



## REFLECTIONS

By David E. Erickson



## Christians in a World Confused About Truth

**I** have heard many people say, “All paths lead to God.” Is that true?

Is one spiritual pathway just as good as the next? If one man goes to the left and the other man to the right, do they end up at the same destination? If one man says “yes” and the other says “no,” do the answers render the same result? Is it possible that every spiritual pilgrimage, no matter how contrary, concludes at the same destination? That’s what the phrase “all paths lead to God” suggests.

Whose prerogative is it to define God? Whose prerogative is it to define the correct path to God? Is it yours or mine? If I select the path to Him, then obviously that path corresponds to the path I have selected for myself. Is God, in any way, defined by what I think of Him or how I think He should be found?

It seems rather convenient for me to believe I can locate God on whatever path I have chosen.

When we suggest, “All paths lead to God,” what we really mean is that my path leads to “my god” and your path leads to “your god.” It all sounds quite tolerant in a culture where ethics are organized by political correctness rather than a search for legitimate truth. Unfortunately, such an effort eliminates God from being anything other than our individual imagination of Him. If we do, indeed, create God, then our individual paths will lead us to exactly what we have created.

**God Defines Himself**

But what if God exists apart from my imagination of Him? What if He was in place long before I thought my first spiritual thought? What if, instead of me defining who God is, He defines himself? And what if, instead of me selecting the appropriate path to Him, He determines how He will be found?

If God is God at all, then He must be able to exist beyond us and even without us. The result, then, is that none of us has anything to say about the paths that lead to Him. If God existed before me, in spite of me, and without me, then my thoughts about finding God must take a new direction.

The truth is that God defines himself. In the same way, He is solely responsible for defining the path

by which He can be found. Finding the path to God has nothing to do with us, and everything to do with Him!

If your life quest is to find yourself, then search for yourself. Don’t claim to be locating God, when all you are searching for is you! If you want to find God, you must search for Him on His terms alone. There really is only one way to God. It is the way He defines and the plan He organizes.

All paths do not lead to God! When are we going to figure out that to believe in everything (for the sake of political correctness) is to believe in nothing? “Everything” includes ethical opposites. Saying that everything works means that nothing works!

If there is a God and if He can be found, then He alone will set the terms to find Him (John 14:6).

**Can Christians Handle the Truth?**

Truth feels like such a mystery. In a world where perspectives are as numerous as the population totals, it is a constant challenge to land at the truth.

I have a favorite preacher. Perhaps he is on your list, too. I can’t say much for his wardrobe, and you don’t ever want to invite him over for supper because both his table manners and his diet are a little hard to accommodate. But when it comes to preaching, he’s tops.

I’m talking about John the Baptist.

The only recorded sermon we have of John the Baptist begins in Luke 3:7,\* “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” I have been preaching for 23 years, and I don’t ever recall a sermon introduction that began, “You worthless snakes!”

As offensive as that sounds, his preaching connected. His style or approach didn’t turn them away. They came out in droves to hear him. When the invitation was offered, people ran down the pathways in response.

How could preaching that offends be such potent preaching?

I have to remind myself that the gospel is frequently offensive. It repeatedly confronts behaviors in my life. It threatens my decisions and places my

God existed before me, in spite of me, and without me. There is only one way to God, and it isn't down a path of man's creation, but down a path that God has defined.

opinion of myself at risk. It makes me question my identity. It regularly wants to bring change to my personality. It often demands that I give in when I don't want to surrender. I find the gospel very offensive!

Yet, offensive as it is, I am strangely drawn to it. I need it! For my attitudes are deeply ingrained, the result of thinking I have nurtured for years, sometimes decades.

It's like all of us who have practiced poor routines of behavior or thinking. One drink and we're gone. One lustful thought or anxious incident and we're gone. Down the path of worry, down the path of anger, down the paths of pride, abuse, skepticism, doubt, apathy, and laziness. The buggy almost drives itself. It knows the way. And I have to tell you that I am offended and threatened any time those well-worn paths are crossed.

But I need them to be crossed!

My heart has stone-cold compartments that willingly sleep like Rip Van Winkle until somebody belows like a furnace fire into the deep freeze of my indifference. I need offensive preaching! When I hear that preaching it makes me squirm, it makes me sweat, it makes me mad, and it makes me feel guilty. But I tell you what—I'll come back to hear that preaching again because I need that preaching!

I don't need a whitewashed relationship that only pats me on the head when I need to be kicked in the pants. I need truth! I need that preaching!

The gospel is very offensive. It offends all of the private places that I have been so feverishly defending. I need the preaching of truth! Without it we fall asleep in the apathy of sameness. After a while we rot to the mildew of a dampened heart. Or worse yet, we become part of the Petrified Spiritual Forest where trees once bent to the press of godly breeze, but now are stiff and unbending.

### Preaching to a Tough Crowd

John the Baptist preached a tough message because he was preaching to a pretty tough crowd. They were tough because they were cruising on autopilot. They had become drowsy by virtue of a common, false assumption: "It's automatic. I'm in!"

For John's audience, it went something like this: "I am Jewish for goodness sake. I live in the bloodline of Abraham for goodness sake. That makes me

an inevitable heir to all of God's goodness."

We think in similar ways. We, too, assume it's automatic. I'm in because my parents took me to church. I think about God a lot. We are all going to the same place. Every path leads to the same destination. I'm American. I'm wealthy. I'm good enough. I'm better than most. It's automatic!

### The Truth Is God Doesn't Need You!

You know what? God doesn't need you or me! He is capable of raising up for himself children of His delight. He is not limited in His work to me or my friends or my Bible study or my church. We need to hear what John told the Jews: "Out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Luke 3:8).

I don't think John's audience was any tougher than the crowds that congregate among the Lord's church today. I have days when I look out in the crowd and I wonder the same questions as John. Why did you come? Who did you come to see?

I see people who seem to come for the oddest reasons. Some come to sleep, others to visit. Some come just to wrestle with their children. Many don't open a Bible to read the Word for themselves—as though it were too much work to participate. There are people who never give a dime to support the ministry that's nursing them. Many come only one hour per week, drinking in but never pouring their life back into ministry. Some have put themselves on the shelf because somebody offended them. Others came only to find "their song" or "their style" of music or preaching or some other self pleasure.

Careful pastor! That's pretty offensive preaching! You're right; it is. It is tough preaching because we can be a pretty tough crowd!

If you didn't come for an encounter with the truth of God, why did you come? This world is in such a mess. We so desperately need Him to confront us in the true places of our need. We had better come searching for the truth! The world is confused enough. Christians had better know how to handle the truth!

\*Scripture quotes are from the *New International Version*.

**David E. Erickson** ministers with First Christian Church in Council Bluffs, Iowa.