

Biblical Exclusivism and Cultural Pluralism:

**a.k.a. "There is one Lord over everthing; there is one King, he is Jesus"
Daniel 3:1-30**

Immigration and globalization have brought various nationalities, ethnicities, and religions into closer proximity than ever before. When America was overwhelmingly Protestant, and even after successive waves of Catholic immigrants, the religious debate was intramural: "Which denomination's theology is most biblical or accurate?" Now, with Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism also major stakeholders on the world scene, pluralism has bred relativism. A widespread view is that all religions have equal standing, and that none has absolute claim on the truth. So Christians come under considerable social pressure to renounce exclusivism, on the grounds that it is intolerant and arrogant, and leads to violence in the name of God. This situation is not new, however; nearly three thousand years ago, Daniel's friends came under similar pressure.

Day 1: Daniel 3:1-30 No other god ...

Chapter 3 develops the overall argument of Daniel one step further. Chapter 1 affirms that God is *sovereign*, even though his client nation was defeated by a contemporary superpower, and its patron super-god. Chapter 2 affirms that God is *supreme* over all gods in the heavens above (2:47), and over all kingdoms on the earth below (2:44-45). Chapter 3 develops the corollary: he alone is to be worshipped and obeyed. This chapter makes the point in two ways. First, the three faithful Jews refuse to bow before an idol: "O king ... we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (3:18). Secondly, when God delivers the men from the furnace, the king concludes, "No other god can save in this way" (3:29). These are two aspects of exclusivism: (a) only this God is to be worshipped; (b) only this God can save.

To the offense of their culture, and our own, biblical faith is exclusive in both respects: we worship no other gods, and affirm that no other gods save. We see this just as clearly in the New Testament. When told to stop preaching the gospel, under threat of death, the apostles reply, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). In other words, Christ alone is to be worshipped, because he alone can save.

Day 2: Daniel 3:1-7 No other option, not even in a pluralistic world

Given that Scripture calls us to religious exclusivism, how do we live

within a pluralistic and relativistic culture? Many Christians today feel that exclusivism is a non-starter: it is simply too controversial and offensive, so they soft-peddle or side-step it. This reluctance is understandable, but strategically nonsensical: our context is no different in this regard than both Old Testament and New Testament contexts.

Both Nebuchadnezzar and the other peoples of his time are pluralists. When the king sets up this statue, he does not order all peoples to give up their own gods; he insists only that they add a new god. His intent is not primarily religious, but political: to unify a diverse empire, and to determine who is a loyal subject. The king orders “the straps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials” to come to a dedication ceremony (3:2). Understanding his purpose, all the officials – “the straps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials” – comply (3:3). The repetition underscores the cultural consensus. Near consensus, that is. All comply except the three Jewish officials.

Since then, the faithful Church has consistently declined to participate in religious-political ceremonies and oaths, even when refusal entailed persecution or death, whether under the Roman empire, the Ming and Qing dynasties of China, or wartime Japan. Today, all we face today is social pressure, not threat to life or livelihood. So we do well to stand firm. Today, it is common to suppose that all religions are largely the same, and that sincere worshippers of any faith will make it to heaven. This view is not open to us: there is one true God, who alone is to be worshipped.

Day 3: Daniel 3:4-18 At the same time, let us not be provocative about it

One reason that our culture is leery of religious absolutism is a fear that it breeds intolerance and violence toward other faiths (such as between Christianity and Islam). If all religions are equally valid, the rationale supposes, there is one less thing to go to war over. In that light, we note two features of this text. For the one, these Jewish bureaucrats do not provoke antagonism by publicly trumpeting their opposition to polytheism. They are simply minding their own business, and following their own convictions, when they are ratted out by professional rivals (3:8). For the other, it is the relativist Nebuchadnezzar – not the exclusivist Jews – who resorts to violence (3:6,15,19-23,29).

As we consider our own times, let us admit without hesitation that a great number of wars have been waged in the name of religion. Of course, that does not mean that the war was actually about religion. Political leaders often realize that people will not risk their lives just to maintain

some ruler's hold on power. Some higher motivation is necessary. So leaders may co-opt religion for personal political ends (though religious groups are too readily duped by such manipulation). In actuality, the most murderous regimes of the twentieth-century were avowedly secular states (Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, China, Cambodia). So secularism has killed more people than religion. That acknowledged, religious violence is entirely contradictory for Christians: we worship a Lord who did not inflict violence, but suffered it. Similarly, Jesus calls us both to religious exclusivism and to religious tolerance. So, like these three, we do well neither to succumb to relativism nor to provoke public confrontation.

Day 4: Daniel 3:15-29 God is able to save

God's exclusivity is evident in this: he rules over all powers in the heavens or on earth. Three times this chapter highlights God's ability to save his people from all threats, no matter how powerful. King Nebuchadnezzar threatens execution: "What god *will be able* to rescue you from my hand!" (3:15). The three Jews exclaim: "The God we serve *is able* to save us from [the furnace], and he will rescue us from your hand" (3:18). Once God does save them, Nebuchadnezzar confesses, "No other god *is able* to save in this way." (3:29). Our God saves!

Sometimes God saves *from* the fire: he could have done so in this instance, plucking the three out of harm's way before they were thrown into the furnace. Other times, God saves *through* the fire, as here, allowing his people to fall into danger, before rescuing them from it. But most times, even in Scripture, God does *not* save. In Revelation 13, for instance, the elder John describes the coming persecution: "If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed" (13:10). God *can*, save but does not *always* do so! As Revelation 13 exhorts, "This calls for patient endurance and faith on the part of the saints." So persecution – and life in general – calls for two kinds of faith: confidence that God *can* save, and confidence in God when he *does not*.

Day 5: Daniel 3:18-29 When God does not save

These young leaders prepare for the possibility that God would not rescue them: "Even if he does not [save us] ... we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold" (3:18). Preparing for this option makes perfect sense: after all, they are in Babylon precisely because God did not rescue them or the nation from the Babylonian invaders. Then, after God saves them, King Nebuchadnezzar praises their willingness to die: "They

trusted in [God] and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God" (3:28). Subsequent history records – not least in the furnaces of Nazi Germany, or in the prisons of Pol Pot, or in the Rwandan genocide – that God more often does not intervene to save his people. So the confidence that he *can* deliver requires much less faith than the determination to worship him even when he *does not* intervene.

For our part, while persecution and national catastrophe are remote, personal disappointment, hardship or grief can still threaten our faith. This is, of course, a much lighter burden than that which faced Daniel and his friends, or the holocaust victims of World War 2, or the numerous genocides since. Still, let us acknowledge the distress of such suffering. Let us also affirm that such evil originates not from God, but from human wickedness. And let us find comfort in four realities, only three of which were available to Daniel and his colleagues. First, God is *able* and occasionally actually *does* deliver. Second, God is sovereign, even over suffering (Daniel 1). Third, God will one day set all things right (as we will see in Daniel 12). Fourth, in Christ, God entered our suffering, and suffered on our behalf. Life can still be hard, and evil can be hard to fathom, but we persevere in Christ despite suffering, knowing that he walked this same path for us, and waits to welcome us home at last.

Day 6: Daniel 3:4-7 All peoples, nations and men of every language

One of Nebuchanezzar's inflated demands was that not only all his subordinate officials from around his empire, but also that "peoples, nations and men of every language" bow before his statue (3:4-6). In response, all do so (3:7). The book of Revelation picks up this language to make the point that one ruler exists who actually deserves universal worship, and who will one day receive it: "Before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb... They cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb' (Rev 7:9-10).

This is the justification for Christian exclusivism: that one day, "at the name of Jesus every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11). We confess him alone now; one day, all will confess him alone.