

Date of sermon: 10/30/2021
Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke
Bible passage or verse: John 14:1-7, Acts 4:12
Title of Sermon: The Challenge of Pluralism
Series: The Bride vs. Godzilla - #1

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John 14:1-7: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ²My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴You know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you really know me, you will know^[b] my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

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Well, friends, we are starting The Bride, Part Two, which actually is, we've titled it "The Bride vs. Godzilla." Well, why Godzilla? I don't know. Godzilla's huge. A formidable foe. And, in fact, if you were to look at the Bride versus Godzilla, you would say, "Oh, you're talking something of dainty strength versus a monster." That's a little bit what it feels like. And what we want to look at over these next four weeks together is the battles that the Bride faces. We spent six weeks looking at the Bride, who is the Bride, what is the assignment of the Bride, and we went over all of those things. And now we want to look at, what is the battle of the Bride.

If you were to ask 30-some years ago -- 36, actually, 37 -- when I got into ministry -- what were some of the issues people were facing? What were some of the things that people were battling over? Well, for my entire time in the church, we've been battling over worship. That certainly started way back in the sixties and the seventies. Yes, that's certainly been an issue that the church has faced for a lot of years. I think another one, spiritual gifts. I grew up in a church where, if you had a drink of alcohol, you were damned and going to hell. Straight up. Smoke a cigarette then do it? You're at the lower level of hell. I went to a new church, and -- I think every elder was talking about their different microbrews, and I was like -- "Wow! Are you guys even saved?" I just got called to a church where not one of the elders were saved! I mean, I had to get to work! It's one of those battles that we've faced over the years. Marriage. That was a big one. Can you ever get remarried after you're divorced? Oh, that was a huge issue. Split a lot of churches. And now we're discovering there's a whole other area in marriage, and that is, who you can marry -- same sex -- and there's a lot of churches that are moving in that direction. One I just heard of, it kind of shocked me. I won't mention it, but the pastor is into a place of what we call "affirming." And I thought to myself, "I would never see this individual go to that level." But he has.

All kinds of things. It's different today. Some of those are still issues. But there are bigger issues, in some ways. There's the issue of electronic surveillance. I was just talking to Josh about, you know, we were discussing whether or not Google listens to you and whether or not Facebook listens to you, and Alexa, and Josh's suggestion is, "You ought to be evangelizing Alexa all the time. They'll probably turn it off." I thought that was a great suggestion! What do we face? A nationalism that is teaching us at times to hate other people. An authoritarianism that is removing individuality and individual rights. A conflict of civility. I was talking to a person the other day who runs his own business, and he said, "I have to protect my assistant who answers the phone, who regularly receives hostile phone calls." It's just really a different day.

It's no longer who you marry, but it's actually now, there's a whole other challenge: what gender are you, and can you switch that? It seems like whatever era a person lives in, the church has battles. They have things that they come up against that are challenging, in many ways redefining. And what I want to look at is four. I'm not going to try and convince you that they are the worst four. I'll let you debate that. They're just four that I think in many ways are hurting us, crippling us, or actually in some ways, redefining us. When you hear some of them, you're gonna think -- "Oh -- what?! That's in your top four?" I will do my best to make a case as to why I chose them, but -- trust me, if you have a better four, I believe you. And whenever you become the pastor of another church, you can preach that set of series. I'm gonna grab my four.

And I want to start off with the threat of what I call pluralism. What is its statement? All faiths and all religions are equal. It is something you hear everywhere. "Live your own truth." Whatever that means! It means at the end of the day, do whatever you really wanna do! Because there's really no absolute truth at all! When did this come about? Oh, it was being baked for some 250 years. If you go back to the enlightenment days, some 250 plus years ago, that was the age of reason. That was actually the age where we would say, "Trust the science." I found it quite -- almost the irony of it just was laughable. For 250 years, we have been on an absolute assault of absolute truth. Have we not? Colleges everywhere have suggested to us that all ideas are created equal -- there is no absolute truth. And then we get into this crazy pandemic, and everyone's saying, "Trust the science." But friends, do you realize that for 250 years we've been eroding trust in anything absolute, like science? We have moved in, eradicated the triumphalism of modernity and replace it with post-modernity. What is the value system of this day? It is this statement: there is no true truth. There's none. No matter who says it. When Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" -- if a person looks at that, they're going to say, "We don't really understand what He's saying, or, the reality is, we don't care what He said. If you want to believe that, that's wonderful! I don't." But there's this fundamental belief that there is nothing that there is absolute. Why? Because all ideas are created equal. And if that's the conclusion that you come to -- and our culture has -- what is the direct implication of that? It's really significant, my friends. It's this. If all claims are equal, then conversion is unnecessary, even cruel.

In other words, if all roads lead to God -- if it doesn't really matter what you believe, as long as you sincerely hold something. If that's your fundamental truth, then think about it for a moment. Conversion is naivety or cruelty. Because the idea that I would want to convert you to a certain belief is suggesting that my belief, or whatever belief it is, is superior to yours. And that, my friends, flies in the face of pluralism. There is the belief that we have no grounds. I remember years and years ago, Paul Borden, a friend of mine, and I were doing a consultation of a church. And I'll never forget the day. We were sitting in this room with all of the leaders of the church, and this one individual says, "I have no idea why you guys keep talking about converting people and sharing the gospel. I feel no obligation to share my faith to anyone unless they just want to hear my story." He said it. "I feel no obligation." I asked him, "Can you help me understand what Jesus meant when He said, 'Go make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.' Can you help me understand what Jesus was saying when He said in Acts 1:8 that 'You're gonna be my witnesses.'" And the guy looked at me, and he goes, "I don't know. But I don't feel any obligation. And I don't think we as a church should." I told my friend Paul that night when we went back to the hotel -- I said, "Paul, we do not want to help this church thrive. We want to kill it. Now, I know they paid you a lot of money, but I want to help this church die!" Why? Because if indeed all claims are equal, then conversion is absolutely unnecessary, and we as a church have a really, really hard issue to deal with. What do we make of Jesus' exhortation, "Go make disciples"?

You see, if all claims are really created equal, if all roads lead to God, all it depends upon is the sincerity of your belief, then the necessary next implication is that conversion is unnecessary, and if conversion is unnecessary, then syncretism is our only task. What is syncretism? It is simply the melding together of various beliefs to the point that we feel happy or satisfied. You want a great illustration? Deepak Chopra is a great -- William Dyer. Both of those would be marvelous illustrations. When they speak, when they lecture, they will at any given time borrow from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity. I've never -- and I've listened to them actually quite a bit. You wonder, why do I do that? I don't know. It's my own form of weird purgatory. But whenever they speak, it will be a syncretism of all of these different faiths, thinking somehow that they're really -- what? Obliging themselves, honoring them. But here's the danger of it. Syncretism never forces itself to deal with what? The contradictions. Like my friend, Leith, went up to a guy and said, "Can you help me understand how you can reconcile Christianity and reincarnation. Do you believe both of them?" And the person looked at Leith and said, "Absolutely." Leith said, "If I helped you see that these are two contradictory positions that oppose each other, would that bother you?" And his response was so telling. "Not in the least." You see, if you give up absolute truth, if you believe that the Scripture is absolutely wrong, that Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me" -- if you reject that and say, "Oh, no no no no. Jesus was saying something that we maybe don't understand." If you set that aside, the only task you have is to what? Borrow from any form of religion that you want, putting it together to the point that you feel happy or satisfied. But what you will see, in the most brilliant of them, William Dyer -- no obligation -- at all -- to deal with the root differences of any of the faiths that he quotes.

What does it look like? Syncretism? It looks like a person who has devotions in the Bible in the morning and reads their horoscope at night, somehow believing that both are directive for their life. What does syncretism look like? It's a person who prays to God and carries a lucky rabbit's foot that Grandmother gave them and said, "As long as you rub this, good things will happen to you." It's the person who lives with the belief and the sovereignty of God but takes Friday the 13th off because bad things happen to you when you work on that day. You laugh, but I know people that do that. I know people who won't step on cracks on sidewalks. I know people who are driven by superstition, and they go to church. I've known people who trust in God, who believe the Scriptures, and tell me, "Pastor, I feel such great peace whenever I talk to my son." "Your son? I thought your son died." "Oh, he did." "How do you talk with him?" "Oh, I talk with him almost daily." "But he's dead. How do you have conversations with the dead?" "Oh, Pastor -- God enables all things." Wow. See, it's not a problem for her that her behavior is in complete contradiction to the Scriptures that she says she believes in.

That, my friends, is why I suggest pluralism -- all ideas are created equal -- is one of the greatest threats to our church. Why? Because I've walked onto college campuses that are Christian universities and heard professors say, "Oh, Pastor Mark -- the Bible is a living document." "Can you help me understand what that means?" "It's a living document." "Walk me down that path. What does it mean that it's a 'living document'?" "It means that there is not just multiple applications to every text, but there are multiple meanings to every text." No no no, we're not talking about Reed College. We're talking about a Christian university. We're talking about a person who's a Christian leader who pluralism has shaped the way he sees all of life, in particular, the Bible.

I know worship has been a challenge in the church for 50, 60 years. Actually, if you look at the history of the church, about 500 years. I understand we've debated over spiritual gifts and we've had some challenging conversations over the mode of baptism. I think this one is at a whole different level. Because if pluralism is right, if all ideas are absolutely equal, if all roads lead to God, it only depends upon the sincerity of your belief, then I would tell you -- the Scripture is a liar, disregard it. Conversion is idiocy, and syncretism is your only task. How should the church respond to such an issue? How should we respond to people who say things like Rabbi Boteach, who makes this statement: "I am absolutely

against any religion that says one faith is superior to another. I don't see how that is anything different than spiritual racism." Or, Mahatma Gandhi -- "My position is that all great religions are fundamentally equal." I'm not trying to throw the person under the bus. I'm not trying to say that he didn't have some good things to say. I'm saying that the core of his belief is what? Pluralism. It's the belief that all things are equal. All religions are equal. Therefore, it doesn't matter! Choose whatever path you want! Why? Because truth is only your truth.

I cannot tell you how many times I turn on Facebook and somebody is saying, "I am learning to live my truth." I'm like, "Wow. That's awesome." I thought about being God for a day. Didn't work out well. I did. I periodically have moments of thinking, "If I were God, I would've really messed this up." I would be the worst God in the world. And so, for me to suggest, "I'm going to discover MY truth," is a statement so absurd, because it's like saying, "I'm gonna try my hand at being God." I'm pathetic. I can't meet the needs and the demands of one family, let alone take care of the world! But that's really what's behind the statement. "I am going to pursue my own truth." Mahatma Gandhi says, "My position is that all great religions are fundamentally equal," and the great theologian Oprah Winfrey said, "One of the biggest mistakes humans make is to believe that there's only one way." My friends -- I hope you understand that that's only a critique of Christianity. And that's okay. I love this country that you get to say whatever you want. I really do. Actually, there are many diverse paths leading to God.

Now. Let me ask you a question. How do you respond to any of that? What's your opening line or thought pattern? Let me suggest that I don't want to defend the church. I have no need to defend the church; I have no passion to defend the uniqueness of the church. But I do have a passion to defend the uniqueness of Christ. And that, my friends, is my answer to pluralism. What's our opening step? It's humility. Because one of the worst things that we can do is to become defensive of our church, or defensive of Christianity, or defensive of American Christianity. We have no business trying to produce some kind of defense of the superiority of Christian America, or American Christians. We have no need for that. Why? Because we're not all that unique. We may look different than Asian Christians. We may practice things a little different. We may pray sometimes a little different. We may worship a little different. But I have no passion -- in fact, I don't think the Scripture supports in any sense defending the uniqueness of Christianity. There should be no superiority in us. There should be nothing but simply humble grace. I don't know about you, but periodically, try at least weekly, I just think to myself, "God, I have no idea why I'm saved. I have no idea, Lord, how you got me here. But I thank you." I don't know why I have such a deep love and appreciation for the Scriptures, but I do, and I consider it nothing but a gift from God. I think in dealing with pluralism, the worst thing that we can do is become defensive or defend ourself, or somehow to think that we are superior to other people.

But what we can do is, we can proclaim the uniqueness -- the uniqueness of Christ. Why is that important? Because there was a poll that was done by PBS's Religion and Ethics in Newsweek a number of years ago. This was 2002. I can only imagine that it's worse. The question was this: Which statement comes closer to your own views? Which of these statements comes closer to your own views? First statement -- "The religion you practice is the only true religion." In other words, there's only one way to God and it is through Jesus Christ. That would say, yes, I believe that my faith practice is the only true one. Only 19 percent of people who said that they were Christians affirmed that statement. "All religions have elements of truth." 77 percent. I'd actually probably put myself in both of those camps. I think God's truth is found in many places -- not in its totality, but I think that there is some truth probably in all religions. But "Don't know" or "Not applicable" or "Refuse to -- four percent. The point probably that is most concerning to me is, only 19 percent of people -- only 19 percent of people said at the end of the day, who professed to be a Christian, suggested my belief in Christ is the only true faith. Why should I be concerned? Because of Jesus. "I am the way, I'm the truth, and I'm the life. No one comes to the

Father except through me." Acts chapter 4, verse 12, says: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under Heaven given to people by which we must be saved."

What is the uniqueness of Christ that I would suggest that we defend? Number one is incarnation. The very beginning of Christ on this earth was like none other. There is no story of God becoming man. There are multiple religions of men becoming gods. Very simply, Mormonism -- believes that if you are a godly man, God will give you your own planet; you will become your own god. They're minimizing that, but it's still one of the core doctrines. There are other faiths that believe that through a process of reincarnation you become a divine being. No other faith at all suggests that God became a human. You see, that's unique to Christ. We call Him the "God man". What enabled this? A miraculous birth. A birth of a young woman, probably close to the age of 16, by the name of Mary, who -- she knew in her heart, and Joseph knew in his heart -- "I have never allowed that man to ever sexually touch me." And yet, the story of history tells us that Mary gave birth to a baby by the name of Jesus. There's no other story like that. And you can either believe that or you can write it off as a fairy tale. But the very core foundation of the uniqueness of Christianity is believing that God became a man. He took on the nature of a servant, even unto death. He lived on this earth, 30 plus years. He suffered on this earth. But the Scripture is clear -- He never sinned. He never allowed the contamination of the world to touch His life.

Therefore, the second uniqueness of Christ is His atonement, or His capacity to forgive. He not only took on human nature, but there are two passages, I want to plead with you, get in your head. Maybe even memorize them. "God made him who had no sin" -- speaking of Jesus -- "God made him who had no sin to become sin." Bold that. Underline it. It wasn't just that Jesus took on flesh, but He actually imputed and imparted all of life's sins, all of yours, all of mine, all of the human race. The Scripture says, "God made him who had no sin to become sin so that we might become the righteousness of God." Peter says it this way. "Christ bore our sins in his body." The closest I've ever come to that is, I took on some of my kids' college debt. It felt like the sins of the world. That's really the closest, honestly. I've borne some of their decisions. But I've never taken your sin into my body. I've never taken the sins of seven billion people into my body. I can't. Christ did. Christ took every sin that you've ever committed. The Scripture says, "He infused it into his body." That's why when He was hanging on the cross, the Father turns His face from Him. That's why the clouds went dark, the temple curtain was torn, because in that moment perfection met the totality of imperfection. Why is Christ unique? Because He did something that no other leader has ever suggested. God became man, and that God-man took on our sins. Not just gave us phenomenal teaching -- but the Scripture says He bore our sins in His soul. Judaism says if a sinner repents, they will stumble into the presence of God. The story of God is different. The story of God is this. God so loved the world that He gave His son, and while we were sinners, while we were living our own truth, while we were pursuing our own path -- the Scripture says, God died for us. And when He died, He took your sins and He put them in His soul.

I will never defend the uniqueness of the Christian church -- there's no need. I will never somehow try to convince people that our expression of Christianity is the right one. I will defend that God became flesh, and God took your sin into His body. As Bishop Neal says, "The Good Shepherd goes out into the wilderness to seek the lost sheep." God in Christ in that moment takes the initiative in going out to seek and to save those who are lost. With no grudging calculation of the cost to himself. Think about that, my friends. If pluralism is correct, then all ideas are equal, and the death of Christ was a mistake. Why? Because He didn't have to. If all ideas really are the same, and all it takes is sincere faith in something, then, my friends, everything that Jesus did was for nothing. But when Christ says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me," I believe He's saying Christianity is different. All ideas aren't equal. And therefore, conversion is necessary. Syncretism is a sin. Why? Because Christ is unique. In His incarnation, in His atonement, and lastly, in His resurrection.

If you think about it for a moment, where is the focus ultimately of Christianity? It's the song: "We wait. You're coming soon." If you think about it for a moment, where's the focus of Christianity? Is it on a grave? No. Is it on the past? Not at all. It's on a coming King, it's on our soon coming King. It's on the focus of Heaven. It's on the focus -- whenever a person dies who is a believer, it is almost inevitably quoted in the sermon or in the funeral or in their life. What do we quote? "You have heard the most splendid words, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant.'" Where is the focus of Christianity? It's on the future. Where is the focus of every other faith? It's on the past. One caveat would be a reincarnation. Why is the focus of virtually every other religion past? Because there's no resurrection. Without resurrection, all you have is the fanciful teaching of a person of some religious capacity, but because we have the resurrection, what is our focus? Our focus is the soon and coming King. Our focus is Heaven. Our focus is imagining in our own minds what it was like for our friends who died to cross over from faith to sight. Why do we believe that? Because we believe in the resurrection. All of the religions look back, but Christ rose. And because of that, we have hope.

Let me sum it up this way. If all faiths are equal, then my friends, to be quite honest with you, pity yourself. Pity yourself. You're wasting your time. If all faiths are equal, save a whole bunch of money and quit tithing. If all faiths are really equal. Huh. Scully the Scriptures, and go read Mark Twain and maybe William Dyer. But if indeed Christ is unique, in His life, in His sacrifice, and in His resurrection, then dear friends, pluralism is a lie. Conversion is necessary. And your faith in Christ is the most important decision you'll ever make. If indeed Christ is unique. There will be some truth in all religions -- I think that there is. But only in Christ can one receive the gift of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life in Heaven, and if that's true, then conversion is necessary. And the most important decision that you can ever make is to place your faith in God, who became flesh to die for your sins so that you might inherit eternal life.

My friends, if that's true, don't believe the lies. Sounds narrow-minded. But think about it for a moment. There are absolute laws that you live with every day, are there not? Nobody goes to the Grand Canyon and says, "Ha ha! Gravity. I'm gonna discover my own truth." Nobody gets into a plane at 37,000 feet and opens the door, and says, "Gravity? Ha ha! I'm gonna live my own truth." The reality is, we do live every day with absolutes. And nobody would ever think it insane, but if a parent were to stand at the edge of a cliff and tell their little child, "Stay back. Do not defy gravity." No one ever would say, "Oh -- how bigoted and narrow-minded you are, Mom." No, you would say, "What a good mom, who loves her child." My friend, have enough strength inside of yourself to overcome the snide comments that you're a bigot and a narrow-minded man. Because if you believe that Christ is unique, and that His death is the only means of salvation, God forbid that you wouldn't stand at the edge of life pleading that someone might place their faith in Christ. You're not narrow-minded -- I think you're a loving person.

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