



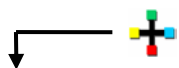
The Finality of Christ within a Plurality of Faiths

1972

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

Dialogue 24: 15-19.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.



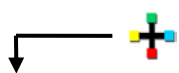
Let me begin with a preliminary point which one may call the psychological point. We are all of us in difficulty because we have so immediately behind us the period to which our chairman has referred, when we did really look at people of other faiths with contempt. Just last Sunday I regret to say, my wife came home from a service at the Madras Cathedral and told me that the congregation had been singing with great gusto about:

"the heathen in his blindness bowing down to wood and stone."

We still have this attitude as part of our mental make-up, and we cannot deny it. Of course, it is all tied up with colonialism, with the attitudes of contempt which arose out of ignorance, but which have enormous power and of which we are still the heirs. We cannot deny the fact that these things are still part of our psychological makeup, and therefore it is difficult for us to look objectively at this question because, if we are at all sensitive, we are bound to feel that we must at all costs detach ourselves from that attitude of contempt and superiority. We must, as it were, guard our ways, and try to make it clear that we do not share that attitude. It is difficult for us to come to this subject with a sort of cool objectivity, because we -ourselves are so caught up in a distorted, perverted attitude of which we are the heirs.

The second point is that, in our proper anxiety to detach ourselves from that kind of error, we must not fall into the opposite error of imagining that we can, as it were, become completely objective and detached when we are discussing the question of the place of Jesus among the religions. We cannot avoid speaking of any subject from a certain standpoint. There is not available to us a standpoint which is above all standpoints. 'Inevitably we speak as people who, if we are serious about the truth, are committed in a certain way and our commitment becomes a part of the judgment we make. We deceive ourselves if we think that we can speak about the relations of other religions from a position of non-commitment. Of course, we can do so, and regard all religions as illusions. That is one position. But as Christians that is not the position we can take. If religion is to do with our outward concern, then our religion cannot be relativised. If it is relativised, it is no longer 'our ultimate concern. If a man says 'my religion is only one among various religions in the world', then one can confidently say that that is not his real religion; that

is not the thing to which he is really committed. One would have to question him and find out what is the thing that really ultimately matters to him, that is really determinative, that is decisive for him. That is his real religion. And about that he will not be prepared to say that is just one of the possible attitudes. He will have to confess that, on that he is committed, whatever it may be. And therefore if we are serious about our religion, then we have to admit the fact that we are talking about something, and that we cannot stand outside of it, as it were, and look with a cool objectivity at our own religion along with the religions of other people. That standpoint is not open to us. Even when, for example, a Vedantin says, as he probably does, from the point of view of his understanding of reality, that all the different historical religions are simply different roads to one reality, he is in fact confessing the faith in a certain kind of reality which, when you probe it and examine it, you find is not the reality which the Christian accepts as final. The Vedantin who normally assumes that the ultimate goal of all religions is realization, in the Hindu sense of that word, that is, the experience of the ultimate unity of the soul and Brahma, and who appeals to the great mystic tradition as evidence, is confessing that he is making a certain act of faith that, in that mystic tradition, in that immensely ancient and venerable tradition, there is the ultimate reality in relation to which all the historic religions can be seen to be different roads to one goal. This is a perfectly legitimate position, but we would have to say, as Christians, that that reality is not the reality to which we are committed, as a matter of ultimate concern. And again, the liberal Christian who finds a great deal of good in all the religions and who estimates them in various ways, perhaps regarding Christianity, as Farquhar did in "The Crown of Hinduism", as in some sense the fulfilment of the other religions, is obviously making his judgment of the other religions in terms of the commitment which he has already made as a Christian. Though he himself may perhaps be unaware of it, he is using the standards that he will rouse from his Christian faith to judge and estimate the values in, the other religions. A sincere and intelligent adherent of another religion will immediately detect that fact, and will be aware of the fact that this man who speaks in this way is not judging the religions impartially; he is judging them as a Christian, from the point of view of the insights that his faith gives. We obviously are concerned, in speaking about religion, with the apprehension of the truth, and also with commitment to the truth. We are not concerned with apprehension of the truth in a manner which leaves us uncommitted. It is indeed questionable whether any truth is apprehended without an eloquent commitment. But certainly when we are talking about religion, we are speaking about the apprehension of what we believe to be true, and about which therefore we are bound to say that, if this is the truth, then that which contradicts it is not the truth. But also, at the same time, we are speaking about something to which we are committed and therefore involves our commitment, the very foundation of our own life. In that situation there obviously has to be maintained a certain tension which is extremely difficult to maintain in practice, as I think all of us who have been in intimate fellowship with those of other faiths



know. 'There has to be a tension between our utter readiness and openness to the truth, as it may be shown to us from whatever quarter and with whatever strange accent it speaks to us. And yet also, at the same time, it has to be a faithfulness to that to which we are committed, because if there is not that faithfulness then we are not ultimately serious. In fact, we are not ultimately talking about our ultimate concern.

Therefore, this is my third point – If I speak now to you about the finality of Christ among the religions, I am speaking as a Christian – as one who is committed to Christ. I cannot conceal or deny the fact, I cannot pretend to speak with a detachment from that fact or to speak in a kind of detached objectivity regarding the various faiths of mankind. I cannot speak of my faith in Jesus as one among the alternative ways of believing in God. One thing that astonishes me is that it is so easy to believe in God, and to feel that believing in God is a kind of obvious thing to do. I have to confess I found it exceedingly difficult to believe in God, in the sense of believing that

there is an utterly wise, utterly loving person, in complete charge of everything that is happening in this world, except through what is given to us in Jesus, in His Cross and in His Resurrection. How then, if that is the case with me, can I speak about the other faiths? I am faced with a searching dilemma, because it would be possible and indeed it seems almost inevitable to argue, from what I have just said, to the position that I know that I would be lost if it was not for Jesus Christ. Then what is there to prevent me immediately drawing the obvious conclusion that those who do not have this knowledge of Jesus Christ are lost? Of course that conclusion, as you know, played a vital role in the great missionary expansion of the western churches in the 19th century. Although we find it impossible to speak in the way that those people did 100 years ago, I think we should pause to recognize the fact that there is something irreplaceable there in that, what one might call, traditional missionary faith. That really passionate concern about other people which made at least the best of these missionaries, (even if they were confused and distorted in their picture of what they called heathenism), nevertheless did involve a profound and costly and loving concern about other people. I just pause to point out to you that that seems to be logical from within the Christian experience – that I am bound to confess – and yet nevertheless we do not find it possible to apply that logic. Perhaps it was possible when the so-called heathens were strange and uncouth and not very well known, but as we have moved into a time when we share more and more a common culture, and when the barriers between Christians and others have been so much reduced, we find it humanly impossible to apply that logic, and I think that, in order to be honest, we must press the question – why is that logic inapplicable?

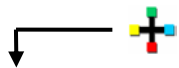
I suppose that, theologically speaking, the answer is that the essential message of the Cross and the Resurrection is – to put it in a two-fold way – on the one hand, that there is none righteous, no not one; that is, no human leverage with God, that there is no human achievement which enables a man, as it were, to claim from God His mercy; but that, on the other hand, God's salvation is absolutely and totally of grace, and grace is free and sovereign and unchanged. If then I get to the position of saying that, because I am united with Christ through faith and baptism, therefore I have a claim on God's mercy, which others do not have, then I am, by a subtle movement, precisely reversing the very central meaning of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus and putting myself into the position of the Pharisee, of those who in the name of God crucified Him. Because the grace of God is utterly free and sovereign and in Jesus Christ and in His Cross and Resurrection we know that it is the very centre of our faith, on the one hand it must mean a longing that all men should see that, and on the other hand it excludes the possibility that we should be able to say, on that basis, that whereas I am saved, they are lost.

Now I am still in the prolegomenon, as you can well see, but I find that this is necessary, because one cannot evade that kind of question. But now of course we have to go beyond that, to speak about that which we cannot possibly deny, namely, that if we know God through Jesus Christ, we are compelled to recognise also signs of God's presence in men of other faiths, and indeed in men of no religious faith. If we deny these signs, if we try to find ways of questioning them, or denying them, we are in danger of committing something very like the sin against the Holy Spirit.

Now on that I want to say four things. Firstly, that we are not speaking here simply of the signs of God's presence among religious men. Those of us who have had close fellowship with men of other faiths will find it utterly impossible to deny that, if our human experience means anything at all there are men of other faiths who enjoy a very deep fellowship with God, and who show in their lives the truths of God's goodness, and who in many many cases, put to shame the shallowness of our own religious life. I think that one simply has to accept that as a fact and to try to hedge about it is, as I say, to come perilously near to the sin against the Holy Spirit. But of course, it is not only among religious men that we find evidence of the working of God. We find it among people of a purely secular cast of mind, who have no place in their minds for religion at all, and who have no sense of the presence of God. We find evidences of the working of God, evidences of the character of Jesus Christ being reproduced in other lives, and evidences of the powers of the kingdom as they were revealed in Jesus Christ, at work in other lives, completely

outside, not only outside the realm of the Christian Church but also outside the realm of religion. It seems to me absolutely basic that this must be recognized, that there must be no attempt to hedge about it, to fear that in some way God's honour may be compromised by acknowledging these facts. To put it the other way round, we must be very aware in ourselves of a kind of meanness and jealousy, which I think is present in all of us as simple human beings, which is a little hurt to discover a real shining goodness right outside that sphere to which we are ourselves committed. I think that some Christians with whom I have argued about these matters appear to be afraid that God might be too magnanimous in His dealings with men – and that is not a good situation to get into.

Secondly, on this point I think that if we are to understand this theologically, I do not find that the New Testament speaks of this as the work of the Holy Spirit outside the Church. I know that this is very often the language that is used at the present time, and I am not sure that it is



necessary to quarrel with it, but it does seem to me to be a fact, and I think it may be an important fact, that as far as I remember, the New Testament does not at any point speak of the work of the Holy Spirit in that sense outside of the Church. It seems to me that the New Testament speaks of the things that I have just been talking about, in terms of the image of God in man, in terms of the word of God, in terms of a light that lightens every man, in terms of the law written in men's hearts, and so forth. Even, for example, in the case of Cornelius; who is given to us as an example of a godly man who is wholly pleasing to God, an upright and god-fearing man, the goodness that he has, before he meets in any way with the Church, is not ascribed to the Holy Spirit; on the contrary, it is said that he had yet to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In other words, it does seem to me important to recognize the fact that the New Testament speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit as something which is very distinctive of that fellowship which acknowledges Jesus as Lord, which has the particular character that arises from this explicit acknowledgement of Jesus. I say this with diffidence. I am not sure whether this is theologically important or not, but I think it is factually correct to say that the New Testament reserves and speaks of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in terms of the actual experience of that fellowship, which explicitly confesses Jesus as Lord. Certainly, without any question whatever, the New Testament acknowledges the image of God, the word of God, the light that lightens every man, the law of God written in man's heart, bringing forth its proper fruit entirely outside the Christian Church.

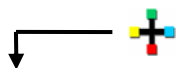
Thirdly, under this point, in any case what is clear is that you have here a reality which has got to be recognized and rejoiced in, in which there must be no room for any kind of jealousy – and jealousy is the right word to use, I think – with which we often try, as it were, to qualify what we say about the work of God in men who are completely outside the Christian Church.

The most important point, as it seems to me, is the question of finality. If we are using the word finality with regard to Jesus Christ, that question can only be answered in the context of a true eschatology, in the context of a true understanding of what it is that God finally means to do through Jesus Christ. It seems to me that this question has constantly been answered wrongly because it was posed wrongly; it was posed in terms of a false eschatology. By this I mean that it has been posed as if the only question at issue was the faith of each individual soul conceived as a monad, abstracted from history and destined after this life either for heaven or hell. When this question is discussed, not in sophisticated theological circles, but in ordinary Christian discussion, I find that it is almost always posed in this very simple form: Will a Hindu go to heaven after he dies? Is it conceivable that a Hindu goes to heaven after he dies? In other words it is posed in terms of an eschatology which is not a biblical eschatology, which ignores vital elements in the New Testament picture of what it is that God intends to do through Jesus Christ. A picture which has its climax, its focus, not in the abstract monads claimed out of this world into another world where they either have bliss or agony, but rather the centre and focus of the New Testament picture, as I read it, is the intention of God through

Jesus Christ to bring his whole creation, and with it all mankind, to a worthy end to that which is pictured in so many vivid ways in the last book of the Bible, and above all in the image of the Holy City – the City which is the climax of all man's history on earth, and into which, according to the Book of Revelation, "the nations (heathen) will bring their treasures." It is within this framework, it seems to me, that we have to speak of the Finality of Jesus. It seems to me that the terms in which we have to use the phrase 'finality' in regard to Jesus, are something like this: in the life, death, Resurrection of Jesus we find, by faith, the turning point of the whole of this story of God with man: the turning point, the point at which its meaning is revealed, and revealed by the fact that in it the intention of God is achieved; that, in principle, the victory of God is gained. That does not mean, therefore, that after Jesus there is nothing more to look forward to. On the contrary, the whole point of the story, to use the very striking language of Jurgen Moltmann in his book "Theology of Hope", is that the story of the world is the story of the future of Jesus. Thus the Resurrection of Jesus means that from now onwards the story of mankind is the story of the future of Jesus. But it is Jesus whose future it is, and therefore commitment to Him is commitment to God's real purpose in history, the purpose, which looks forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the Holy City into which the nations (heathen) will bring their glory and honour.

Now by saying this I do not mean, on the one hand, to take the position of dogmatic universalism. I do not believe that it is possible to deny the possibility of ultimate loss, in spite of the very impressive attempt of Dr. John Hick in the book "Evil and the God of Love". I do not believe that one can, in the light of Scripture or in the light of theological reflection, adopt the position of dogmatic universalism, or, to put it negatively, to deny the possibility that one might miss the goal completely, and become ultimately useless for any purpose of God.

While it does not seem open to us to take that dogmatic position, on the other hand it seems to me that it is also not possible, in the light of this whole biblical picture, to say that only those who are explicitly committed to Jesus Christ have a share in His victory. On the contrary, it would seem to me that the whole tendency of the New Testament is to suggest that God is infinitely more magnanimous than that, and that while it is in Jesus Christ that the real meaning of God's whole story with His creation is revealed, and therefore it is in commitment to Jesus Christ that one is committed to a true participation in the story of God's drama, it does not however mean that God's purpose is limited to those who are so committed to Christ. Here in Colombo I cannot help recalling a sermon preached by Rev. D. T. Niles at the meeting of the Central Committee of the W.C.C. in 1965. Possibly even D. T. Niles sometimes preached the same sermon twice and therefore you may also have heard it. He took as his text the verse in Acts, Chapter 28, where God appears to Paul on the ship in the midst of a storm, and tells Paul that he will be saved, and then goes on to say "God has granted to you all those who travel with you." The point of course, as D. T. Niles brought it out, was that, from the point of view of the saving history of the Bible,



Paul was the only one of those passengers that had a real place. The question was: Would Paul get to Rome? From the point of view, as it were, of the story of salvation it is the fate of Paul that occupies the centre of the picture. But God says "I have also granted to you all those who travel with you". This indeed is God's magnanimity. It means that, if that is so, it is not only with that ship but also with this earth's ship, whose fragility we are more and more coming to recognize. Then we surely shall not criticize God but only be thankful.

Now, I am not sure, Mr. Chairman, whether this is the kind of speech you intended me to make at all, because I have not talked about the other faiths. I have simply tried to say how, as a Christian and from within the Christian commitment, I try to understand the biblical claim of the Finality of Jesus in relation to the reality of the work of God, as I believe it to be, among men of other faiths and of no faith. I am very much aware that what I have said is open to criticism and question, and we will now have a period of discussion.

Discussion

Question 1: *What would you say about mixed marriages, say a Christian marrying a Buddhist or a Hindu?*

Answer: Let me say what I think and then; what we have done recently in the Church of South India. It does seem that marriage is such a very deep and intimate relationship that, if two people come to me who are thinking about a marriage, say between a Christian and a Hindu, I do always try to press upon them the question whether they understand what they are doing; whether they recognize the elements of tension that may be involved. The more deep the commitment to the different faiths, the more deep is their commitment to one another, the more there is a possibility of very great tension. But on the other hand, I think it is clear that when people have accepted this, and understood it, the marriage should not be strictly forbidden. In our own Church in the C.S.I. we have modified our traditional attitude, which was to put out of the Church those who married a non-Christian. But we have now definitely changed that, and by a series of resolutions passed in the Synod in 1968 and 1970, we have now ensured that where such a mixed marriage takes place, and where it is clear that the Christian partner intends seriously to continue his or her Christian profession, and that the non-Christian partner is not going to make it impossible, we should give every assistance to the Christian partner to continue as a full communicant member and to help the Christian partner to live a fully Christian life within this mixed marriage. In other words, we should not minimize the real dangers involved, nor should we, in my opinion, forget the ideal that, as St. Paul says, the Christian should marry in the Lord. We must bear in mind that very real problems are involved when that advice is neglected. But nevertheless, when-for whatever reason-a Christian does take that step, I feel our Church should feel that we should try to do everything possible to help the Christian partner to live a fully Christian life and maybe, if God so wills, it does eventually become a fully Christian family. This has very often happened. .

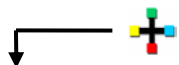
Question 2: *Can we say that all people who live a good and righteous life will ultimately go to heaven, irrespective of what religion they profess?*

Answer: That is exactly what we can't say because that is to reverse the sovereign freedom of God's grace. I wonder if you can say, if I fulfil certain conditions God is bound to give me a place in heaven, then the whole relationship of grace is destroyed. The Bible is full of indications that whatever happens on the last day there will be a lot of surprises; those who are sure they are saved will find they are not, and those who are sure they are not will find they are. I think this is the whole point, that this is a question we cannot answer in that form, because to do that is to undermine the very heart of the matter, which is the sovereign freedom of God's grace. All you can do is to keep on pointing people to that of which the ultimate validation is the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, in the presence of which even the most holy men are convicted as murderers, and even the murderer is given an immediate entry into Paradise – the place where all of these things take place – and we are turned back on the utter freedom of God's grace.

Question 3: *Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Except you be born again you cannot be saved." And to Thomas he said, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." In Genesis we are told that man is created in the image of God. Can we not therefore say that it is only through the divine element in man that man can attain salvation?*

Answer: Let me say one thing which I think is relevant. That is, that we are always tempted to want a view which will, so to speak, put God where we know we can get Him; which will tie God up so that we know exactly what rules He obeys; and to put together collections of texts by which we feel we can calculate and know exactly where we can get God and where we can't. That is totally just impossible. If we are speaking about God, we are speaking about that which simply cannot be fitted into our calculated speech, about someone who remains absolutely free in relation to others, but with that freedom and spontaneity, as it were, raised to an infinite degree. Therefore

when you take the texts of Scripture, I think you cannot, in the kind of scholastic way that was characteristic of the Middle Ages, take these texts and make a mosaic out of them, out of which you can get a total picture. You have to look at texts in their context. It was in the particular context in the conversation with Nicodemus, and the particular kind – of way Nicodemus was coming to him, and in the context of the fact that Nicodemus was one of those who refused the baptism of John, that Jesus said these words about being born again, about being born of the Spirit. And it was in a particular context that He said, "I am the way, the truth and the life". I take it this means that the humanity of Jesus is the one place given to us in this world of history, where we are given a way to God; by a total commitment to Jesus we are opened up into a communion with God; but that verse must obviously be taken in relation to many other texts of Scripture which emphasize the freedom of God to deal with all his people, whether they come from the east or the west, and sit down in the kingdom of God, or whether they be cast out. So I think one has to interpret these texts, not as if they can



be fitted into a total tight picture, but as texts which point us to a reality, a reality much greater than we can comprehend.

Question 4: *Will a good non-Christian be saved? Will not every honest man come to Jesus some day?*

Answer: I distrust any attempt to solve this problem by saying that the good non-Christian will be saved, because according to the gospel it is the bad people who are saved, not the good. When we say that good non-Christians will be saved, we make our own decisions about who is good. It means we are sitting in judgment and we do it on our own basis, on our preconceptions. Secondly, we remove the whole element which is, I think, absolutely essential to the gospel, which I referred to earlier as the sovereign freedom of God's grace. This is expressed in such facts as that the Pharisees became the murderers of Jesus, and the murderer becomes the first to go into the kingdom. I don't think that we should try to substitute a kind of moralistic criterion for faith, because the real essential of the gospel is the gospel of God's utterly free mercy to those who are totally unworthy of it.

I should also say that one cannot dogmatically rule out the possibility that a man might finally close his heart to God's mercy. I think we have no right to rule that possibility out. But on the other hand, I do not think that it is in accordance with the Gospel to say that in addition to the Christian, those who score over 75 % in a general moral test will be allowed in. This seems to me to be totally the reverse of the whole spirit of the Gospel. I feel very unhappy about the way the relationship of Christianity and other religions is depicted by drawing a series of concentric circles, with Roman Catholics in the middle, then the other Christians, the few Moslems, and the Hindus and Buddhists and atheists and communists in outer space. I can't read the gospel that way. The question "Who is nearest to Jesus who is Father of all?" can't be answered that way. In the light of the gospel many of the dignified ecclesiastics are a very long way away, and many of the most apparently godless atheists are very very near. You just can't use that kind of geography.

The other part of your question is, will every honest man come to Jesus? This again is making a moralistic judgment. I don't think one can say that. "No man comes to me unless the Father draweth him", are the words of Jesus that need to be reflected on. I think myself that we are not called upon to make judgements about who is going to be saved. I think that famous occasion when the disciples asked Jesus, are there few that will be saved, was a very significant occasion. Jesus absolutely refused to answer that question. Instead He said, you go along the narrow road that leads to eternal life, that's enough. I feel that our whole anxiety to speculate about who is going to be saved is misplaced.

Question 5: *What would be the evangelistic thrust of the gospel in relation to men of other faiths and no faith?*

Answer: Quite early in my own missionary experience I came to the conclusion that in the context of the kind of Hinduism that I was living in Conjeevaram, the sort of traditional evangelistic approach was totally wrong, because it was self-centred rather than God-centred. The appeal was made to people to accept the gospel lest they be lost forever. Evangelism was a way of trying to frighten people into heaven.

I think that it is still true of a great deal of evangelism that I see. It is basically an appeal to a selfish fear. Even when the appeal is accepted, the basic problem remains unsolved; the man is still basically centred in his own fears. I fear that that happens in a good deal of popular evangelism today. Therefore in the very early stage in my own ministry, rightly or wrongly, I felt that it was right to lay the emphasis very strongly on the reality of God and God's purpose for our lives. Since the one thing common between Hindus and Christians is the sense of God as a Reality, I think one should begin there. Who is God? and what kind of purpose does He have? and how do we respond to that purpose? But I would not say that should be the only way. It seems to me that there obviously are times when there is a tense longing for the experience of God and His mercy and that may be the proper starting point. In the spiritual biography of many great distinguished converts that has been the case. I doubt whether one can speak about any one method of approach. I speak from a very limited background. My contact has been mainly with Hindus, none at all with Buddhists.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.