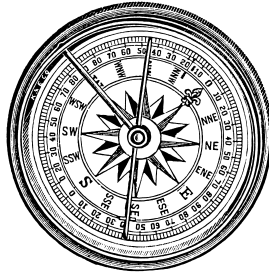


Chapter 7

DEFENDING THE CHALLENGE



What the gospel says

The last of the six points in our gospel outline spells out the challenge that arises from the first five, namely, that there are only two ways to live: our way or God's way. Those two options exhaust the possibilities.

Our way means that we continue rejecting God's rule, and continue trying to run life our own way without him. Sadly, this is the option that many people persist in. The result is that we remain condemned by God. Unless we turn around and change course, we continue to face death and judgement.

If we continue in our way (by the way we live, ignoring him), God gives us what we are asking for. He condemns us for our rejection of his rightful rule over our lives. We not only have to put up with the messy consequences of rejecting God here and now, but we



face the dreadful prospect of an eternity of separation from him, without life or love or relationship.

The alternative is God's way. That means submitting to Jesus as our ruler.

For those of us who have realized that our situation is hopeless, there is a lifeline. If we turn back to God and appeal for mercy, trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection, then everything changes. The result is that we are forgiven by God and given eternal life as a free gift. God wipes our slate clean. He accepts Jesus' death as payment for our sins, and freely and completely forgives us. He pours his own Spirit into our hearts and grants us a new life that stretches past death and into forever. We are no longer rebels, but part of God's own family as his adopted sons and daughters.

From the moment we turn from our way to God's way, we live with Jesus as our ruler—our Captain, our Commander-in-Chief.

This is how the Bible puts it:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him. (John 3:36, NIV)

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

As a result, the choice between the two ways to live could not possibly be clearer:



OUR WAY:

- Reject the ruler—God
- Try to run life our own way

Result:

- Condemned by God
- Facing death and judgement

GOD'S NEW WAY:

- Submit to Jesus as our ruler
- Rely on Jesus' death and resurrection

Result:

- Forgiven by God
- Given eternal life

At this point we need, gently and respectfully, to ask the unbeliever: which of these two ways represents the way you're living now? And which of these two ways represents the way you'd like to live?



BUT IF THEY STILL HAVE QUESTIONS and challenges at this point, what are they likely to be?

Well, there is really only one question that might arise at this point: “Is there no other option?” But this one issue can emerge in two different ways.

I don't know

It will sometimes come up in the form of the unbeliever not wanting just two boxes and having to tick either one or the other. What they want is a ‘Don't know’ box. They really want to believe that there are more options.

Sometimes the hesitations or questions at this point



revolve around the narrowness of the challenge. “Surely”, they might say, “God is broader than that? Surely I don’t have to make up my mind now? If I fell under a bus in half an hour I’m sure”, they protest, “that God would know that I believed in him, that I was sincerely doing my best, and that I was genuinely wrestling with the ‘our way/God’s way’ thing”.

What such objectors are looking for is a way to dodge the challenge. The answer is that when it comes to how we stand with God, there is no neutral territory. There is no spiritual Switzerland; there is no fence to sit on.

The real answer is that “I don’t know” is an answer.

Looking at the two options (‘our way/God’s way’) and saying, “I don’t know” or “I’ll think about it later” is really a firm decision in favour of our way, and against God’s way.

Picture it as sitting on the wrong train, going in the wrong direction: until a change is made, the traveller is still on the wrong track going the wrong way. Something positive has to be done to change that. Doing nothing is a positive decision to keep going in the wrong direction—travelling down the death track (the ‘separation from God’ track) and getting closer to death at the steady speed of one day every 24 hours. Deciding nothing is saying “No” to God.

What about other religions?

The second way this issue comes up can be in the form of a protest against the exclusivity of Jesus. “But surely



you're not saying", the protestor cries, "that all the nice, sincere Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and the rest are going to hell?"

The answer is that people are going where they want to go. Those who choose to be disconnected from God in this life, in this world, will be disconnected from God forever—that's spiritual death, or hell if you prefer.

"But hang on", the protestor continues. "It's very narrow-minded of you to say that Jesus is the only way to reconnect with God. Jesus can't be the exclusive way to God. There must be other ways to come home to God, not just the Jesus way."

The answer is that it's Jesus who makes this claim, not us. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life", said Jesus. "No-one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). So those who reject the notion that there are only two ways to live must recognize that they are calling Jesus a liar. That's a fairly heavy thing to say to someone, but it's the truth.

It can be worth pointing out that this is God's call, not our call. It's not the case that God has said to us, "How would you like to come home to me? Pick your own way." That hasn't happened. God has said, "Like this". So it's either "like this", or we fail to get home to the security of God's friendship and God's forgiveness.

We must turn back to God in the way that God requires and has provided. And that means Jesus. It is God who is being exclusive at this point.

Sometimes the protestor will say at this point, "Well, that's just because you grew up in a Christian society.



Why couldn't it be the case that God speaks to Christians through Christ, to Buddhists through Buddha, to Muslims through Muhammad and so on?"

The answer is: "Only Jesus died". The only doorway to heaven is marked 'Forgiveness'. And Jesus is that door. Only Jesus can forgive us because only Jesus died in our place to pay for our wrongdoings. Buddha didn't die for Buddhists. Confucius didn't die for his followers. Muhammad didn't die for Muslims. L. Ron Hubbard didn't die for Scientologists.

Jesus alone took the weight of our rebellion and wrongdoings upon his shoulders and died for us. Only Jesus died our death, suffered our punishment, and purchased our forgiveness.

And only Jesus came back from the dead as the conqueror of death and the giver of new life.

These historical facts are exclusively true of Jesus, and make Jesus the exclusive way back to God. Jesus is the way God has provided (at unbelievable cost) for us to come home: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

God's way is God's way. We're either in it or out of it. That's why there are only two ways.

One final objection is sometimes raised: "But what about people who haven't heard about Jesus? What will happen to them?"

The answer is that the Bible doesn't tell us, so we don't know. However, we do know God's character so we can trust God absolutely. Whatever is right is what will happen. God's character guarantees that.



But this is not usually a genuine objection: it's a smoke-screen. The real answer is: "You've now heard about Jesus, so, whatever happens with others, you can't use the 'ignorance excuse'. If you choose to continue living your way, and refuse to turn to God's way, you will have no excuses when you stand before God in judgement."

We have enough information to make the right decision. God will do whatever he will do for others but for us, it's our own eternal destiny that hangs in the balance.

IN SUMMARY:

- The only objection at this point is to the narrowness of the choice: just two ways.
- To those who want a third option ('Don't know'), the answer is that the 'I-won't-make-a-decision-now' option is a decision to remain cut off from God—a 'non-decision' is a decision against God.
- To those who want some way other than Jesus to get to heaven, the answer is that Jesus alone has died and risen again—no-one else has done that, so no-one else is qualified to forgive us and bring us home to God.
- To those who say, "What about those who haven't heard of Jesus?", the answer is that this is a smokescreen. Those who haven't heard are safe in the hands of a perfect God. But you have heard, you can't plead ignorance, and you have only two choices: your way or God's way.

