

In the name ✝ of Jesus. Amen.

One of the raps on Christianity is that it is exclusive. Christianity excludes people. Is that true?

I suppose one could say that. We don't call Buddhists Christians. We don't call Muslims Christians, or Rastafarians Christians. We only call Christians Christians. In today's world that wants to let girls call themselves boys and men call themselves women and whites call themselves black, and that depending on which day of the week it is, we're out of step, to be sure. We're exclusive. We say only followers of Christ are Christians. In today's world, that may even be considered "hate speech."

I suppose one could say that Christianity is exclusive—because it teaches that there is one way to God the Father, and that is through Jesus Christ, that is, by being a Christian. Jesus taught it: *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). You go to the Father only as you trod the way of Jesus, as a Christian. Peter taught it — we heard it just a few weeks ago: *"there is salvation in no one else [other than Jesus the stone the builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone], for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12). You are saved only as you are given and are kept in the name of Jesus — only as a Christian.

I suppose one could say that Christianity is exclusive—but is it really? Doesn't the God we preach say through the apostle Paul that He *"desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"* (1 Tim. 2:4), that is, come to know Jesus so that they may be saved? *"All people"*—does that sound exclusive to you? Doesn't Jesus say to the disciples as He prepares to ascend to the Father, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... [and] teaching them"* (Matt. 28:19-20)? *"All nations"*—does that sound exclusive to you?

Consider Jerusalem ten days after Jesus' ascension into heaven, fifty days after His resurrection. It was called the day of Pentecost — fiftieth, and Jerusalem was filled with *"devout men from every nation under heaven."* The disciples preached to them all: people from nations to the east of Jerusalem — *"Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia."* Didn't exclude them. The disciples preached to people from the vicinity of Jerusalem — *"Judea."* No exclusion there. They preached to people from nations to the north of Jerusalem — from *"Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia."* The disciples preached to people from nations in Africa to the southwest — from *"Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene."* They preached to people from the northwest — from *"Rome"* and the island of Crete. They preached to people from the south — from the Arabian Peninsula. No exclusions.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, who descended upon the disciples on this Pentecost Day as Jesus had promised, the disciples preached to these nations, miraculously all in their native languages, and again, by the power of the Spirit who converts and gives faith and life, “*there were added that day about three thousand souls*” (Acts 2:41) — that means not just men, but also women and children, for Peter had told them that “*the promise is for you and for your children*” (Acts 2:39).

Now, to be sure, those “*devout men*” who had gathered there in Jerusalem on Pentecost were Jews, Luke says. But the New Testament church that knows Jesus and goes by the name Christian, which is given birth by this work of the Spirit, would quickly expand to include Gentiles. Indeed, the Church begun by Adam, and sustained by patriarchs and priests and a prophetic promise was simply transformed this day from a church that was focused on the promise of a Messiah to come into a church that revels in the fulfillment of that promise: Jesus, both “*Lord and Christ*” (Acts 2:36), “*a man attested ... by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him*” — fulfillment; Jesus, “*delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, ... crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men,*” but raised back up again by God, “*loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it*” (Acts 2:22-24).

This Jesus was not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles also. So that already by Acts chapter 8, we have an Ethiopian eunuch—we heard of him in Eastertide—a Gentile, excluded from the assembly of the Lord not only because of that, but also because he had been emasculated (Deut. 23:1), but now included, baptized, and added to the number of those who follow after Jesus, the one “*led to the slaughter*” “*like a sheep*” (Acts 8:32). And a bit later on in Acts 10 — we heard this in Eastertide, too — Peter was sent to a Roman soldier, a Gentile, for the Lord instructed Peter not to call common “*what God has made clean*” (Acts 10:15), and Peter came to realize that “*God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*” (Acts 10:34-35). “*Every nation*” — not exclusion from the Church, but inclusion in Christ. Indeed, those, who heard Peter preach Christ crucified and risen from the dead, came to believe; the “*the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out ... on [these] Gentiles*” (Acts 10:45); and they were “*baptized in the name of Jesus Christ*” (Acts 10:48). They became Christians.

Indeed, the Christian does not make a big deal about insignificant external things, like where you were born—the United States, Germany, South Sudan. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what color skin you have, whether you are a man or woman, whether you were born of privilege or not. It doesn’t matter if you were circumcised or not (Gal. 3:28). What matters is: “do you follow Jesus?” Have you been baptized into Christ, sins washed away, clothed with His righteousness (Gal. 3:27, Acts 22:16,

Is. 61:10)? Do you “[call] upon the name of the Lord”? Do you proclaim the Lord’s death (1 Cor. 11:26)? Do you believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:9)? Then you with Christians everywhere are one in Christ Jesus.

Now I preach this with the backdrop of some conversations that I’ve had in the last several weeks. They’ve troubled me deeply, for these weren’t conversations with strangers, but with people I know and care about. I’m troubled because it seems that they are rejecting this message of inclusion regardless of outward characteristics. They’re focusing in on race, thinking that because they are black and their roots are in Africa, they are somehow true Israelites, not Jews descended from the tribe of Judah, but fleshly descendents of the scattered ten tribes of Israel. Some call themselves Biblical Hebrews according to the flesh, Abraham’s children according to the flesh and not by faith, as St. Paul teaches.

They reject the New Testament teaching of salvation by grace through faith in Christ; they embrace a corrupted Old Testament teaching of salvation by keeping the Commandments — not just the moral law, but the ceremonial, too. How racially motivated they are is shown by their rejection of the New Testament, something they call the white man’s book, and although I’ve not been treated this way, some will not even shake the hands of white people, who they say are devils.

But this anti-Christian teaching is of the devil, and not of the Holy Spirit. And it troubles me that it is spoken by some, who have been taught the word of truth by the Spirit of truth and have confessed it, who now reject it. They reject the “*words ... [of] spirit and life*” (John 6:63) that Jesus speaks to us. They are rejecting the Spirit’s guiding “*into all the truth*” through this word of Jesus that He declares to us, a word that, Jesus says, bears “*witness about [Him].*”

Is this rejection the “*eternal sin*” (Mark 3:29) against the Holy Spirit? I don’t know. I do know that they are deluded. Their rejection of Jesus is a rejection of the Spirit’s message that leads to Jesus, to the truth, to forgiveness and life. Their rejection of Jesus is a rejection of the Father. Jesus says, “*the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me*” (Luke 10:16). Conversely, He says, “*Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me*” (John 12:44). Their rejection is rank unbelief, and this unbelief convicts. “*Whoever does not believe is condemned*” (Mark 16:16).

For Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, the Helper, to advantage us, to guide us into truth: the truth of our sin, the truth of a righteousness apart from the works of the law, and the truth of a judgment that is sure and certain.

Yes, Jesus sent the Spirit to convict us “*concerning sin,*” and that means especially of the First Table of the Law sin of unbelief. To be sure, all sins offend

God and are worthy of condemnation, but because of Jesus' sacrifice, "*There is ... now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 8:1), who are baptized into Him, who trust in Him, who follow Him.

Jesus sent the Spirit to convict us "*concerning righteousness,*" and it's important to know that righteousness before God is always a righteousness of faith, whether it's Abraham who "*believed God, and [that] was counted to him as righteousness*" (Rom. 4:3), or us, who are righteous not according to our works, but by faith. As St. Paul says, "*[This righteousness] will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification*" (Rom. 4:24-25). Jesus may have gone to the Father, but He sent the Spirit to preach this message, that by it we may believe and be accounted righteous.

And Jesus sent the Spirit to convict us "*concerning judgment,*" to assure us that He had indeed judged our ancient enemy, the ruler of this world, and that as we look to Jesus, our judgment is sure — the blessed hope of everlasting life. And we can look forward to joining the "*great multitude that no one [can] number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*" — no one making distinctions of race, ethnicity, sex, or language. One people, the body of Christ, "*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession,*" all proclaiming "*the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light*" (1 Pet. 2:9). Yes, "*This is the LORD's doing* — it's the Spirit's work, gathering believers everywhere around the Lamb (Rev. 7:9). —*it is marvelous in our eyes*" (Ps. 118:23). Blessed Pentecost.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.