

# Christian Exclusivism, Religious Pluralism, and How You Can Still Say Merry Christmas in Public!

By Tom Gilson

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Good morning, and Merry Christmas! Yes, we can still say that here.

Remember the "Christmas Wars," though? They've died down lately, which is okay with me. There were those years, though, maybe 15-20 years ago, when it seemed like almost the worst thing you could say out in public was "Merry Christmas." My wife and son were out shopping one day around that time, and they actually saw a greeting card that said, "Happy December 25th." No kidding.

Stores put away their (quote) "Christmas" shopping signs and called everything "Happy Holidays" instead. Not that all that's changed back again. It's still "Happy Holidays" in a lot of places, and I have a sneaking, cynical suspicion that half the stores that went back to Merry Christmas did it only for the sake of sales.

You don't see many people fighting those old "Christmas Wars" anymore. Maybe it's partly because we were a little embarrassed by it. We who say, "Jesus is the reason for the season" almost got ourselves in the trap of fighting for "Being able to say 'Merry Christmas' is the reason for the season."

## **Symptom of a Larger Problem**

More importantly, though, we discovered it was a symptom of a much larger problem. It's the problem they call pluralism: the idea that there are many peoples, many cultures, many beliefs represented in our land, and the time has come that we give them all the respect that they're due.

Along with that, there comes the related issue: The time has come to stop thinking there's anything special about the Christian faith. It's one religion among many, and we ought to treat it that way.

So for a few minutes here today, I want to talk about this pluralism. I'm going to narrow in on one key aspect, too. I could talk about the kind of pluralism that says we should respect people as people, regardless of nationality or ethnicity or what they think or what they believe. I'm not going to spend time on that, because it's too obviously true. Every person deserves the respect that comes with being created in God's image.

That part is easy to agree on. The harder part is whether every belief deserves equal respect. For today I'm going to focus on religious belief. And right up front I'm going to tell you the whole point of this message, the big idea I want to get across.

## **Overview**

That message is this: Our culture is pushing hard toward religious pluralism, the idea that all beliefs are equally valid and worthy and true. Christians, we feel the pressure to go along, and it's especially because it's easy to think we're actually living out a Christian virtue as we do so: the virtue of humility. We can easily think that humility says we shouldn't elevate our own beliefs above anyone else's. And yes, that's humility of a sort, but it's upside-down, backwards humility, humility pointed in the wrong direction.

We're going to look here at humility from another angle, an upside-right and forward angle, as I'll explain. We'll see there's still room for us to believe Jesus when he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one [no one!] comes to the Father but through me." And finally before I close I'm going to offer three ideas on how to live in true humility along with true conviction.

So that's the plan: The pressure to be pluralistic, the mistake we make through backwards/upside down humility, and a better way to think about humility. Then some practical ideas to apply it all.

## **The Pressure**

So here we go. We feel the pressure. You can't live in this country without feeling it: You're supposed to live and act and think as if every religious belief is equally good and right and true. You ought to think twice before you say "Merry Christmas," because that person you're talking to might not believe in Christ or Christmas, and you need to respect that belief.

And above all this there's the "Who am I?" question. "Who am I to say I'm right? Who am I to say they're wrong? They're going to think I'm arrogant, and who knows, they're probably right."

## **The Elephant and the Blind Men**

Nothing says it better than the old Indian folk tale of the blind men and the elephant. Have you heard it before? It goes like this. The story has several blind men encountering an elephant. Each one of them tries to tell what it is. One runs into the elephant's trunk and says, "It's a large and powerful snake!" Another feels the elephant's leg and says, "No, it's a tree, firmly planted." The third runs in the

animal's side and says, "How could you possibly think that? We've bumped into a wall!" A fourth feels the sharp, strong tusk and warns the others, "Look out! It has a spear!"

And this is supposedly how religion is. Everyone encounters Him differently, and everyone thinks his own encounter is the whole story. Before long we have many different religions with different (quote) "truths" about God.

But God is great, and we are blind. God is huge, and we can touch nothing but the tiniest piece of Him. Or as John Godfrey Saxe ended a poem on the parable. This is

So, oft in theologic wars The disputants, it seems, Rail on in utter ignorance Of what each other mean,  
And preach on about an Elephant Not one of them has seen!

I updated some of his language there for us. You get the point, right? This is how the religions build their theologies: like blind people. We all think ours is better than everyone else's, but in reality we're all talking about something no one could possibly begin to see in all its fulness, much less understand.

### **How (Not) to Be Humble About Your Beliefs**

So who are we to claim we have the one true religion!? How proud! How arrogant!! Doesn't humility say we'd better back down on that? If Christmas is about our belief in Jesus, well, other people believe differently, so hadn't we better give all their winter holidays equal billing?

Christianity went a long time before seeing this as any kind of a problem. Centuries, actually. It really was the undisputed top-dog religion, first in Europe and then later in America. That lasted until technology punched a hole in it, letting people travel the world and meet more people from more lands. Better world-wide communications made a difference, too. Even the two world wars played a part in it, as soldiers saw peoples and cultures unknown to them.

We met all these people from all these religions, and we began respecting them as fellow human beings. It was and still is the right thing to do.

We realized we had differences. We knew how Christ taught humility, and so we sought to treat other people with humility, too, which also included taking a humble attitude toward our own beliefs alongside theirs. What could be more Christian than walking humbly alongside our fellow human beings?

### **Counterfeit Humility**

That's the way it feels. That's the way the culture we live in wants it to feel. But it isn't real. Yes, it's a kind of humility, but it's backwards humility. It's humility pointing in the wrong direction. It's a counterfeit humility.

Granted, it's a convincing counterfeit. *Very* convincing. If you've kind of settled in to thinking that way, you've got a lot of company. But it's not real. When Christians decide to treat other beliefs with the kind of humility we've been talking about, we take humility in a place it was never meant to go.

Where did we get it wrong? We think it's humble to doubt the truth. No one's said it better than G. K. Chesterton. He wrote this around a hundred years ago but it's more true now than it was then:

What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert - himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt - the Divine Reason.

### **The Elephant's Problem**

He says "the Divine Reason." I would say the part we ought not doubt is the truth God has revealed in Jesus Christ. Before I can go there, though, we need to clear away the confusion from that tale of the elephant and the blind men.

The story packs a punch. It really does seem to tell us we'd better not take our beliefs too seriously. And I'll tell you this: The parable works. *If*. The parable works, *if* God is an elephant. The parable works as long as God is like that mute, dumb, beast — and I mean no disrespect, because elephants are supposedly some of the smarter mammals, but think of the role it plays in that story. It just stands there. It's passive.

The blind men show up and say all kinds of wrong things about it, and what does the elephant care? It doesn't *know* the blind men are getting him wrong. It doesn't *care* they're getting him wrong. And even if it knew and it cared, it *wouldn't know how to say so*.

### **God is Not an Elephant!**

So maybe one part of it's true: We're blind, in a way; that is, we don't stand a chance of getting God right on our own. But the story only works if God is like the elephant, if He was dumb and mute and uncaring that way. Then sure, he could stand there and do nothing and say nothing, and let us all think he's a snake or spear or a tree.

But the first message of Christianity is that God is nothing like that at all.

### **God Reveals Himself**

God is love. God created us. God can communicate. Psalm 94:9 says, "He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see?" We could as easily ask, "He who created the mouth, can He not speak?"

Are we blind? Yes. Can we figure out God on our own? No. But the parable goes badly wrong when it assumes it's our job to figure out God on our own. Do you know what that is? It's religious pride. It takes a lot of pride to think that getting God all figured out is supposed to be a human project.

No one has ever seen God. That's true. I'm quoting another religious authority now when I say that. No one has ever seen God, it says in the Bible, the Gospel of John, chapter 1 verse 18. We'll never figure God out on our own.

But that's only part of the sentence. Here's the rest of it:

“No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known.”

### **God Revealed in Jesus**

It's talking about Jesus. We haven't seen God, but Jesus has made Him known. Just a few verses earlier, verse 14, it's also speaking about Jesus as it says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the Son from the Father.”

Colossians 1:15 says, “He is the image of the invisible God.” There in verse 19 Paul adds, “For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell.” Do you see how we can see God in Christ?

Hebrews 1, starting at verse 1, says it even clearer:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also made the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.

Jesus told Phillip the disciple, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.”

### **God Tells Us What We Need to Know**

God is not an elephant. He's not mute. He's not passive.

Some will object, “But God is still too great. Man could never know Him as He is.” True. I expect part of heaven's eternal joy will our forever learning more of God than we knew before, and that eternity itself will not be long enough to know Him for all that He is.

Here on earth we won't know anywhere near a fraction of all there is to know about God. But we don't have to know everything, or even some large fraction. It's enough if we just know enough.

How much is enough? How do we decide that? We don't. That's not our job, either. God can solve that one, too. In his wisdom he has given us his Word, and he's given us the life of Jesus Christ. He gives us the light of the Holy Spirit within. And from God's point of view, that's what we need to know. For now.

### **We Can Know That We Know**

Not only can we know this about God, we can know that we know. If there were time — though there isn't — if there were time, I could tell you dozens and dozens of reasons I'm confident that Jesus really is the truth of God, revealed for us to know and to trust and in whom to find salvation. We have every reason for confidence. The reasons abound.

But now we run into that same problem again. Am I starting to boast now? Am I being arrogant? Am I maybe acting like we hold the truth, or even as if I hold the truth? If so, isn't that arrogant? Who can say they hold the truth?

### **A Better Way to Be Humble**

Good question. I'm glad you asked it. And now I'm going to offer you the first of three ideas on how to live in humility while also holding to your Christian convictions. This first one is all about who holds the truth.

Let me set your mind at ease: I don't think we hold the truth. I don't think I hold the truth. Oh, some of you are even more worried now. You're wondering if I'm contradicting myself. "I thought you said we have the truth!"

It's okay. I said we don't hold the truth. Here's the rest of it: We don't hold the truth, God holds the truth. We don't hold the truth, the Truth holds us.

### **God Holds the Truth**

That's the mindset that makes sense. It's not just mental manipulation. It's real. God never meant us to hold the truth, at least, not in the sense that we've got it packaged, and under control; as if we've got some kind of lock on it; as if we're special people with special knowledge. That's God's role, not ours. We don't hold the truth, God holds the truth.

### **The Truth Holds Us**

And the Truth holds us. I'm talking capital-T truth now. Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." That was just before he told Philip, by the way, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." Jesus is the Truth, the living Truth, the very personal Truth. And this Truth who is Jesus? This Truth holds us.

We The Truth holds us. We don't hold it, we submit to it. We bow down in worship before Jesus Christ who is the Truth. Worship. Submission. Bowing down. That's what humility looks like. Not being humble toward other people's beliefs, but being humble toward actual truth. Being humble toward God himself.

That's how you move from counterfeit humility to true humility. You don't claim anything special for yourself, but claiming everything special about God himself.

### **You Can't Worship God and Keep Your Options Open at the Same Time**

Or let me put it this way. Suppose you want to say your beliefs are no better than anyone else's belief. You know what that means? It means you're saying you believe God is God. That's your belief, right? The one you believe, but you also think isn't any better than anyone else's belief? You also believe Jesus is God. You believe He died on the cross to save you from your sins. You believe that, it's your belief, and yet you won't say someone else's belief is wrong, just because you have a different belief.

You believe God is God, that Jesus died on the Cross for you, and you probably also believe God deserves your worship. And here's what your worship looks like:

“Oh, God, I praise you. You are my creator. You are my Lord. Jesus, I praise you. You paid the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world. And oh, by the way, I, uh, I just want you to know that as far as I'm concerned, you're one option among many. I mean, who am I to say you're really the Creator? Who am I to say anyone else is wrong when they disbelieve in you and reject you and misunderstand you? I gotta stay good with them, you know. It's more important to me than staying good with you.”

And then you turn around and sing the same song of worship:

“Oh, God, I praise you. You are my creator. You are my Lord. Jesus, I praise you. You paid the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world.”

Really?

### **True Humility**

Some will still say it's humility to say you don't have the Truth. I say that if you've had a true encounter with this Truth that is so much bigger than all the rest of us, then it's pride, not humility, that says you can walk away from that truth as if it wasn't there. It's pride that says you can decide how you're going to worship God, and that it's okay with him if you keep your options open. It's pride that says it's more important to stay good with all the other religions, than it is to be right in God's eyes.

### **Closing Thoughts on Christmas**

So stay humble, yes, of course! Respect other people as fellow humans bearing the image of God. But don't think that means you have to let go of your convictions. Jesus really is the one way to God, and it's perfectly okay to believe and to say it.

Some people won't like it. If it's okay with God, though, hadn't that ought to matter more?

But yes, some people won't like it. That brings us back around to Christmas again. We're celebrating the same thing I mentioned earlier: “The word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father.”

So let me say just a couple things to help you get through this month. Especially about saying “Merry Christmas.” The first one this: Don't make it about the holiday. If someone objects to you saying “Merry Christmas,” ask them a question that points to Jesus. For example, “So I'm curious: What do you think about this Jesus, whom Christians celebrate on Christmas?” Listen well. Listen to hear what they have to say. Maybe God will open the door for you to say more to them about Christ.

If that doesn't open a door, try this second idea: Ask them what they celebrate at this time of year. Again, listen well. You can always learn by listening, even if it's something you don't agree with, you can grow in understanding. You show love by listening that way, listening to learn and to understand. And just maybe they'll ask you something like why Christmas is so important to you. Or maybe you'll

ask permission to explain that to them, and they'll say yes, because they know you cared enough to listen.

We celebrate Christmas because Jesus came to save us from sin, to conquer death on our behalf. And to reveal God. Because God is no elephant, mute, dumb, and uncaring. God loved us enough to send his Son. Say it freely, say it openly; believe it freely.

Let's close in prayer. ...

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