

I Am the Way

If you were alive at all in the early 70s then you will remember one of the most successful commercial jingles ever thrust upon the American consumer, / the Burger King song. In the unlikely case that you have been able to successfully purge the lyrics from your consciousness, let me refresh your memory: /

*Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce, special orders won't upset us,
all we ask is that you let us serve it your way. Have it your way....
Have it your way at Burger King*

Though the Burger King song simply celebrated the freedom to select the particular condiments you preferred to garnish your Whopper, the secret of a successful commercial is to express, however crudely, the values and beliefs of a culture. And the phrase, / “have it your way,” expressed well the culture of the preceding decade of the sixties, a decade in which American culture radically changed in multiple ways. Perhaps the best way to describe those changes was a growing suspicion with authorities. The legitimacy of every social institution which authorized the “way” we should live was challenged: the government, the academy, the military, the church, even the family. An entire generation grew up with a different mindset. Rather than accept the traditions and conventions and wisdom of one’s elders, this generation had a different impulse. / “Don’t trust anyone over 30.” / “Do

your own thing.” / “Live and let live.” A popular therapist in the ‘60s was Fritz Perls, founder of “gestalt therapy” but more famous for what came to be known as the “gestalt prayer.” This prayer captured the mood of a generation. / *I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations, And you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you, and I am I, and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.* (Fritz Perls, "Gestalt Therapy Verbatim", 1969)

Throughout history traditional wisdom and culture did not usually elevate individual choice as the best / “way” to determine one’s direction in life. In a traditional culture people are expected to conform their lives to whatever “way” their society determines is the best way to live. / The early Greek and Roman philosophers did not encourage people to have it their own way. They encouraged people to follow a philosophy they often referred to as the golden mean or way. / Confucius and other Chinese sages taught people to follow the “way of heaven.” / Many eastern religions encouraged people to live according to the “tao”, a word which means the right path or way. / The Hebrew word for way is “derek” and so the prophets repeatedly called Israel to follow the “derek” or “way” of the Lord.

So you can see how radical the sixties were. “I do my thing and you do your thing”, “have it your way” flies in the face of the wisdom of the ages. And yet, nineteen hundred and sixty years before the radical sixties,

there was a prophet who came along and said something even more profoundly radical. His name was Jesus and his message was not “Have it your way.” But neither was it to follow the way of the Lord. What Jesus said was far more radical, far more controversial. Listen to what he says in a conversation with his disciples found in John chapter 14. /

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” / Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, / “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:3-6)

Growing up going to Church and hearing the words of Scripture over and over is like growing up in / Moran, Wyoming . Everyday, when you wake up and go outside, one of the most breathtaking sights in all the world is continually on display for you to see, the spectacular mountain peak known as the / Grand Teton. Living in Moran, after awhile you become so accustomed to that sight that it gradually seems ordinary. Years ago Randy Allen and I drove through Moran, Wyoming on a trip and we were stunned with its beauty. Boys from West Texas aren’t used to seeing such a sight. But as we stopped at the little gas station there, we noticed the people who lived there were walking around as if there was nothing special to see. We could hardly take our eyes off of the mountains; they hardly glanced at it.

When we read these / words in John 14 we are like those folks in

Moran, Wyoming. We've heard them so often, for so long, they sound ordinary to us. But I assure you when the disciples heard Jesus that evening they were stunned. No great teacher would ever make such an outrageous statement. Buddha told his disciples to follow the way of Brahma. The disciples of Confucius were told to follow the way of Heaven. Moses and the prophets instructed disciples to follow the way of Yahweh. Years later Mohammed would tell his disciples to follow the way of Allah. None of these would have had the audacity or arrogance to say I am the Way, follow me! If they *had*, they would not have been taken seriously as a great teacher.

These are not words someone says who expects people to take him seriously. And it is surprising that anyone took Jesus seriously after saying such a thing. But they did take Jesus seriously, because it was apparently obvious to them that Jesus was more than just another great teacher or prophet. This is why John tells us in the first words of his gospel. /

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and glory; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (John 1:1,14).

Jesus is not just a prophet come to preach the Word of God to us; Jesus was the prophetic Word of God incarnate, come to walk among us. In John's letter to the churches, he reiterates this radical assertion about Jesus.

/ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we

have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. / The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. (1 John 1:1-2)

Jesus' statement, "I am the Way" is as stunning, as breathtaking, as outrageous in the twenty first century every bit as much as it was in the first century. Non Christians today would have no problem with us if we simply said that Jesus was a good man whose good life was tragically, violently interrupted by bad men on the cross. But biblical faith doesn't say that. The cross was not merely man's interruption; it was God's intervention. The cross was not the tragic end of a good man who tried to show us the way; it was the triumphant victory of the God Man who insisted he was the way, the only way.

So what does it mean for us to believe Jesus is not merely a teacher who came to show the way, but the Son of God who came to be the Way? It means more than we could fully understand if we were to live a thousand lifetimes. / It is the essence of Christianity. It is what makes our faith qualitatively different than every other faith ever preached on this planet.

Every other religion follows a teacher because of the truth of his words. We follow Jesus' words because *He* is the Truth. Religions differ on their various ways of salvation, but what they all have in common is their

focus on what we must do to be saved. How different is the Way of Christ. Other faiths seek a way to find God, we proclaim a God who has found a way to us. Other faiths please their gods through sacrifices, we preach Christ, the Son of God who was pleased to become a sacrifice for us. Other faiths seek salvation based on their own virtue, we preach that while we were sinners, enemies to God, the Son of God died for us that we could be saved not by our works but by his grace. Other faiths offer us a way of self-improvement, we preach the power of the indwelling Son of God through his Spirit whose inner presence transforms us into his image. In other words, while other faiths provide explanations of the way to be saved, followers of the Son of God proclaim the Way God has saved us.

It is not that Jesus gives no commands to obey, no teachings to learn, no lifestyle to follow. He has given us a way to follow. But what makes Jesus different isn't so much his teachings. He summed up all of his teaching at the end of his sermon on the mount in Matthew (7:12) when he said, / *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for **this sums up the Law and the Prophets**.* There is nothing particularly new about this teaching. Hundreds of years before Jesus showed up on the scene, / Confucius had already said “*Do not do to others what you would not like yourself,*” the / Buddha had already said, “*Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.*” / Hinduism taught “*do naught onto others*

what you would not have them do unto you.” / Zoroaster had already taught, “That nature alone is good which refrains from doing to another whatsoever is not good for itself” and / Taoism had already taught, “Regard your neighbor’s gain as your gain, and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss.”

/ What was utterly unique about Jesus’ teaching was not so much the ways we should follow, the truths we should believe or the kind of lives that we should live. What was completely new with Jesus was his claim that the way, the truth and the life was a person, and ***He is that person!*** What a difference that makes. Jesus is not just our teacher; he is our ever present companion and guide. He has already been wherever we are. He shares our humanity; he understands our struggles. He knows what it’s like to have over-protective parents that don’t always understand him. He understands sibling rivalry first hand; his own brothers thought he was crazy. He knows the grief of losing a close friend to death, whether by illness like Lazarus or murder like John the Baptist. He understands the stress of dealing with the demands of hundreds of people upon his time and resources. He knows the loneliness, rejection, ridicule, betrayal, manipulation, anger. He even knows what its like to be afraid, to struggle with doubt. He knows what its like to die. He’s been wherever you are and is willing to be there again with you. And knowing Him who is the Way is far better than simply knowing a way or a philosophy or a religion, because when difficult times come, and

we feel lost, having a companion is far better than merely having a map.

A map may show you where you have to go, the valleys you have to go through, the mountains you have to climb over. But a map can't enjoy the scenery along the way; a map can't laugh with you at a good joke; a map can't pick you up when you've fallen down or find you when you've wandered off the path. There are many good maps that show good ways for us to live. There is only one companion who has offered to be the way for us, a truth I learned years ago playing football at Wheelock Elementary.

I rode my bike there on Saturday afternoons because there was always a pickup football game going on, usually high school guys. I was only in junior high. Usually I would sit just outside the lines waiting and hoping someone would invite me to play on their team. Usually I'd ride home after awhile disappointed. But one Saturday I'll never forget. That Saturday John Greer was playing. Everybody knew John Greer. He was the best football player in town, a star player at Lubbock High. More importantly, for me, he was a neat guy. He saw me sitting on the sidelines and invited me to play on his team. I couldn't believe it; I jumped up and ran to join the huddle.

I really didn't care if I ever touched the ball. Just to be out there on the field was thrill enough. When we broke the huddle, I'd run to my customary position, wide receiver. For a while someone on the defense would cover me, but after a few plays it was obvious I was no threat. Soon

the defense forgot about me. Then, as we were huddled up to call a play, Greer looked at me. “Can you catch a pass.” I couldn’t believe my ears. “Yes” I said. And he said, “Good. Go long.” No one had ever told me that before. That’s the pass route every receiver dreams to run. So when the ball was snapped I went long, running as fast as I could, all the way to the endzone, ignored by all defenders who had little concern for me. When I arrived in the end zone and looked up, there it came, descending from the heavens, a perfect spiral that gently landed in the palms of my hands, then through my hands and finally bouncing shamefully on the field.

I knew what I was supposed to do. I knew the route I was supposed to run. I understood the rules of football. My problem wasn’t a failure to understand what I was supposed to do; my problem was my failure to do it. It took courage to run back to the huddle. When I got there I stood just outside, hoping no one would notice me. Then I heard Greer’s voice, “Langford.” What was he going to say to me now? “You idiot. You were wide open. Why did you drop the ball? Don’t you know how to play football? Why are you out here if you’re can’t play?” That’s what I feared. That’s not what I heard. Greer just looked at me and said, “Go long again.”

I couldn’t believe it. I ran again hard to the end zone. I was ignored again, even more, my inability to catch a football had been well established. Again the heavens delivered. Again it came down gently into my hands.

This time I caught it and scored a touchdown. 'Til I die I'll never forget that moment, a moment that came because of a person who did something no book of instructions could ever do. / A book cannot throw the ball to you again. Knowing Greer was far different, far better than having a book.

We all drop the ball in life. And when we do, its not enough to simply throw the book at people. People need more than a book, more than a religion, more than a way. / They need a person, the person who is the Way. And long, long ago, in an upper room, speaking to his disciples, the Word made flesh, the Son of God, Jesus uttered the most amazing, wonderful words. "I am the Way." May those words never become ordinary to us because believing those words makes all the difference in the world.