

CHRIST AMONG THE 'GODS'

Responding to
Religious
Plurality Today

Part 3

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**Presenting Jesus' Claims to Uniqueness
in the Context of Contemporary 'Multi-faith' 'Tolerance'.**

Introduction

This is the third in a series of papers on the topic of engaging with the different religions, and different attitudes to religion, that characterise Australia today. The first paper, *An Opportunity for Christian Mission*, showed how Australia is now a 'multi-faith' society: we take religious plurality for granted, and insist that we 'tolerate' each other's religions. For us Christians, this religious plurality is a fantastic opportunity to tell more people about Jesus. We shouldn't be intimidated by it; we need to embrace it. The second paper, *'Tolerance' and the New Secularism*, showed how contemporary 'tolerance' actually promotes a new religion of secularism, which tries to demoralise and de-convert adherents of other religions by insisting that they stop taking their religion seriously.

In this new multi-faith context, how can we persuade people that Jesus is the unique saviour, without being silenced by contemporary 'tolerance'? We need to go back to first principles – to the Bible, and the gospel itself – to see what they say about advancing Christ's gospel when not only the content of the gospel, but even our right to commend it to others, is actively opposed.

This paper is not about what 'method' we use when we try to tell people about Jesus. It's about approaching that act of communication with a particular **attitude**: one of humility. Such an attitude acknowledges the multi-faith culture in which we operate. More importantly, it is **faithful** to the content of the gospel itself. Evangelism requires **humble faithfulness**.



Faithfulness to the nature of the gospel as the divine summons to trust Jesus as Lord

The core gospel affirmation is that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour – that he is the king of God’s kingdom. This would not usually be good news for rebels against a king. But it *is* ‘good’ news, because this king doesn’t come in vengeance to slaughter his enemies. Rather he comes in mercy to die and rise, to forgive them for rebelling against him, and give them a place in his kingdom. This is the gospel: that in Christ, the one God, who created the whole world, and against whom all people in the world have rebelled, offers mercy. That’s why Christians seek to tell everyone in the whole world about it. Evangelism flows from the nature of the *evangel*, the gospel itself.

Jesus, the Apostles and the early Christians vigorously declared, taught, and reasoned with all kinds of people in the racially and religiously complex world of the first-century Roman Empire (Mark 1:15 & parallels; Acts 2:22-39; 10:36-43; 17:2-3; Acts 18:27-28). They did not present the gospel as mere human opinion – “here’s some ideas about spirituality, we hope you find them useful” – but as the authoritative summons of the one God who created everything, and in Christ offers redemption to everyone – “thus says the Lord”.

Humility, because faith cannot be ‘coerced’

As we explained in our second paper, this kind of universal claim will probably be publicly vilified as ‘coercion’. But there are both logical and theological problems with defining evangelism as ‘coercion’.

The **logical** problem is this: the mere fact of **telling** people the message of Jesus cannot, in any meaningful way, be coercive. The nature of the gospel requires us to **explain why** Jesus is worth following. And those reasons are open to public debate. Our explanations do not force anyone to believe us. Anyone can ask, “How do we know that Jesus is Lord? What’s your authority to make that claim?” And no-one is forced to accept a claim simply because it is made. Any listener can say, “No, Jesus is not Lord,” and walk away.

The **theological** problem is that the Biblical, Christian gospel by its very nature requires we give those who hear it a degree of ‘tolerance’ and ‘freedom’ to reject it. We do not back down one millimetre on the divine authority of Christ and his gospel. But it is for precisely this reason that we must give people the ‘space’ to respond. The gospel comes with divine authority, not human. It is the Word of God, not a human word. People hear it and respond to God, not to us. Our attitude must then include ‘tolerating’ people when they reject Christ, for they have not

rejected us, but have rejected God as their king (to paraphrase 1 Sam 8:7).

The New Testament itself is testimony to the fact that one aspect of a true response to the gospel is submission, not to the evangelist, but to God himself. The Bereans did not naively accept what Paul said; they were regarded as more noble than the Thessalonians because they “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). Paul expressed relief that he had baptised no-one beyond Crispus, Gaius and the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:14, 16). Why? Because he wanted to make it clear that baptism was not in the name of *Paul*, but in the name of *Christ*. Paul didn’t use human wisdom, but proclaimed the counter-cultural divine wisdom of Christ crucified, “so that [the Corinthians] faith would not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Cor 2:5). He commended the Thessalonian church for accepting the gospel “not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God” (1 Thess 2:13).

‘Conversion’, ‘being born again’ or ‘coming to faith’ – however we choose to articulate ‘Christian conviction’ – cannot be imposed from the outside. Christian faith and repentance are deeper than mere outward behaviour. They involve a change of the ‘heart’, a realignment of

one’s attitude to God. A Christian goes from being a rebel who ignores God’s word and rejects God’s will, to being a child of God who accepts his word and seeks to obey his will. It is an internal change which cannot be imposed externally. Any supposed change that happens through external enforcement isn’t actually a change – it’s just hypocrisy, a pretence. It’s like the little boy at school who, when his teacher ordered him to sit down did so, all the while scowling and muttering, “I’m still standing up on the inside”.

So, as we urge people to accept Jesus, we should also give them ‘space’ to think about what we’re saying, and to consider the significance for them personally. This is the example of Jesus: he called people to “count the cost” of following him (see, e.g., Mark 8:34; Luke 14:25-35; John 6:41, 60, 66-69). Ultimately, it is not human persuasion that ‘makes’ a person become a Christian and live as a Christian. This happens when they are convinced by the Father, internally through the Holy Spirit, that Jesus really is Lord (John 5:21; 6:37, 39-40, 44, 63-66; Rom 8:28-29; 9:16). Confident in this, we don’t pressure or manipulate people; we hope that God will grant them repentance (2 Tim 2:24-26).





This evangelical freedom and tolerance is not the gospel. We do **not** say to people, “Good news! You can choose whether to follow Jesus or not!” We **do** say to people, “Good news! The crucified and risen Jesus is ruler over everything and everyone!”

This freedom and tolerance does, however, shape the **manner** in which we engage non-Christians. It shapes the manner in which we **communicate** the gospel. It means we can be simultaneously faithful to the content of the gospel (“Jesus really is Lord, whether you like it or not”) and at the same time share it in a manner that demonstrates a respect for the personal integrity of the listener (“What do you think, how do you feel about that?”) It also creates the kind of environment where conversions are most likely to be genuine. Those who do repent and accept Christ will be personally convinced that Jesus really is Lord and Saviour. And this will be from the Bible, through the internal operation of the Holy Spirit, and not because of human persuasion.

Humble faithfulness in a multi-faith context

What we’ve said in the previous section is not a new reality which only happens in a multi-faith context. Evangelical freedom and tolerance has always been relevant for the way we call people to trust and follow Jesus, because it flows from

the nature of the gospel as a divine message, a message that is not merely human words. What we must do now is enact this evangelical freedom and tolerance in our contemporary situation of living in a multi-faith society.

In a multi-faith society, much of our evangelism will happen in dialogue with people from other faiths. In carrying out this evangelistic dialogue we need to approach people of other religions with an attitude of **courtesy** and **curiosity**.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, we want to minimise the possibility of causing personal offence by our attitude, and at the same time maximise the possibility of the gospel message and its personal significance being understood.

Secondly, we can no longer assume that the people we’re talking to share our basic understandings about God, humanity, and the world. If we tell a Hindu that he needs to be “born again”, he might agree – because he knows he needs to be reincarnated. If we tell a Muslim that Jesus is the Son of God, she might think we mean that he’s the son of God the Father and Mary the Mother. To avoid misunderstanding, we need to know what our non-Christian friends already believe.

Before trying to explain Jesus to someone, we should **curious** about *their* beliefs. We should ask them what they already believe, genuinely listen to what they say, and check whether we’ve

understood them correctly. Once we have a basic understanding of what our friend believes, we can say, “That’s really interesting, because Jesus says...” We can then explain the gospel in a simple way that they clearly understand. Knowing the person we’re talking to doesn’t stop us from explaining the gospel – in fact it helps us explain the gospel **more** clearly.

This attitude of curiosity is itself **courteous**. We respect the person we’re talking to by genuinely hearing their beliefs. We can deliberately respect the person we’re talking to, and their religion, and through that point to the gospel. Christ did not come to call the righteous but sinners (Mark 2:17 & parallels). So we can say to someone, “You’re such a faithful person – I admire you, really, you put my Christian devotion to shame. But according to Jesus, neither your devotion nor mine is good enough. Jesus is the only way”.

This sort of response is not offered just to be clever. In our contemporary multi-faith context, it is the best way to be faithful to both the content of the gospel and the inter-personal dynamics implied by that gospel.

	Humility	Arrogance
Faithfulness to the gospel	<p>winsome evangelism subverts prejudices and maximises the possibility of people hearing the gospel message properly</p>	<p>unnecessary offensiveness reinforces anti-Christian prejudices</p>
Affirmation of others’ beliefs	<p>non-Christian token pluralism reinforces anti-Christian prejudices</p>	

What if we get attracted by non-Christian beliefs and behaviours?

Dialogue implies mutuality. A genuinely deep, potentially long-term relationship with someone of a different faith will make us open to non-Christian influences. We may find elements of their ways of thinking and living attractive.

The solution is not to run away and isolate ourselves from anything that might contaminate us. We dismissed that option in our first paper, *An Opportunity for Christian Mission*.

The solution is to engage in the ordinary activities which feed ordinary Christian faithfulness: prayer, Bible reading, and Christian fellowship and accountability – that is, church and Bible study. God promises to use these ordinary means of grace to nourish us so that we both persevere in our own faith and are equipped to communicate it to others.

Get equipped!

The goal of this paper is not to give you yet another ‘method’ for evangelism. Instead, we’ve shown that an attitude of humble faithfulness is both true to the nature of the gospel, and most likely to lead to clear communication of the gospel message. This is especially so in a multi-faith context.

To engage in the kind of tolerant, courteous dialogue we’ve suggested in this paper, we need to know the Bible and the gospel well enough to clearly communicate it to our non-Christian friends. The best way to do that is to regularly attend a church which faithfully teaches the Bible, and to get involved in a Bible study group there. You’ll be surprised how much information and personal encouragement you’ll get from a regular diet of faithful sermons and Bible study.

That said, we encourage church ministers to offer evangelism training appropriate for the people in your church and local area. Some reliable programs are:

Two ways to live

<http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/2wtl/>

Introducing God

<http://www.introducinggod.org/>

Simply Christianity

<http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/simply-christianity-a-modern-guide-to-the-ancient-faith>

Christianity Explained

<http://www.christianityexplained.com/>

Christianity Explored

<http://www.christianityexplored.org/>

The GS&C committee offers a course called **Christianity Everyday**. It aims to help you engage in the kind of humbly faithful dialogue we've outlined in this paper. For more information, contact us at contact@gsandc.org.au.

For those who want to be equipped at a higher level, consider courses at:

Christ College Presbyterian Theological Centre
<http://www.christcollege.edu.au>

Christ College offers a unit *Evangelism in Contemporary Australia* (PNM 31/ 51) which helps students understand the nature of contemporary Australia and the modes and practice of evangelism appropriate and helpful to different Australian contexts, to think theologically about evangelism in a culturally diverse society and to develop skills in the practice and evaluation of evangelism.

Timothy Partnership

<http://timothypartnership.com.au>

The Timothy Partnership subject EM223 'Evangelism' offers a combination of theological reflection on issues around evangelism, and training in practical skills relevant for both the dedicated evangelist and the every-day Christian.

The Gospel, Society and Culture committee aims to provide resources which are faithful to Scripture, relevant to the life and mission of the church, engaged with contemporary Australian culture and informed by careful research. Resource Papers aim to be consistent with the confessional position of the Presbyterian Church of Australia and to reflect positions on social issues expressed by the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW. They have not been approved by the Assembly and so do not represent the official view of the Presbyterian Church of NSW.

For more information about The Gospel, Society and Culture committee see www.gsandc.org.au .

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