

A MANY CREEDS ONE CHRIST@

Evangelist Johnnie Lavender

I John 1:1, 3-7

In the summer of 1942, when I returned home from my first year in college, I took a job at the Pacific Bridge Company Shipyards in Alameda. It was a good paying job and money is always important to a college student. My first year had cost more than one thousand dollars and I had to earn every penny of it myself. In addition, it seemed like a good way to aid in the war effort which was at its peak at that time.

I didn't have a trade, so I hired out as a laborer. You know what a laborer is. He is someone with a strong back and a weak mind. I seemed to fit those qualifications rather well.

I don't know how it was in other shipyards, but the one where I worked, when there was nothing in particular for you to do, you were sent with a crew over to some obscure part of the yard to dig a hole. This hole always had to be an exact size and shape. Sometimes they even sent a surveyor along to make sure it was the right size and shape. Then, when you were through digging the hole, the foreman would send you over to the opposite side of the yard and have another crew come and fill it up again. Once in a while he would get mixed up and send you back in the afternoon to fill up the same hole you dug in the morning. When that happened, there was always a good deal of griping. It wasn't so bad filling up somebody else's hole, but having to fill up your own wasn't much fun.

During the course of my travels from hole to hole, I met **ABig George.** Big George was about six foot four inches tall, and weighed somewhere in the neighborhood of 235 pounds. He was an interesting chap, and while he had not finished high school, he had done a good deal of reading and was well-informed on many subjects.

One afternoon we were busily engrossed filling up an empty hole. Of course, if it was a hole it

would *have* to be empty! I mean we were filling up a hole someone else had dug that morning. To help pass the time I was singing some of the old gospel hymns. Big George came over, stopped me and asked if that was a church song I was singing.

I told him it was, and he wanted to know if I was a Christian. I told him I was. His eyes lit up and he said, **A**You're just the fellow I've been looking for. **I**d like to ask you a couple of questions.**@**

I said, **A**Shoot, George, **I**'ll do my best.**@** Do you know what he asked? **A**Where did Cain get his wife?**@**

To tell you the truth, I was a bit disappointed. I had thought George might be a fellow Christian hungering for some fellowship. Instead, **A**Where did Cain get his wife?**@**

I explained as best as I could how the Bible said Adam and Eve had both sons and daughters. In those days there were no laws against intermarriage between members of the same family, and so he probably married a sister. I went on to explain that, since sin had not yet entered the human race, there was no weakening of or contamination of the bloodline. Therefore, it was physically safe.

George seemed to be satisfied, and about that time, the foreman came over and said, **A**Hey guys, **I**'ve got another job for ya.**@** He took us across the yard, pointed to a spot and said, **A**Dig a hole.**@**

As we continued working together, Big George came up with other questions. He wanted to know about Jonah swallowing the whale. I explained *that* as best as I could and he seemed satisfied. About that time the foreman would come over and say, **A**I've got another job for you. Dig a hole!**@**

That went on for days. Big George would ask a question. I'd try to answer it. He'd seem satisfied. And the foreman would say, **ADig a hole.**®

After about two weeks of questions, answers and holes, one day Big George said, **AJohn, I understand that you're going to be a minister.**® **AThat's right.**® **AWell,**® George said, **AI've got just one more question. Tell me, why you are a Christian and not a Buddhist or Confucianist?**® I said, **AWell . . . George . . . I . . . don't know.**® The truth is, I had never thought about it and I couldn't give him a good sound, logical answer.

I told him I had been raised in a Christian society, had not been exposed to other religions and had found that when I had placed my faith in Christ, I was fully satisfied. While that answer seemed to satisfy him, it didn't satisfy me. I was disgusted with myself because although I could answer most of his inquiries about my faith, I couldn't answer the so-called \$64 question as to why I was a Christian in preference to other faiths, because I didn't know anything about other religions of the world.

So, I decided then and there to make a study of the great religions of the world, to discover why I was a Christian and to determine whether or not in Christianity I had the true revelation of God.

During the intervening years I have read every book I could lay my hands on in the field of comparative religions. I thank God that he led me into the shipyards where Big George could challenge me to know why I was a Christian. Because, through my study of many creeds, my faith in the one Christ is more deeply rooted than before.

Tonight I am speaking to two groups of people: Christians and non-Christians. Among those who are Christians, there are some who are facing an urgent and thrilling summons to preach the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. For them, in this message, I bring an added challenge as we shall see the heart-hunger and crying need for the indescribable riches of the Gospel of this one Christ amid the unbelievable poverty of the many creeds.

Among the non-Christians here tonight there are those who are seeking the truth, searching for God, hungering for the soul-satisfaction which only comes through a knowledge of sin forgiven. For them, in this message I bring a portrait of the great Prince of Peace, who alone can satisfy and give salvation.

There are eleven living religions of the world today: Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism, Judaism, Shinto, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Mohammedanism, Confucianism and Christianity.

Now, it would be impossible for us to analyze all eleven of these religions in one message. So I have chosen the five which are most widely known. These are Hinduism, Mohammedanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity. Each of these present a different idea of God, a different conception of sin and a different method of gaining salvation. The purpose then is to seek to discover which of these could satisfy that longing within the heart of each of us to know God, and to find forgiveness of salvation from sin.

Hinduism

Of the five, Hinduism is the most difficult to understand because of its various forms. But, as we survey Hinduism in an effort to capture the prevailing spirit throughout it as a whole, we are confronted with a religion which contains within itself a number of momentous contradictions.

Hinduism's main conception of God is as an omnipresent divine being called Brahma . . . B- R-A-H-M-A. It's almost impossible to describe Brahma, but Brahma is not a personality. We cannot call Brahma ~~A~~he@ or ~~A~~she.@ Brahma is more like an impersonal ~~A~~it@ . . . Although, even the word ~~A~~it@ is not fully correct, because ~~A~~it@ contains a certain idea of substance, and there is no substance to Brahma.

Brahma is spirit, not a spirit such as the God we worship, but plain, old- fashioned ~~A~~spirit@ which is present everywhere and at all times. In other words, Hinduism first fills the world full of God.

Then it takes a second step which is to deny all real existence to the world. It says, **A**There is nothing without God@-- which is true. We Christians believe that. In fact, John 1:3 says,

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. @

But Hinduism goes on to say -- which is false -- **A**There is nothing but God. @

Now follow my reasoning here. It is very important. If all is God, then all is good. For, if we know anything at all about the nature of God, it is that he is good. But, if all is good, then there is no need for salvation. Salvation from what -- to what? And yet, the Hindu is constantly striving for salvation.

In Hinduism we have a belief in transmigration -- **A**the wheel of change which is forever turning. @ The idea is that what you are in this life is the result of what you were in the last life. And what you will be in the next life, will be a direct result of what you are in this life.

Transmigration, then, is governed by what the Hindus call Karma -- the law of the deed. Or, in other words, you reap what you sow. Of course, we Christians believe that, but we believe it in a different context.

As I have said, the Hindu doctrine -- that all is God -- does not allow for sin. And yet, in Hinduism we have a religion which, while denying the reality of sin, says that your deeds -- both good and bad -- determine what your next level of reincarnation will be. And thus the Hindu becomes involved in a logical contradiction which cannot be reconciled.

What, then, is salvation in Hinduism? To put it simply, it is to be free from this **A**wheel of change@ which is ever turning -- that is, to be free from transmigration. To cease to exist. To be absorbed into and to become a part of Brahma, this elusive world spirit which is everywhere at all times.

But remember, Hinduism teaches that all is God, and on the basis of that, you are part of God

already. So once again, we are caught up in a logical contradiction.

Now, this state of salvation is achieved by balancing the scales of Karma, that is, making your good deeds balance your bad ones. There can't be too many good deeds, for if there are, you will go on to a higher level in your next life, and vice versa if there are too many bad deeds. By contemplation and by abstaining from all effort and desire -- either good or bad -- this state of blessedness wherein you cease to exist is finally attained. This, to the Hindu is salvation. And, this accounts for the widespread lack of activity on the part of the Indian people. If you were to visit India tonight, you would find the Brahman priests and many of the higher castes sitting rigidly still -- lost in deep meditation -- completely oblivious to the world about them. Why is this so? Because they are seeking to balance the scales of Karma hoping that through a quiet life of meditation, they will achieve a blissful state of non-being.

And so, we have in Hinduism a faith which seeks to satisfy your longing for God by offering you a God which has no attributes. A God which has no personality. A God which neither loves nor hates. A God which has no personal interest in your welfare. A God of spiritual essence, unloving and unlovable.

Furthermore, in Hinduism we have a religion which denies the reality and existence of sin, and therefore, offers salvation when salvation isn't necessary. Salvation to be obtained by being drawn into something, a part of which you are already.

Now, frankly, in this conglomeration of inconsistencies I can find no satisfaction for my own soul's desire to know God. No assurance for my soul's salvation. So we move on to --

Mohammedanism

Islam **B** meaning resignation or submission to the will of God -- was the name given to his religion by the prophet himself. As a means of salvation, Mohammed established five rules --

1. The ritual of the creed -- **A**There is no God but Allah. Mohammed is his prophet.**@** This was to

be said once a day. 2. The offering of prayers five times a day. 3. Observance of the annual fast. 4. The bestowal of alms. 5. A pilgrimage to Mecca.

By judiciously keeping these five simple rules, one was supposed to be saved. However, the concept of God offered in Islam would lead one to doubt the assurance of this. The God of Islam is the God of pure will. Not justice, not reason, not love, but will! Christianity says, **A**Trust in God.**@**Mohammedanism says, **A**Submit to God.**@** Hence the coldness, harshness and, often, cruelty of this religion.

Mohammed thought it foolish to suppose that the attributes of man gave him any particular claim to the consideration of God. And, in this we would tend to agree. But, Mohammed goes onto a conception which leads to utter fatalism and despair.

Islam teaches that man cannot approach God except as a slave. That God sits as an awful and unapproachable majesty. That God has no rule, but arbitrary will. That he delights in making all creatures feel as if they are his slaves.

AHe misleads whom he will and guides whom he will,**@**is one of the basic points in the Islamic concept of God. And, with such a God as this, what assurance could anyone ever have of salvation? For, at any moment, God might change his mind and reject him or her.

Hope perishes under the weight of this iron bondage. And, this blind submission to the perceived will of God, explains the degraded conditions of Mohammedan countries.

The great bulk of the people are passive. Wars and revolutions rage about them, but the people sit blissfully by, accepting these as decrees of fate against which it is useless to strive.

Now the strongest canon of evidence which can be brought to the defense of any philosophy or religious faith is that it works. And, Islam cannot deny that as a way of life, it has utterly failed.

Mohammed himself, though blindly devoted to it, found that it left him wanting. On several occasions, when he found that his philosophy did not work, he changed it.

There are a number of instances recorded in Mohammed's own scripture -- the Koran -- where Mohammed issued special proclamations to suit himself. He, the so-called prophet of God, the founder, was defeated in his own faith. The result has been no different wherever Islam is heralded. Suffering, sorrow and struggles are the order of the day. And, if Mohammed has failed so tragically as a way of life, is it not likely to also fail as a hope for eternity? It seems that way to me. And, therefore, I could not find in it the satisfaction for which my soul desired. And so we turn to **B**

Buddhism

From the writings of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, come these words, **A**The world is empty. The heart is surely dead. God is nothing. Man is nothing. Life is nothing. Death is nothing. Eternity is evil. All existence is evil.**@**

Such a philosophy of utter despair with life was based upon the reality of human suffering. And so, it was to a practical problem -- the escape from suffering -- that Buddha addressed himself.

The solution of this problem, or so it seemed to him, was to set aside gods and their worship. It wasn't necessary to deny them, it sufficed to ignore them. Man was to look to himself for salvation. The goal was escape from suffering. The path which led to it must be trodden by man himself. Any consideration of God or gods could be dismissed.

Now, Buddha invited people to salvation by means of virtue, knowledge and self-denial. The fundamental doctrine in Buddhism taught by its founder and received by all Buddhists is the doctrine of The Four Sublime Truths -- namely -- **A**All existence is evil. Evil is the result of desire. To be free from desire is to be free from evil. There is a certain way to be free from desire.**@** There then follow eight steps in this fixed and certain way **B** right to belief, right to judgment,

right utterances, right motives, right occupation, right obedience, right memory and right meditation. In other words, conduct and conduct alone determines a person=s salvation and destiny.

ANot by birth,**@**says Buddha, **A**does one become an outcast. Not by birth does one become a Brahman or priest. By deeds one becomes an outcast. By deeds one becomes a Brahman.**@**

The foundation upon which Buddhism rests is the personality of Buddha himself. In the development of Buddhistic thought, Buddha=s personality has been raised, first to the level of ideal, and then to the level of the divine. This, despite Buddha=s attempt to divert the thoughts of his disciples from the worship of any god, including himself, to concern for their own personal escape of suffering. It is this elevation of Buddha which has converted Buddhism from an ethical system into a religious faith -- for the God of Buddhism is the Buddha himself -- the deified man. In Buddhism we have a faith which sets forth as its God a man who, in his own self-sufficiency, did not acknowledge the need or even the existence of God. A man who held as his **A**higher power**@**man, himself. A man who made so much of man, as to forget about God.

Furthermore, we find in Buddhism, a man-made philosophy of life. Such a philosophy cannot satisfy the desires of our heart of hearts. The greatest philosophy of man -- and Buddha=s was one of the truly great ones -- is still the philosophy of man. Such philosophy can only raise one to a higher level of human existence and experience, but, it cannot lift one above the level of man himself.

To say that Buddha was divinely inspired, is to base that statement on a principle which Buddha himself declined to assume. He did not claim to be inspired. His followers captivated by his sincere life, envisioned in him something supernatural.

They claimed a supernatural birth. He is credited with performing supernatural deeds. And yet, Buddhists who claim these things of him, deny the power from which they can come, for they

believe in a God of nothingness. A God who, if he exists at all, is powerless and insignificant.

True -- in Buddha, we have a great man -- but the fact remains that he is a man, not a God. And, in his way of life, I see a general pessimism which leads to turmoil and despair. More than that, a philosophy, which because it is of man, is relegated to the plane of human existence and fails because it leaves me wanting in my search for a higher power.

Confucianism

There are many philosophers today who would refuse to classify Confucianism as a religion, because it is not God-centered, it is man-centered.

Confucius, himself, was a humanist and an agnostic. For him, man was the measure of all things. Man conceived his own ideals. Man, in his own strength, was sufficient to realize those ideals. Grace from above was needless. Thus, we find in Confucianism, a religion whose main concern is with man's relationship to man. A faith where man's relationship to God is of utter unimportance.

Confucius told his followers to devote themselves to their duties as men and to respect spiritual beings, but to keep away from them. When asked about them and the proper duties to the gods, Confucius replied, **A**We know not about life, how can we know about death? We have not learned how to serve men. How can we serve God?**@** And, in the Analects, the writings of Confucius, this rule is laid down -- **A**Worship as if something were present Worship a God as if he were present.**@**

Continuing on this point Dr. Hu Shin, a great Chinese scholar, has said that, **A**Confucius was like a fisherman who, knowing there was no fish in the pond, still pretended to catch fish by casting his net into it.**@**

Now Confucius believed there was not much evil in this world. That man was inherently good.

And he felt there was a two-fold reason for the evil that does exist **B** 1. Those who are superior lack proper superiority. 2. Those who are inferior lack proper inferiority. Therefore, in Confucianism, salvation was to be gained by being properly superior or properly inferior, whichever the case might be.

Without the aid of God or gods, for Confucianism believes both in one God which is monotheism, and many gods which is polytheism. And here again, we have a hopeless theological inconsistency. Without the aid of God or gods Confucius hoped to bind society together by teaching -- **ALove** to the rulers, and submission to the ruled. Kindliness to the elders and respect for old age to the young. Generosity to the older brother and humility to the younger brother. His ideal was **At**he superior man@living a life of complete harmony with himself and others.

How foolish to assume that any person could achieve such a state without the grace of God. And, in the end, Confucius had to admit that this was true. He died a disappointed, unsuccessful old man, frankly admitting that he -- the founder of this faith -- was not capable of achieving this state of **A**superior manhood. He died freely admitting that he had failed in the very faith which he had fostered.

And yet, despite this fact, Confucius has been raised to the level of the divine. Today millions of Chinese bow before his shrine. Thousands of gorgeous temples have been erected to his honor. Each year, in nearly every city in China, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of offerings are made to this deified man who openly confessed he was just a teacher and that that which he taught was not the truth.

Oh, when will people learn that salvation is not by what they do for God, but by what they allow God to do for them.

Christianity

We turn finally to Christianity. We find in it a conception of God as an omnipotent, omnipresent, righteous, just, gracious, loving and heavenly Father, whose great will and desire is that people may be in fellowship with him.

We also find in Christianity a real existence of evil. Evil is a terrible and inescapable fact of human life. Numerous scriptures testify to this fact -- **A**There is none righteous, no not one. @ **A**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. @ And many others.

This presence of evil in the world is the result of man=s turning away from God. Created in perfection, because of his rejection of God, man=s righteousness is now as filthy rags in God=s sight. No longer is he a child of God. No longer does he merit consideration from God. And, God cannot lower his standards of righteousness and justice. They demand to be satisfied. And yet, God=s grace and love cause him to yearn that people might be in fellowship with him.

Here we find a real tension within the Christian faith. A tension between the righteousness of God which demands satisfaction, and the love of God which yearns for communion and fellowship to be restored.

This tension is satisfied in Jesus Christ, for, as by one man sin entered into the world, so too, by one man -- Jesus Christ, the sinless son of God -- man regains his lost fellowship with God.

The humanity of Christ cannot be contested. The very dating system was changed at his birth. He is heralded as the greatest teacher of truth, the greatest example of living the world has ever known.

If this be true, then hear him as he speaks **B** **A**I am the son of God. @ **A**I and my father are one. @ **A**He that hath seen me hath seen the Father. @ In answer to the question, **A**Art thou the Christ, the son of God? @ He answered, **A**Thou hast said it! @

He was taken into judgment and condemned to death for claiming deity. Now I ask you -- if Jesus is the greatest teacher of truth, the greatest example of living the world has ever seen, then he must be as he claimed to be. Otherwise, he is the worst blasphemer and vilest liar the world has ever known.

Such a person, who would falsely set himself up as the Son of God, so millions of people would place their trust in him, cannot be the greatest teacher of truth. Such a blasphemer and liar cannot possibly be the supreme example which mankind is to follow.

Why should we celebrate the birth of One who has led millions of people into eternity without God? Why should we build great cathedrals in which to worship a blasphemer? Why should we lead our children to Sunday school in order that they might learn to follow the example of a liar?

No! If we are to accept Christ at all, we must accept him in his humanity and in his deity! It is here that he differs from all the other founders of the world's religious faiths. The many creeds point the way to truth and life, the one Christ says, All am the way, the truth, the life.®

In all the other faiths of the world, we have seen many admirable qualities. We have seen in their founders great men. But no other creed can produce a Christ. No other system can produce a Savior. No other faith can promise forgiveness of sin.

In the other creeds we have discovered defeat and despair. We have come to the end of our quest only to find ourselves lacking the satisfaction of our heart hunger. In Christ, and in Christ alone, do we find complete fulfillment of our search for truth.

Tonight you face the crisis of the crossroads. Before you, stretching out across time into eternity, are two great highways. Choose carefully the path you follow, for your soul's eternal destiny lies in the balance.

One road is strewn with the wreckage of the mortals who have walked its great white way. Caught up in the swirl of the crowd, they have whirled on and on and on -- faster and faster in their search for meaning -- until, at last, they have dropped by the wayside exhausted, defeated and dying. If you could hear the cry that comes from their last gasping breath it would be, ALost . . . lost . . . lost . . . I=am lost!@ Their bones, heaped high at the crossroads, spell out an awful warning that salvation is not to be found in any of the many creeds, but only in the one Christ.

For, off in the distance, at the end of that other road, stands One more lovely than the sweetest rose. The fairest of ten thousand. The lily of the valley. The bright and morning star. And, in the silence of this solemn hour, this King of Kings and Lord of Lords cries out the words which make the angels sing, ACome unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.@

Christ asks for just one thing from you tonight -- your sin. In exchange for that burden he offers you the keys of eternal life. This is the Gospel! This is the Christ! Will you claim him tonight?