

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
I Am the Way, the Truth, the Life
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1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

“I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” I would venture a guess that there is an interpretation of this passage you have all heard. It says that this passage affirms the theology that belief in Jesus is the only way to get IN to heaven. It is a wildly popular interpretation of this section of scripture. Even if you never heard a pastor preach that way, you know this interpretation exists because certain theologies have a way of finding us.

Just because it is the loudest proclaimed interpretation it is just one of many ways Christians have read these words. You see disagreeing is part of who we are as a religious family. Even the disciples disagreed about what Jesus was saying. Sometimes Jesus would clarify, and sometimes he wouldn't. Jesus was happy to let the differing opinions exist in the same space.

Throughout the growth of Christianity wildly different theologies develop side by side. Sometimes as direct oppositions to one another and sometimes as happy companions. This verse is a great example of how that happens. One church leader writes about this meaning Jesus is the ONLY way, and another rebuts with their belief that Jesus is saying he is A way.

Unfortunately Christians do not have a great track record of holding the tension of disagreeing. In the past it has meant churches split and new denominations form. Today we see the scourge of Christians shaming other Christians. IF you don't believe THIS way THEN you are not a Christian. Drawing boundaries around who is in and who is out based on what they believe about Jesus and his teachings.

There is a whole structural name for this way of thinking called “bonded set.” We can see how a bonded set looks here. [Shows whiteboard drawing.] There is a boundary drawn to show who is in, who is a real Christian, and who is out. The kicker is that Christians even disagree about how one gets across this boundary. We can't even agree on what the line represents! Catholics believe the way into the circle is through the sacraments. Pentecostals believe it is in receiving the Holy Spirit expressed through the gift of speaking in a heavenly language they call tongues.

Some even say there are state boundary lines and national boundary lines. Some Christians believe similarly enough that they can exist as different denominations but of the same faith and so are part of the same “country” but different “states.” However when you get to traditions like the Church of Latter Day Saints the beliefs are so different they are a whole different nation, no longer a Christian denomination, but a new religion all together.

Now I get why this is appealing. This looks nice and orderly. It looks like those on the inside can sit comfy knowing they are IN, no worries! However, we can't even agree on where this line is, so in reality it looks like thousands of interlocking circles, some thick lines, some thin lines, including some and excluding others. It's a mess. You think you are safe inside the circle but whose definition of the circle is the right one? And so we are left fighting over who is in the right circle.

This way of being depends on someone KNOWING, so anyone on their side of the boundary can also feel at ease. This way of being promotes one theology over another and can only survive if all competing voices are destroyed. This turns religion into a monopoly on access to God. You cannot have a relationship with God unless you are in the correct circle, God does not love the people on the inside the same way God loves those on the outside.

Many Christian churches, pastors, and Christians operate with this structure. Their whole goal is to be in and get other people in. And we have a bit of a chicken or the egg situation because they are also the ones who hold that "I am the way" means the ONLY way. It could be that their reading of scripture led to the formation of this structure AND it could be that their participation in this structure influences how they read Jesus' words. The structure and the interpretation reinforce one another.

This structure and interpretation have become the popular way of being and believing because it offers a sense of security. It requires minimal effort and participation from us. Believe what is told to you from the pulpit, and the promise of being IN is yours, you have a place. The simplicity of that exchange has caused this structure and this interpretation to boom even though the origins of this belief has a parallel interpretation. I want to offer you another way to hear these words from Jesus.

John 14 begins with Jesus reassuring the disciples that they have a place with God. There are many dwelling places. Jesus says if that wasn't real why would I say it? Jesus is saying you WILL be with me and with God, you are already IN. It's a beautiful promise meant to ease the worries of the disciples.

Jesus then makes the assumption that since these men know him, know what he speaks out against and what he supports, and how he lives his life in general, they would connect the dots that being like Jesus is the goal for life. This, of course, goes completely over the disciples heads. Thomas asks, "How do we get IN?"

Jesus then plainly says "I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life."

These words are the part that gets lifted out to support the popular belief that Jesus is saying the only way to get to heaven is to be a follower of Jesus. But if we suspend that interpretation bias for a moment and not let our bonded set mentality influence our hearing, Jesus could also be saying, "I am showing you the way to be closer to God. Copy my way of being, copy my way

of speaking and supporting truth even when it is truth against the powerful. Copy my life. The things I do will bring you closer to God. SO you can be with God here as well as in the next life.” The verse says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (through this way of being that brings you closer to God). 7 If you know me (if you know this way of being), you will know my Father also.”

Notice, no where in there does Jesus say this is the only way, and no where in there does he say belief was necessary. The belief interpretation seeps in from the verses above. “Believe in God, Believe also in me.” BUT the thing Jesus is asking them to believe is that they will be with God and Jesus is making a place for them. Remember Jesus didn’t start this exchange to describe HOW to get to heaven. He was assuring them that they WOULD be there. The conversation was, “Believe me I am going to make a place for you with God.”

It’s only when Thomas gets antsy about KNOWING the way that the conversation shifts to HOW, and THEN Phillip gets freaked out. “Show us God.”

I imagine at this moment Jesus’ palm becomes planted on his forehead. He started with a comprehensive assurance that there is a place for everyone, they are IN. He wants to make sure their hearts will not be troubled. and That would have been the end of the story if Thomas and Philip hadn’t immediately let their hearts trouble them.

They want to be assured that we are included in this promise, that they are inside the circle. They want this. [Flips the white board.] Jesus wants this.

You see, as the bonded set structure developed, another structure developed alongside it. There was a time this was the popular structure before bonded set voices overpowered them. This is called a centered set. At the center is God. As Christians we relate to God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, so for us, God is represented by a cross. Instead of a boundary telling us who is in, or right, and who is out, or wrong, the measurements here are in arrows. An individual is either moving towards the center or away from the center.

This is chaotic to our eyes. It is not easy to tell who is where nor can we tell easily where they will be tomorrow. The goal is no longer getting or keeping people inside, the focus is on which way are you heading. This allows for disagreements because what brings this person closer to God may not work for that person. And that is entirely okay because it doesn’t mean one of us is in or out as long as we are both heading towards the center.

I can hear your minds say, “How close do we have to be to the cross to get to heaven?” “What happens if I die and I’m in a bad place and I was heading away from the cross at that moment?” Do not let your hearts be troubled. Those thoughts are bonded set trauma fighting the tension. With this structure we do not need to let our hearts be troubled about who is in and who is out. There are many dwelling places, there is a spot for you. If it were not so, Jesus would not have

promised that. Believe when Jesus says there is a place for you. Free your mind and heart to be secure and turn that worried energy to movement towards the center.

There is a solid case to say that Jesus endorses this structure in these verses too. Jesus even tells us how to point our arrows towards the center: "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me (believes what I say about there being a place for everyone) will also do the works that I do." When we accept the truth and believe Jesus at his word that we have a place we are free to do the work.

Jesus didn't worry about who was in or out. He didn't feel anxiety about getting his family to church or baptized. Jesus' way rested in the assurance that everyone has a place with God already.

When we accept Jesus at his word, we are courageous enough to speak the truth as Jesus did. We don't argue about who is in or out, or less of a sinner, but speak truth in love to those in power, and speak affirmations and assurances to those without power.

When we trust Jesus that there is a place for everyone, we can live a life that resembles the life of Jesus. Knowing we have a place takes our energy away from achieving something in the future. We will be with God; we don't have to worry about that part. What is left is figuring out how to get closer to God now in this life, because we know being with God is amazing and we want that right now

We want to put our efforts towards getting our arrows aimed at the center and every ounce of energy we have can drive us towards God. If we have a moment of hardship and our arrows turn away, it's okay. Even if we never turn our arrow back towards the center, it's okay, because there is no line that makes us too far gone. We cannot lose our place with God. What we do lose if we turn away from the center is the chance to be close to God now. I know for me I would rather be close to God now AND in the next life. I don't want to lose a second of opportunity to be with God and so I will work to keep my arrow aimed at God.

So, siblings, do not let your hearts be troubled. There is a place for you and for everyone to be with God. Believe Jesus when he says he has made a place for you. And when you believe that, follow the way, speak the truth, and live the life that Jesus showed us so that our time with God is expanded beyond the next life into this one, even to this moment and forever more. Amen.