

Time of Grace Ministry
Culture Collision: COEXIST
John 14:5-14
January 21, 2018

Pastor Jeremy Mattek

Hello, I'm Pastor Jeremy Mattek with Time of Grace. Would you say that Christianity is inclusive or exclusive? Is Christianity something that opens the doors to everyone or is it something that leaves people out? Pastor Jeske's going to have some very important answers to those questions today on Time of Grace.

Pastor Mark Jeske

How many of you have ever seen a coexist bumper sticker? Raise your hand if did – just about everybody. Man, they're everywhere; they're all over the place. I want to talk to you about whether or not Christianity is the only way to connect with God. And that's a big deal because you have friends, there are people who work with you, who think that Christianity is just one of many. And, in fact, I think that – I suspect that that is a big part of what makes these bumper stickers so popular is Christianity and Christians are supposed to just think, "Hey, you're just one of many. Just – will you chill and not go after each other?"

Now, in all fairness, I think we perhaps ought to admit that in our past, in the 2,000 years since the Lord Jesus left the earth visibly and ascended into heaven, when Christians have gotten too much political power, too much money, and too much military power, they have not been shy about making war in the name of Jesus. And let me just put it out there, let's just own it as part of our 2,000 year history, I would say it has not been a problem anytime recently and it certainly is not a problem today. And back to the bumper stickers, back to the coexist bumper stickers, if you look at that, on the one hand, it's saying, can all religions just live in peace? And it starts off – the letter "c" is not really a letter "c." It's the crescent moon of Islam. That crescent moon was on the banners of the armies of Mohammad as they went on their conquests around the Mediterranean and today, the Islamic belt stretches all the way from west Africa clear into Indonesia, to the islands, which happens to be the largest of all the Muslim nations.

The "o" is not really an "o," it's the peace sign. If you go back to the '60s, you know, we used to go around saying, "Peace, brother," and people would wear these medallions, which was a circle and a line going down the middle with two like legs coming off of it. That was actually invented by a British guy who was promoting nuclear disarmament and he used the semaphore or the flag symbols for "ND," nuclear disarmament, and he made up a logo that ended up catching on and became used for nonviolence and the peace movement. And if you look back to the art of the 1960s and the protests against the Vietnam War, you'd always see that symbol around and people – it's still around a little bit – people still use it. It's not really a religion; it's not really a faith belief. It is more like a political – form of political philosophy.

The "e" isn't really an "e;" it is an "e" with the symbols for male and female sprouting out of it. You know, the arrow for the guy kind of wandering off somewhere, which is sort of illustrative

of how people think of males. And then there's the woman, you know, grounded and got the little cross underneath and they're both on the same thing so the "e," it's a little murky what that's supposed to mean except maybe equality of males and females? I don't know, it's – but again, it's not really a religious thought; it's more like a political or a life philosophy.

The "x" is not an "x;" it's the Star of David that is the symbol of Judaism. The "i" is an "i" but the dot on the "i" is a pentagram; it's a five-pointed star with a circle around it, which is the symbol – or one of the main symbols – of paganism today, or Wicca; you've maybe heard of wiccans, who are – they're sometimes mislabeled as witches. They're not like evil witches stirring pots of – and cooking up incantations and spells with secret potions – but it's sort of like an earth movement, similar to Druidism. They follow the old Druid seasons and they're kind of pagans like mother earth worshippers. So that's – they get their little piece of coexist.

And then the "s" isn't an "s" really, it's the light and the dark of yin and yang, which is a Chinese philosophy that is primarily found in Daoism. You maybe have heard of Lau Tzu, the great Chinese philosopher and believe that everything in life has a positive and negative side; there is something and then it's opposite and they're tightly bound together like light and darkness meet each other. And so, that's why you see that kind of swirly black and white shape. And then, of course, tagging on the caboose is the "t," the cross of Christ.

Now if – and I have no problem with the message to encourage people to be peaceful – and absolutely, this is important; that we tolerate one another and do not use the tools of the state to try to coerce somebody else's beliefs. Christianity only works through the word of God and persuasion and communication of the word. It is always corrupted when force, when bribery, or compulsion, or threats, or arrests, or torture is used to try to compel people into a certain faith. That is not how faith is built in a human being.

When Jesus illustrated this in his words in the book of Revelation, he said, "I stand at the door and," and politely says, "can I come in?" He does not stand at the door with an AK-47 and shoot the lock out and kick the door down. He does not come with his angels with a battering ram like a SWAT team and batter the door down and overwhelm you with force. The gospel's voice to you is a soft little whisper. But the message of God's word is a paradox and they seem like contradictions and I cannot resolve that for you because they are not able to be resolved. It's one of those parts of Scripture where you put your arm around two things that seem to contradict each other because, simultaneously, the gospel is inclusive and exclusive. Grace is inclusive. On Calvary, Jesus Christ died to forgive the sins of the world, even people who do not yet believe in him. That's an extraordinary thought and you and I must not diminish one bit of the extraordinary power of the gospel to announce unconditional love to everybody – you and you and your neighbors who are sleeping in this morning who don't even give a rip about God. They have a Savior that they may not grasp or know about; an incredible thing. That is grace. It is 100 percent God's doing. It's already done, it's already been accomplished, and it is universal. It is inclusive for the whole world of the past and the future, as well as the right now.

But the Christian gospel is also exclusive at the very same time for it is received only through faith. It is urgent that the gospel be believed. You're lost without it and I can hear you're starting to get your – your argument's starting to come out of your throat right now: "But you

just said it was inclusive.” I know. It seems like a contradiction but those are both true. And Scripture simply lays it out for us: We are saved by grace through faith. Just don’t argue with God; just embrace that. That is the gig. You can only present the gospel in as winningly a way as possible and then back off and let the Spirit do his work. And it will either get done in that way or not at all.

Now that’s a sort of a long prelude to get ready for some words of Christ and I’d like to invite you to turn to John 14 with me right now and listen in to some words that he spoke in the upper room just shortly after he had given his disciples Holy Communion for the first time. They had eaten their Passover meal – and that was the last time they ate the Passover – and he gave them then communion for the first time. And Jesus is going to talk about this tension between inclusivity and exclusivity. Is Christ for everybody or only for some? Let’s listen up.

In John 14, you probably know the first words of this chapter pretty well because these are often quoted. In fact, I hope you know them by heart: “Don’t let your hearts be troubled.” Of course they were troubled! Jesus had been talking crazy talk about suffering and death and arrest and all kinds of bad stuff; of course their hearts were troubled. They were not only afraid for him, they were afraid for themselves. One of them said, when they heard Jesus was going to Jerusalem, he said, “Alright, let’s go die with them then.” They knew that their lives were in peril; their hearts were heavily troubled. They were sick to death at what they were hearing from Jesus; didn’t like any of it. “Don’t let your hearts be troubled,” he said. “Trust God. Trust me, too.”

“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it weren’t so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you there. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me.” This is part of a plan! Everything up until now has been rolling according to my Father’s plan and the plan is that I take you out of here, as I have come to live with you. That’s not the end game; the end game is you coming to live with me. “I am going to lay out the path to forgiveness, endless favor of God, and immortality. Follow me. Don’t be afraid. Trust me. It’s going to be okay.”

“You know the way to the place I am going,” and Thomas said, “We don’t know where you’re going. How can we know the way? What are you talking about? Where are you going?” He said, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” And this is what is a little off-putting about the coexist bumper sticker to me. I don’t mind encouragement to keep Christians away from military power and away from political power; that’s not our calling. We’re not called by God to really build an awesome utopia here on this earth. We’re called to be proclaimers of the gospel and that everyone may know that he or she is loved and forgiven. That is our mission. It is not to set up and finally define perfect just laws and make sure everybody’s in a Christian church on Sunday morning. That is not our mission to have that kind of power. We don’t take the cross and go put crosses on our military uniforms and go out and conquer in the name of Jesus; that is not our mission. So I don’t mind an occasional reminder.

But I suspect what’s really behind coexist is Christianity is just one of many little curious little philosophies and you philosophers just stay in your place and don’t get too aggressive or mean to one another. And Christianity is not just one of many ways to God. Christianity is not even a

religion; it isn't a religion. A religion is just a collection of opinions. Christianity is reality. Is gravity a religion? Are there any anti-gravitarians here in the church today? Anybody not believe in gravity? I don't need to persuade you that there's gravity. Your feet stick to the ground whether you believe in it or not; it is simply a reality.

Christianity's not a religion where you study it and then you debate it and you maybe take parts of it here or there. It is God describing to you how things are; it's reality. I don't – is belief in oxygen, the existence of oxygen, a religious act? Is oxygen a philosophy? Heck no, it's there whether you believe it or not. It is simply a reality. It is what we breathe. It is how respiration happens in our bodies. It is what keeps us going and every breath we take brings about this marvelous exchange as we fire off used up CO2 and we take in oxygen from the air; it's what keeps us going. That's not a religion, that's not philosophy, it's simply a reality.

Jesus is just telling us some simple facts – dust you are and into dust you will return. You're born disconnected from God. You must be reconnected. You are born guilty. You must be cleaned up. You are born mortal. You must be given immortality from someone else. You will end up in the grave. You must be lifted out of the grave. This isn't religion; this isn't a philosophy. This isn't something you debate. Jesus is simply describing the human dilemma and has revealed himself to us as the way out. And he told his disciples, "There are not many ways. There is one way and I am that way. There is one truth and I am that truth. There is one life and I am that life. No one comes to the Father except through me," Jesus said. Is that arrogant? Is that – is he like insulting all the other religions? He's just describing a reality. Do you want a happy experience in the judgment that's going to come upon you? Then I'm your guy. If you want to act as your own attorney and try to argue your way on your own, not a good choice but that's a choice that you are going to be allowed to make if that's what you want. It's suicide. And this isn't – we're not arguing differences of opinions here; like the way you and I might argue about a restaurant. You might really lay on me that you love this restaurant and I go there and think, "Alright. Not big into Thai food but you like that spicy stuff, okay, well, good for you." And so, we've got Thai food lovers here and we've got the Mongolian barbeque people here and we've got the high-end Mexican crew here who totally – they're happy as a clam when they get that loaded burrito and a corona and they think that is the greatest place on earth. And there's some people who go, "Eh." And there's the French food snobs with the Cabernets and then other people think, "Eh, I don't like that stuff." And then the German food lovers, "Oh, too heavy. I don't like that heavy German food." So we've all got a million opinions about what is good food and, frankly, nobody's opinion is any better than anybody else's. Find some food that you like and enjoy it while you live.

This is the one reality. This is life or death. And Jesus is simply pointing out that if you try to find any other way, you're going in circles, which will lead to a dead end. It is spiritual suicide. "No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father, as well. From now on, you do know him and you have seen him." Phillip said, Lord, I'm struggling with this. "Show us the Father." It'd be so much easier to believe if we could see more. "Show us the Father; that will be enough." Jesus said, "Don't you know me, Philip? Even after I've been among you such a long time?" He's the word of God made flesh. He is the co-creator of the universe become – taken on human flesh, walking on two legs among you. You have seen God. You've seen me.

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show me the Father?’” And now four separate times, Jesus is going to show how what he objectively, out of grace, has come to give to all the world has to be believed. Watch for the four of them. The first one comes in verse 10: “Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” He’s describing the mysterious workings of the Trinity, yet another one of Scripture’s paradoxes – three in one at the same time. The words I say to you are not just my own; rather, it’s the Father living in me who’s doing his work. You want to see the Father? Just pay attention to what I’ve done. He – I am carrying out his mission and his design.

“Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father’s in me; or at least,” – that’s the third time – “at least believe the evidence of the miracles. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. They’ll do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father.” In other words, his heading for the cross was not going to be the end but only a new beginning and “I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask for anything in my name and I will do it.”

So in addition to everything they’d heard, Jesus said, “Haven’t you been paying attention? You have witnessed in your midst the word of God made flesh. God himself incarnate. What other religion can do that? He was going to allow them to watch the payment of the sinful guilt of the entire human race. In just a few hours, he’d be on a cross – not because he couldn’t get away – but because he didn’t want to get away. He gave himself. Like a priest, offered up the sacrifice, which was himself, the Lamb of God, in order that he could give you and me the thing we most need and that is a not guilty verdict in God’s court. All of the woe to come upon foolish sinners was loaded on him and we, in a massive trade off, received the favor and love that the Father gives to his children. And through faith, you have it. That is what lay ahead.

He said look at the miracles! Every one of them demonstrated that his words were true; that God himself did walk the earth. He broke every law of nature because he made the laws of nature. Everything you could imagine – the laws of the physical universe – he commanded substances and materials to move at will; to be transformed into other substances and materials. He gave commands to the entire animal kingdom. Every one of the critters he made heard his voice and obeyed its master, even when that would result in the end of their lives, as when he commanded fish to swim into a net instead of saying, “Swim away, little fishies, and be free.” He commanded them to commit suicide and swim into the disciples’ nets so that they would have food and have something to sell.

He had command over the weather; he was the Lord and master of all of the physical universe. They watched this all happen to amplify the power and convincing ability of his words. He commanded sicknesses to obey him. Even death suffered his rebuke and had to let go its icy grip on three different occasions.

Remember what you’ve seen. Anyone who has faith in me will do what I’ve been doing. You are believers now! You didn’t turn yourself into believers; that’s another witness. The Spirit has transformed you. Look at the personal transformation in you and watch what’s going to keep

happening. As the Spirit of the Lord comes on you, you are going to be doing greater and greater things.

Now you might say, who could – this is silly talk – who could be greater than Christ? How on earth could any human being do something greater than Christ? Maybe just in this; in a matter of scale, in size. Jesus had only a few hundred true believers when after his three-year ministry he went to heaven. In the disciples' lifetime, the number of believers was going to explode into the thousands and into even the hundreds of thousands. They were going to usher in the first great era of the inrush of Gentiles to become believers. And the personal transformations of people through the power of the gospel is one of the proofs of the power of the gospel.

St. Paul put it this way – he said, “You are my living letters.” He wrote to one of his congregations: You are the proof of the power of God because the way in which you've been changed to become loving servants of other people, the way in which you have been transformed to become Christ-like, shows the power of the Spirit living and working in you. And if that isn't enough, Jesus said, you will be able to witness the answers to your prayers. When you talk to the Father in my name, every prayer gets answered and all things – heaven and earth – work together for the good of those who love him. You're going to be amazed at what God does for you. Why? Because you asked. That's what I was trying to cough up. Why? Why is God going to do all that? Because you asked. Because you prayed; that's also an acceptable answer.

So that brings us back now full circle to coexist. Are you embarrassed to say in your world that Christ is the only way? Does that make you look rude and culturally imperialistic? Get over it. You show no love to someone else to let him or her drift along unconnected to Christ. Give them a shot – you don't have to bully people, you don't have to nag them, you don't have to shame them. All those are bad. But you can hold out the one Savior and do it without apology; do it without guilt for there is only the reality that through Christ, sins are forgiven. Through Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells you. Through the washing of your baptism, your guilt is washed away and you are bonded to Christ and become one with his body. Only in Jesus do you have hope that your judgment and your life evaluation is going to have a happy outcome. Only through Christ will your body come out of the ground and be transformed. Only through Christ do you have a happy eternity to look forward to with absolute confidence.

Coexist with one another? Sure. No more crusades. But that doesn't mean that any old way is good as the way of Jesus for he says I am the way. Don't be ashamed to say that. I am the truth. Don't be afraid to say that. I am the life. Don't be afraid to say that. Amen.

Pastor Jeremy Mattek

When I want to drive to a location, I put the address in my phone and what comes up are multiple options for how to get to that location. I can take the fast way, I can take the scenic way, I can take any number of ways; there are many different ways to get to the same place.

Pastor Jeske mentioned today that some believe the same thing about religion. He made reference to this: Co-exist and explained what the different symbols in each one of these things

mean. They really each mean a different religion, a different way of believing that you can get to God.

There's really one difference between this last symbol and all the rest and do you know what that is? In Christianity, Christianity is the only religion in which God ends up getting hurt; it's the only one in which God hurts. And why did that happen? Because God knew there was only one way to love us, to save us, to keep us safe forever is by putting his Son on the cross where he hurt, where we were forgiven, and given the right to walk through life knowing that our home is with our heavenly Father, with him in heaven. It's a great gift that we get to live with today and every day.

Let's pray together.

Dear Father in Heaven, the way to heaven, the way to hope, the way to lasting peace and joy is not difficult to find. You hung that way on a cross on Calvary to show it to the whole world. The way is our Savior Jesus. Thank you for including us in your glorious plans for all of eternity and help us to love those around us by showing them the same plans that you have for them; plans to give them the same hope and joy and peace we get to experience every day. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

I'm Pastor Jeremy Mattek with Time of Grace and it all starts now.