

222 A genuine enquiry

Today's article is by way of a genuine enquiry; I don't pretend to have an answer, though I do have a feeling of direction.

What kind of person would you say the human Jesus was? How does he strike you when you read through the pages of the Gospels? I think it's difficult *not* to see him as an inclusive sort of person, a welcoming sort of person.

Look how he repeatedly defies convention and gives a high priority to women (definitely counter-cultural), to children, to Samaritans, to lepers and other social outcasts, to adulteresses – but we never find out what he said to the **man** who was also 'caught in adultery' ^{Jn 8:3} – and to tax collectors and 'sinners'. (Why does the Bible put 'sinners' in quotes?)

On the other hand, he was, to say the least, 'uncomplementary' towards Bible-believing religious people (e.g. Saul of Tarsus) who had made a real effort to find out what God requires, what was right and what was wrong – *who* was right and *who* was wrong.

But let me now bring in the fact that Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me', which seems to me a pretty *exclusive* claim. ^{Jn 14:6} And what would Jesus say happens to anyone who *doesn't* 'come to the Father'?

We know the answer we've always been taught: they are destined for hell!

You could try to wriggle out of it by saying that Jesus was talking to his closest disciples, and they were enquiring, 'How do we know the way to the Father?' ^{Jn 14:5} but how about Peter, on the day when he (or God?) founded the church? 'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.' ^{Acts 4:12}

These may not be Jesus' words, but this utterance was inspired: 'Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them': ^{Ac 4:8} Then again, we might have a loophole in the same verse because Peter was addressing them as 'Rulers and elders of the people!' so he was clearly wanting to rattle their cages. (Interestingly, this was when Peter and John had just healed a cripple – another outcast!)

What started this train of thought was a comment I read that 'by its very nature Christianity is exclusive', quoting Jn 14:6 and that really rattled *my* cage. Yes, I know that Jesus is unique, and I do believe that the human, Jesus Josephson, from Nazareth, is the Christ of the Universe, but I am struggling with the idea that some people are excluded simply because they belong to some other religious belief.

And I'm also worried about my own culpability in this. Has my own insistence on excluding those who don't believe what I believe actually inhibited other people, including my own family, from discovering the wonderful inclusive love of Jesus?

Answers on a postcard, please.

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