

FURTHER REFLECTIONS



Locking People Out of the Kingdom

GREG H. PARSONS, GLOBAL DIRECTOR, U.S. CENTER FOR WORLD MISSION

A big “take away” from the Protestant Reformation is that salvation is by faith alone and that we do not need a mediator other than Christ. As the apostle Paul declared in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you are saved through (or by) faith, it is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so that no one can boast.”

Yet believers in Christian sub-cultures have such strong expectations of what all believers need to know and do that we often inadvertently *add* to biblical standards. While we may not recognize it, we sometimes act — or are perceived — as if we expect all believers to be like us in things spiritual, theological or behavioral.

“BUDDHISTS, HINDUS AND MUSLIMS HAVE RELATIVELY LITTLE CONTACT WITH CHRISTIANS. IN EACH CASE, OVER 86% OF ALL THESE RELIGIONISTS DO NOT PERSONALLY KNOW A CHRISTIAN.”¹ PERHAPS WE NEED TO RETHINK OUR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND ENSURE THAT WE ARE ACTUALLY MEETING BUDDHISTS, HINDUS AND MUSLIMS.

It is a serious challenge to me that Jesus did not have any patience for those who knew a great deal about God and religion but who missed the main point (Him) and who did not live out what they taught. In Matthew 23 Jesus spoke difficult truths about one group of spiritual leaders. They knew their Bible, and they worked hard at “evangelism,” crossing “land and sea” to seek converts. But Jesus says, “You keep locking people out of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 23:13b, *NET Bible*). The *NET Bible* lists a literal rendering as, “because you are closing the kingdom of heaven before people.”

What a challenge to those today who call ourselves followers of Christ! What are *we* doing that might be locking people out of God’s kingdom?

I have a good friend who directs a large mission agency that works with Muslims. The workers in this agency are trying all kinds of things to encourage Muslims to enter God’s kingdom. One of the challenges in frontier work (and even in “local” evangelism) is to discern how much people need to know before they can be saved, and how to encourage people to examine the truth of the gospel more seriously.

A couple of days ago, my friend told me about his recent encounter with a prominent, globally-minded pastor, who was expressing concerns about

the agency’s strategies. In turn, my friend asked the pastor about reaching people at his church: “How wide is your church’s front door?”

“A mile wide,” the pastor replied.

“And how wide is the door to becoming an elder at the church?”

“About six inches.”

“Well, wouldn’t we want the door to be wide for Muslims to enter into Jesus’ kingdom to learn and grow into maturity?”

So why do we expect Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists to embrace all of our

understandings about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Do we expect them to be Republicans, too? As long as we are not countering Scripture, does it really matter how we encourage them to grow in understanding God and embracing His saving power? Do they have to believe particular truths or act particular ways first?

Many years ago, I was sitting in a church service in which a missionary was sharing during a mission emphasis event. This missionary had been working in a “Christianized” region where people often think they are automatically saved because they grew up in the institutional Church and do what they are culturally expected to do. I was shocked as this missionary, who was gifted in evangelism, described a discussion he had conducted with one man during which the missionary detailed the things the man had to give up *before* he could believe in Christ.

So let’s re-examine our ways of sharing our faith, wherever we are, and take care to not place artificial pre-conditions on faith. Yes, Ephesians 2:8-9 is followed by verse 10, in which the apostle Paul affirmed that good works should result from salvation. But those works may look different in different cultural situations.

Note, too, that Todd Johnson has observed, “Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims have relatively little contact with Christians. In each case, over 86% of all these religionists do not personally know a Christian.”¹ Perhaps we need to rethink our engagement strategies and ensure that we are actually meeting Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. When we do, perhaps our discussions will last a big longer than they have for many. f

1 *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 43:4, Oct. 2007, p. 495