

SERMON:

No Other Name?

Howard A. Snyder

Acts 4:8-13

Text: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12 TNIV).

Introduction

My great concern is the *renewal and vitality of the church*. More broadly, it is the *renewal* of all creation; the renewal of the face of the earth. For God has promised us that God has “a plan for the fullness of time, to bring everything in heaven and earth together under the headship of Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:10, my trans.) With you, I yearn for what Peter spoke of in Acts 3: “. . . that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, . . . even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:19-20 NIV).

For years I have been studying church renewal, renewal movements, and revival. I know that God works in many and varied ways, and that there is a mystery to the renewing work of the Spirit. But I’m also increasingly convinced that renewal centers in a person, Jesus Christ—and in our knowing, experiencing, and following him faithfully. I think I am becoming, if anything, more radically Christocentric.

And so my mind turns to this account in Acts 4, where Peter and John have been called on the carpet before the Sanhedrin, and where Peter says: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.”

My focus today is these three words from Acts 4:12: *no other name*. Peter’s claim here, consistent with all of Scripture, is that Jesus is the only way to God. If we would know God, if we would experience salvation, if we would see all creation healed, the answer is found only and exclusively in one person: Jesus Christ. I am not making this claim today. I am merely saying: This is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. This is what Scripture teaches, and what the church when it has been vital and alive has always taught.

And so this is what I would like to witness to today: Jesus Christ is the only way by which people may be saved from their sins and receive eternal life. He alone is the means by which the world will be saved. Jesus is the only bridge between God and humankind.

I would like briefly to argue this point by appealing to four sources of authority: Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. For all of these point in the same direction.

I. The Witness of Scripture

The Bible presents the truth about Jesus not as an abstract doctrine simply to be believed, but as a matter of fact and history. The Bible says, in effect: Here is *good news*—for you and for everyone. Believe it; trust yourself to it, and enter into abundant life.

This is the case in today's passage from Acts 4. The context is the healing of crippled beggar, shortly after Pentecost.

Peter, filled with Holy Spirit, tells what happened. This is the power of Jesus at work, he tells them. It is Jesus who healed this man—and in fact only in Jesus does one find salvation.

The Jewish rulers are confounded. They are amazed by Peter's and John's courage—but they noted that they had been with Jesus!

Peter and John understood clearly now, since Pentecost, who Jesus really is. They had been with him. They saw now how the Old Testament Scriptures testified of Jesus. They knew that Jesus was the Messiah, and they were increasingly clear about what that meant.

The Scripture teaching about the Messiah, about salvation through Christ, is both simple and profound.

Men and women were created in God's image, but through sin became alienated from God. So the Prophet Isaiah says, "Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isa. 59:1-2).

The wonderful passage in Isaiah 53 gives God's whole plan of salvation in a nutshell: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6). "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).

Scripture makes clear, however, that for one reason only the Messiah was able to suffer in our place: Because of who he was. God says again through Isaiah,

The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intercede; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him (Isa. 59:16).

God himself works salvation through his Suffering Servant, the Messiah. But who is this one? He is unique in all of Scripture and in all of history: Jesus Christ, the only truly Righteous One, because the only person who ever came into the world as fully God and fully human.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

And so Paul writes in Colossians, "Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. . . . For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col. 1:15, 19-20).

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Heb. 1:1-3).

Though there certainly are different nuances in the New Testament regarding Jesus' identity and work, the Bible is remarkably consistent and insistent that Jesus alone is the Way to God.

Peter says boldly about Jesus at Cornelius house: "He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:42-43).

Jesus himself said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

The Apostle Paul put it clearly in writing to Timothy: "There is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all people" (1 Timothy 2:5-6 TNIV).

Again, Peter says: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pt. 3:18).

And the writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that Jesus Christ alone is the mediator of the New Covenant. The blood of bulls and goats never can, never has taken away sin — but Jesus' blood does cleanse from sin! It is the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all that makes us holy (Heb. 10:10).

As I said, Scripture is consistent on this point. Jesus is the one mediator between God and humanity; the one *bridge* between God and you and me. We may see evidence of God's glory and his power and care in many things. But only in Jesus Christ may we experience the change in our moral nature, through Jesus' atonement, by which we become children of God. There is no other name; no other saving person.

This is, briefly, the witness of Scripture. We may speak now of—

II. The Witness of Reason

The Bible gives us the best reason for God's providing salvation through Jesus Christ—his love for us. But is, finally, the exclusive claim of salvation through Jesus Christ alone reasonable? If God loves us so much, why doesn't he save everyone? Why not accept many ways of salvation, many ways to God?

The fundamental reason, of course, is that only Jesus Christ provides an atonement for sin. Only he solves the moral, spiritual, and relational problem and works the true cure. Down through the ages of history, only once has someone taken upon himself the sins of the world and opened the way of salvation to all who will accept it. Only once—for Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, is the only one who was ever *capable* of such a sacrifice.

And yet today many people—even Christians—find it unreasonable to insist that Jesus is the only way to God. Perhaps it will help to look at two common objections. They can be put in the form of questions:

> Isn't it arrogant, in today's pluralistic world, for Christians to claim that salvation is found only in Jesus?

> Wouldn't it be *unfair* if Jesus were the only way to God?

1. Isn't it arrogant to claim that Jesus is the only way? Aren't we then claiming that we are right and everyone else is wrong?

The answer, really, is a question of truth. It is not arrogant to say Jesus is the only way if in fact that is true. In fact, it would be wrong not to confess this truth. We are called to bear witness to the truth, but always in the spirit of Jesus.

It is not arrogant to tell people the truth—though of course we may tell them in an arrogant way, or give the impression that because we have faith in Jesus we have *all* the truth. We don't. We don't even have all the truth about Jesus—who he is, what he accomplished, or what he will finally do. But if we have come to know the truth as it is in Jesus, we have both the right and the responsibility, as good stewards of the grace of God, to bear witness to this truth.

The second part of this objection, however, is a bit more subtle: Aren't we claiming we are right and everyone else is wrong? Too often Christians have made that claim. This is not what we are asked to believe or say. We are asked, humbly and gratefully, to tell everyone that there is salvation in Jesus Christ and in no one else. We are not charged with the responsibility of saying we are right; we are charged with the responsibility of saying what we believe about Jesus.

2. Wouldn't it be *unfair* if Jesus were the only way to God?

Here we face the question of justice. If God is loving, why not accept all the ways to God? Why only the Christian faith? Behind this objection is often also the belief that God is some impersonal cosmic force that all religions are striving towards; that the biblical picture of God is only one relative human way of looking at things. This, of course, is not the historic Christian view.

Scripture, however, gives us the history of how God has in fact revealed himself to humankind. And the real answer to this objection depends on an understanding of history, of human nature as created in the image of God, and of the reality of sin.

God has in fact made his salvation available *to all* through Jesus Christ. As the Apostle John says, Jesus is the true light that gives light to every person (John 1:9).

I like what E. Stanley Jones says on this point. He asks: “Is the Christian way the only way? Cannot people find God through other ways? . . . Do we have to be exclusive?” His answer:

The Christian way is not a way set alongside of others; it is the Way which fulfills all others. . . . [Jesus’] very attitude was fulfillment, gathering up the fragments of truth found anywhere and completing and perfecting them in Himself. He is no enemy of truth found anywhere. . . .

As for those who lived before Christ, the answer is that nobody has ever lived before Christ. . . . Of course [people] lived before the Christ became the incarnate Jesus. This eternal Christ is “the true Light, which lighteth every[one] that cometh into the world.” (John 1:9.) The light that was in conscience, in insight, in illumination, in ideals, was the light of the excarnate Christ. If [people] lived according to that “light,” they will be saved and be saved by Christ, however unconscious they may have been of Him as Christ. . . . A varying standard of judgment according to light will give [everyone] equality before God” (*The Way* [Abingdon, 1946, 1974], 362).

Is the Christian claim, then, reasonable? Yes it is, when understood in biblical terms. It is not, however, when some other philosophical system is adopted that clashes with Scripture.

Actually, I am struck with the sheer irrationality of claiming to believe in Jesus Christ and at the same time believing there are many ways to God, given the clear biblical witness as to who Jesus Christ is.

III. The Witness of Tradition

The Christian church, when alive and vibrant, has always confessed gladly and powerfully that there is salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Consider a few witnesses:

Cyril of Jerusalem: “The wounds of mankind are beyond our healing. The evil cannot be repaired by us” (*Catech. Lect.* 12). Therefore Jesus Christ the Mediator was necessary.

Augustine: “Now when Adam was created, he, being a righteous man, had no need of a mediator. But when sin had placed a wide gulf between God and the human race, it was expedient that a Mediator, who alone of the human race was born, lived, and died without sin, should reconcile us to God” (*Enchiridion* 108).

John Calvin: “Who could accomplish this, unless the Son of God should become also the Son of man, and thus receive to himself what belongs to us, and transfer to us that which is his” (*Inst.*, Bever. 2:12.2). [Quotes from T. Oden, *The Word of Life*, 102, 106.]

I like the way John Wesley puts God’s action through Christ. Though men and women sinned, God

did not leave [them] in this helpless, hopeless state: he immediately appointed his Son, his well beloved Son, “who is the brightness of his glory, the express image of his person,” to be the Saviour of men [and women]; “the propitiation for the sins of the whole world;” the great Physician, who, by his almighty Spirit, should heal the sickness of their souls, and restore them not only to the favour, but to “the image of God, wherein they were created” (Sermon 66, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” ¶2).

IV. The Witness of Experience

Down through history, Christian experience has testified to the fact that salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone.

Where the church has clearly taught this, and incarnated the truth in the spirit of Jesus, the church has been alive and vibrant. When this truth is compromised the church loses its vitality.

Early Methodism in eighteenth-century England is perhaps the best illustration of this. It was both the essential *centrality* and the boundless *provision* and *promise* of healing salvation in Jesus Christ that through God’s Spirit made the Evangelical Revival so powerful.

Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:38 TNIV).

The church’s *experience* teaches it that its claim about Jesus is true—the experience of revival and renewal in the church.

Conclusion

There are, finally, *five great reasons* why salvation is found in no one else than in Jesus Christ:

1. Only Jesus was the incarnate Son of God.
2. Only Jesus lived a life of perfect love.
3. Only Jesus suffered the penalty for our sin and brought us healing.

4. Only Jesus conquered the powers of evil.
5. Only Jesus will bring salvation to its fullness in judgment and liberation.

Our greatest need is to be with Jesus in the Body of Christ, the church. Studying the Word, sharing, praying together, we come more and more to understand and *feel* the truth that to experience healing salvation, there is “no other name.”

Our gospel will be convincing the more we are *with Jesus* in intimate fellowship together—and then live Jesus’ life humbly, lovingly, faithfully in the world.

© 2004 Howard A. Snyder
Posted to Wineskins.net 3/04