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Must Christianity Surrender its Truth Claims?

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That perspective is to be expected among secularists, but theological liberals are also riding the bandwagon. Tired of defending the truth claims revealed in Scripture and long cherished by the Church, these figures call for a radical reformulation of Christianity itself.

A clear and important example of liberal theology at work undermining Christian truth claims is found in *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*, by Charles Kimball. The book has received a great deal of media attention, and Kimball has struck a cord among those who see absolute truth claims as the fuel for inevitable religious strife—and as catalysts for acts of terror.

Kimball is chairman of the Department of Religion at Wake Forest University. Previously head of the Middle East Office at the National Council of Churches, Kimball suggests that Christians should modify the way we hold and present Christian truth claims. A position of “rigid exclusivism” that holds Christianity to be the only message of salvation is, according to Kimball, “the foundation for a tribalism that will not serve us in the twenty-first century.” Accordingly, he instructs Christians to make exclusivist truth claims in a way that they are no longer absolutely exclusive. Behind that disingenuous use of language is his point, namely that Christians must surrender the claim that Jesus is the only Savior.

“Religious truth claims about God or the transcendent necessarily rely on language,” Kimball argues. “When the language stiffens into unyielding doctrines, people frequently take on the role of defending God.” Without doubt, most terrorists hold tenaciously to truth claims understood to be absolute and unyielding. On the other hand, unyielding truth claims are not the problem. Most airline passengers would be relieved to know that the pilot of their plane holds an absolute and unyielding understanding of the laws of gravity. If Kimball’s logic prevails, Christians will be required to surrender any absolute claims concerning Jesus Christ.

At the same time, Kimball insists that he isn’t calling for “a kind of relativism.” Nevertheless, when he speaks of holding to a model of exclusivism that is no longer exclusive, it is clear that this is just relativism in a disguised and dishonest form.

Kimball understands that the exclusivist position “has been dominant among Christians over the centuries.” Furthermore, he understands what the exclusivist’s position entails: “It rests on the conviction that Jesus Christ provides the only valid way to salvation.” So far, so good.

At this point, however, Kimball launches into a call for Christians to hold some model of exclusivism that is no longer exclusive. “Today, however, considerable variation exists among those who would locate themselves within this theological framework,” Kimball suggests. He presents a spectrum of exclusivist views with “literalist” views on the one hand and less “narrow” interpretations on the other. He commends Christian exclusivists who “take a more flexible and

open position.”

This game of playing with words may help to sell his books, but he isn't getting very far with his argument. An exclusivism that is no longer exclusive is really a disguised form of inclusivism, universalism, pluralism, or relativism. What such a position can't be is any form of exclusivism.

Kimball also acknowledges that the New Testament includes passages “that appear on the surface to [be] exclusivist.” As an example, he cites John 14:6 [“Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father but through Me.'”] Christians err, Kimball instructs, when we take such verses “literally.” This approach, according to Kimball, is simply self-evidently wrong. “Christians who say they take the Bible literally are either ignorant or self-deluded.” Well, at least we know where we stand.

Kimball dismisses an exclusivist interpretation of John 14:6 by suggesting that the statement is a mere metaphor. Though the passage appears to state that people who reject Jesus are lost, “That isn't what it says,” according to Kimball. Of course, it's hard to imagine what Kimball thinks the text does say.

In reality, the exclusivist nature of the work of Christ is not based on isolated verses that may be easily taken out of context. In addition to John 14:6, the New Testament also includes the clear declaration of the apostles on the Day of Pentecost, found in Acts 4:12 [“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”] The very phrase, “no other name,” implies nothing less than exclusivism.

Anyone who would make an argument dismissing exclusivism in the New Testament must reject far more than a few verses, for the entire structure of the New Testament points toward this understanding. Jesus Christ is God's provision for our salvation, and the atonement accomplished by Jesus is the only means of salvation. Belief or disbelief in the Lord Jesus Christ stands as the essential question and determining factor concerning salvation.

Most Christians know John 3:16 by memory, treasuring its Gospel affirmation: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” We must note carefully that just two verses later the Gospel records, “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” That chapter ends with the declaration that, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” These verses cannot possibly be reconciled with any form of “soft” exclusivism. Intellectual honesty should require that those who call for “soft” exclusivism admit that this is really a complete rejection of any claim that faith in Christ is necessary for salvation. That same honesty should compel those who reject the Bible's truth claims to be candid in this rejection.

These scriptural declarations demand either acceptance or rejection. There is no way to put a “soft” interpretation on these passages in order to suggest that these are true only for Christians, but not for others. Such an interpretation completely destroys any coherent meaning in the text and rejects the clear teaching of the New Testament in its entirety.

When it comes to the exclusive nature of the work of Christ, the most emphatic testimony may come from the Apostle Paul in his first letter to Timothy, where he speaks of Jesus Christ as the “one mediator” between God and man [1 Tim. 2:5]. He did not claim that Christ is one among many, or several. In the tenth chapter of Romans, Paul tells us that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. Any confusion there?

In a March 17 appearance on Fox News Live with Alan Colmes, Kimball objected to evangelical missionary efforts in Iraq. I appeared on the program to defend such missionary efforts and the missionary nature of the Christian gospel. As I told Alan Colmes, “What we have here, Alan, is a distinction between evangelicals and those who are not evangelicals. I believe, and other evangelicals believe, that eternity is hanging in the balance, that the only way to salvation is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If Dr. Kimball and others do not believe that, then of course they will see this in a different light.”

Colmes then turned and asked, “Dr. Kimball, you do believe that, don't you, that the way of salvation is through the Lord Jesus Christ?” Kimball responded: “My experience of God has come primarily mediated through my experience as a Christian, but a large part of my own family is Jewish, and I am quite sure that my experience of God does not exhaust all the possibilities.”

Later, Kimball rejected the idea that belief in the Lord Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation and the gift of heaven. “I believe that God is the God of all creation and that God’s way far exceed my ways and my experience,” Kimball responded. He continued: “In fact, I write quite extensively in my book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, that indeed there are many paths and we would do well to be the best Christians, to be the best Jews, to be the very best Muslims. . . .”

Charles Kimball was once a Southern Baptist, but now he identifies himself simply as “a Baptist in the South.” He laments the conservative resurgence that took place in the Southern Baptist Convention over the last 25 years, and now describes those who hold traditional evangelical beliefs as “rigid” and potentially dangerous.

He is at least consistent in his liberal reinterpretation of the Bible, expanding his relativizing of the biblical text from issues related to salvation to those related to sexuality as well. He once remarked to Fox News host Bill O’Reilly that “the Bible says actually very little about homosexuality.” He went on to dismiss the biblical teaching concerning homosexuality as needing reinterpretation. This is part and parcel of the way he approaches the Bible. He can find a way to explain away what he just doesn’t want to accept.

Kimball’s book and his arguments presented in the media provide evangelical Christians with a clear warning of what a “nuanced” understanding of the Bible and a more “inclusivist” understanding of exclusivism would really mean. At the same time, Professor Kimball’s arguments should also serve as a graphic reminder of why the conservative redirection of the Southern Baptist Convention was so necessary. The integrity of the Christian gospel requires every Christian to answer this question: When Jesus Christ said that “no man comes to the Father but through Me”—did He really mean what He said?

