

The Way, the Truth and the Life by Shirley C. Guthrie

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." Some Presbyterians argue that we must take these words to mean that since Jesus is the only way to salvation, Christianity is the only true religion. Therefore any genuinely two-way conversation between Christians and followers of other religious traditions inevitably compromise true Christian faith and leads to religious and ethical relativism. Others argue that to take these words literally leads to Christian arrogance, intolerance and exclusivism in relation to people both inside and outside the Christian circle who do not believe and live like us. We can only say that for us Jesus is the way, but there may be other ways for other people.

I believe that if we understand this saying of Jesus in light of the total New Testament witness to him, we will discover on the one hand that it not only permits but requires interreligious dialogue, and on the other hand that it gives us some guidelines for participation in such dialogues, so that without compromise it is genuinely and faithfully Christian.

Who is this Jesus who claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life?

He is the one who came to do the will of the Father who sent him: the God of Israel who created not just Christians but all people in God's own image and wills the life, health and welfare of all human beings; the God of the prophets who promised and demanded justice for all who are poor, powerless, excluded and oppressed.

This Jesus came not just to give his followers everything they want to be happy, successful and secure in this life and the next. He came to announce and inaugurate the kingdom of God, the world-wide reign of God ó justice and compassion for all people, everywhere.

He was the friend of sinful, unbelieving or different-believing people who were excluded and rejected by law-abiding, morally respectable members of the religious establishment.

He believed that caring for needy, suffering human beings is more important than conformity to the requirements of moral and theological orthodoxy.

He came not to condemn, defeat and lord it over his enemies and the enemies of the God who sent him, but to give his life for them to reconcile them to God and each other.

And God raised this Jesus from the dead and made him the crucified and risen Lord over all principalities and authorities everywhere. Not just Lord over and for the church and in the hearts of its members, but Lord over and for the whole world. The Lord who by his Spirit continues his healing, reconciling, liberating, saving work everywhere to create a whole new humanity in a whole new heaven and earth. Even where he is not yet known, confessed and voluntarily served. Even before Christians get there to tell others about him.

The good news is that God was, is and will be at work in the risen and living Christ to reconcile the world to himself.

I believe that there are three consequences of this good news for interreligious dialogue between Christians and followers of other religious traditions:

Modesty. To be a Christian is to bear witness to what God has said and done, is saying and doing, and promises to say and do in Jesus Christ. It is not to bear witness to the superiority of "Christianity" or "the Christian religion" over other religions, or to what we Christians and our church (or any group in it) know that nobody else knows, what we have that others do not have and what we have to offer to the world. On the contrary, to bear witness to Jesus Christ is openly to confess that it is not just other people but we ourselves and our Christianity who are judged by the Gospel we proclaim.

The history of Christianity, past and present, is the story of many contributions Christians and the church have made to the world. But it also includes the still-remembered) story of how in the name of their God Christians once invaded the Near East to slaughter Muslims, the long story of religious wars in which Catholic and Protestant Christians (and Protestants and other Protestants) exiled or killed each other to defend "true religion," the story of the alliance of Christians and their churches with colonialism and its economic and political imperialism, the story of Christians quoting Scripture to justify racism and anti-Semitism and the continuing story of the way the Christian community has contradicted in its own life the truth, compassion, justice and reconciling work of God in Christ it proclaims to others. If we want our Christian witness to be faithful and convincing, we must confess that it is first of all we ourselves (liberals, conservatives and evangelicals alike) who need to repent, hear and live by the good news of the one who alone is the way, the truth and the life.

Openness. If we believe in a risen and living Christ who has been and is at work in the world outside our Christian circle, we will know that we do not have to "take" Christ to people of other religious traditions; we go to meet him in our encounters with them. We will expect and gladly welcome evidence that the grace and truth we have come to know in him has reached into their lives too. We will be glad to hear them saying things about their God and their faith that sound remarkably similar to what we have to say about our God and our faith. Without the slightest trace of reluctance or suspicion we will welcome such similarities as confirmation of our own faith in a living Christ who is present and at work not only among us but among them too. More than that, we will be prepared sometimes to discover among those whose religion is different from ours a depth of faith, personal integrity, gratitude for the goodness of God, commitment to justice and self-giving love for others that put us Christians to shame. We will be ready to confess that we sometimes see more of the way, truth and life taught and demonstrated by Jesus among them than we see in our own lives and in the Christian community. Just when we are committed to our own gospel we will enter into dialogue with them not only because of what we have to offer them, but because of what they have to offer us.

Criteria for making truth judgments. How can we recognize the grace and truth of Jesus Christ when we enter into interreligious conversations? By what norms do we distinguish between what is true and false, what is faithful to the gospel and what compromises it for the sake of lowest-common-denominator religion or relativistic inclusivism? The answer is precisely to take seriously Christian confession that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life ó the standard by which all religions, including our own, are judged and corrected.

So for instance, we may gratefully recognize the presence and work of our risen and living Lord whenever, wherever, among non-Christians as well as Christians:

- Religious faith and morality are motivated by love for God and fellow human beings rather than by self-serving desire to be rewarded for believing and doing the right things, or to escape punishment for not doing so.
- There is respect for the value and dignity of human life, with the recognition that all human beings are created in the image of God and dearly loved by God, whatever their race, gender, sexual orientation, class, culture ó or religion.
- The cause of the poor and oppressed is defended.
- Those whom the (liberal or conservative) pious and righteous exclude are befriended and invited in.
- Love is offered without qualifications of what people must believe and do to be eligible for it.
- Justice is administered to heal, reconcile, help and restore rather than to pay back, get even, seek revenge and destroy.

On the other hand, whenever, wherever, among Christians and their churches as well as among non-Christians, such is not going on, there we must conclude that the God who is at work in the risen and living Lord is not yet known, only partly known, forgotten or rejected.

The truth we seek in interreligious dialogue is not our truth but God's truth, the truth of the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is truth that exposes, judges and corrects the limitations, fallibility and sinfulness of us Christians and our religion as well as those of other people and their religion.

But more important than that, it is also the truth about what evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock calls the "boundless generosity" of God in Jesus Christ, who lived, died and rose again for "them" as well as for "us." If we want to bear faithful and convincing witness to that truth, we will enter into conversation with people whose faith is different from our own with modesty about our own wisdom, virtue and piety; with eagerness to meet our own God as we listen to them; and with honest recognition of the differences that separate us. And we will do it (even when differences appear) with a boundless generosity of our own that is the best possible witness to the crucified, risen, living and coming Lord who is the way, the truth and the life.

Shirely C. Guthrie is professor emeritus of systematic theology at Columbia Seminary. This article is a condensed adaptation of ch. 6, "Jesus Christ and the Religions of the World" from his book, *Always Being Reformed* (WJKP, 1996).