don't seem to get much thanks. God <i>does</i> love us really.</p>

How awful it would be if, with the best of motives, we became like the Pharisees (the elder brother?) trying to work out and tell people how they need to come to church, believe in Jesus, and then they can do what pleases God.

I think I'd sum up Jesus' teaching as a tirade against RELIGION and a relentless pursuit of us, to help us know how we can have abundant life – a RELATIONSHIP with God, through Jesus and through the Holy Spirit.

RELIGION	RELATIONSHIP
Fear	Love / Worship
Shame	Restoration / Adoption
Estrangement	Reconciliation
Isolation	Community / Communion
Rejection	Acceptance
Worthlessness	Supreme value
Punishment	Forgiveness (repeated)
Exact meaning ('letter')	Spirit
Doing	Being
Speaking	Listening
Obedience	Faithful questioning
Wrath	Grace
Word	Spirit
Discriminating right and wrong	Enemy love