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For Goodness Sake?

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Just before the end of 2008, the [Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life](#) released a report indicating that a significant percentage of American evangelicals reject the biblical claim that Jesus is the only way of salvation. According to [the report](#), 52% of American Christians believe that “at least some non-Christian faiths can lead to eternal life.”

Surprisingly, 37% of those specifically identified as evangelical Christians agreed, rejecting the claim that Jesus is the only Savior and identifying at least some non-Christian religion or religions as leading to eternal life.

The [report](#) was an important follow-up to the [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#), released in 2007, and it basically affirmed one of the most controversial findings of that survey — the claim that evangelical Christians are increasingly rejecting the exclusivity of Christ. A potential lack of precision in the way the question was first asked led the Pew Forum to take another look at the issue. This new report, based in solid research, corroborates the earlier study. Many evangelicals *are* redefining the Gospel and rejecting the claim that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to eternal life.



A most interesting response to this report now comes from [Charles M. Blow](#), the “visual Op-Ed columnist” for *The New York Times*. In “[Heaven for the Godless?](#),” published in the December 27, 2008 edition of the paper, Blow celebrates the report and expresses his pleasure in the fact that Americans are abandoning their belief that, in his words, “heaven is a velvet-roped V.I.P. area reserved for Christians.”

Mr. Blow affirms that the Bible teaches the exclusivity of Christ and that the Christian church has defined the Gospel in these terms. Nevertheless, he celebrates the fact that the doctrine is being abandoned by so many — as many as 70% of all Americans.

He then asks why this change is happening, and he suggests several factors. First, he offers this:

One very plausible explanation is that Americans just want good things to come to good people, regardless of their faith. As Alan Segal, a professor of religion at Barnard College told me: “We are a multicultural society, and people expect this American life to continue the same way in heaven.” He explained that in our society, we meet so many good people of different faiths that it’s hard for us to imagine God letting them go to hell.

As a possible and plausible causal factor, this makes sense. As a matter of fact, Blow appears to express what millions of Americans (including many, no doubt, who consider themselves evangelicals) believe — that the American way is the way to heaven. But, people who “expect this American life to continue the same way in heaven” will find no biblical support for this expectation.

Second, Blow offers that “many Christians apparently view their didactic text as flexible.” In other words, they do not believe the Bible is eternal truth. As he explains, “According to Pew’s August survey, only 39 percent of Christians believe that the Bible is the literal word of God, and 18 percent think that it’s just a book written by men and not the word of God at all.”

Well, once again he points to a crucial factor. Those who believe that the Bible is “just a book written by men and not

the word of God at all” will see no reason to believe what the Bible teaches. Those who believe that the Bible is in some sense God’s revelation but deny the inspiration of the actual text will feel quite free to revise (or reject) biblical teachings at will.

Blow’s third proposal delivers the most significant paragraph in his column:

Now, there remains the possibility that some of those polled may not have understood the implications of their answers. As John Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum, said, “The capacity of ignorance to influence survey outcomes should never be underestimated.” But I don’t think that they are ignorant about this most basic tenet of their faith. I think that they are choosing to ignore it . . . for goodness sake.

At this point Blow’s analysis gets even more interesting. He rejects the claim that American Christians (including the evangelicals cited in this report) are confused or ignorant concerning what the Bible teaches about “this most basic tenet of their faith.” No, Blow insists, these American Christians are not confused or ignorant about this Christian teaching: “I think that they are choosing to ignore it . . . for goodness sake.”

Look closely at this argument. Blow argues that many American Christians are rejecting the claim that Jesus is the only way of salvation for sake of “goodness.” In other words, “good” people don’t believe that other people are going to hell.

Here we see the ultimate confusion of theology and etiquette. The implication of Charles Blow’s argument is clear. He believes that Americans are trimming theology to fit current expectations of social respectability. Socially respectable people — people who are recognized for “goodness” — consciously reject the clear biblical teaching that Jesus is the only Savior because it just isn’t socially respectable to believe that your neighbors and fellow citizens who do not believe in Christ as Savior are going to miss heaven and go to hell.

Charles Blow celebrates this transformation of theology into etiquette. Doctrine is cheerfully replaced with public relations. The words of Jesus are rejected in favor of a more “inclusive” message.

Those who are concerned about the integrity of the Gospel will respond to these developments with a very different attitude. We are witnessing the virtual transformation of biblical Christianity into a new faith — a false gospel. This new faith wins the approval of Charles Blow and *The New York Times*, but it is precisely the kind of false gospel that the church is warned in the New Testament to detect and reject with clarity and courage.

Mr. Blow’s column is truly helpful in crystallizing this issue. Those who believe that the gospel of Christ is just a variant of “the American way” will find that the Bible presents a very different Gospel. Those who reject biblical authority will feel free to replace biblical Christianity with a new religion, but they should demonstrate enough honesty to admit that this is indeed what they are doing. Those who are convinced that social respectability determines doctrine will soon find themselves to be socially respectable pagans.

Of course, the great question missing from Charles Blow’s column is this: What if Jesus really *is* the only way of salvation? If so, and Jesus clearly said that it is so, then public relations and etiquette are quickly revealed to be rather frivolous concerns — indeed, these concerns are revealed to be both deadly and delusional.

If we really believe that Jesus is the only Savior and that the Bible truthfully reveals the only Gospel that saves, then we had better make our confidence clear. The inevitable result of this confidence should be a resurgence in concern for the evangelization of those who do not yet know Christ . . . for goodness sake.

See my previous article, “[Many Paths to Heaven?](#),” December 18, 2008. See also coverage by Cathy Lynn Grossman of *USA Today* [here](#) and [here](#).

