

## The Riddle of the One and the Many: What does the Bible Say about Pluralism?

By Bob Young

### INTRODUCTION

My assigned topic is to explore pluralism; the title includes the tension between “the one and the many.” Is there one? Or are there many? This is the question of pluralism. It is also the question of idolatry. Perhaps you have never thought of those two concepts together. Since at least some of us can likely say we have not made that connection previously, we begin with some fundamental observations and definitions.

“Looks aren’t everything...luxury’s not everything...money’s not everything...health is not everything...success is not everything...happiness is not everything...even everything is not everything...there’s more to life than everything.”

Simply stated: what some people see as everything—the panacea, the cure-all and end-all—is not everything. Having my own way is not everything...stuff is not everything...success is not everything...power, prestige, prominence are not everything.” So is the solution to try everything (Solomon in Ecclesiastes), to cover all of the bases? Why cannot a Christian accept a number of possibilities? And, specifically focusing on the assignment, what about all of these “isms”? Are they actually idols?

Definition: Idolatry is the misidentification of the meaning of life. What do you live for? Ingmar Bergman said, “You live with meaning because living is its own meaning.” Perhaps some do live to live. Some live for pleasure, some live for reputation, some live for experiences, some live for success, some live for things (covetousness, Col. 3:5).

An idol is an object of ardent devotion, made the center of the heart’s desire. “If only I had—education, money, looks, success—I’d be happy. That is the language of idolatry. An idol is the norm and inspiration of life. An idol is what gives life meaning. An idol represents a worldview—this is the priority, this is supreme, this is the ideal.

Idolatry is attractive because we want to be like those around us; we tend to adopt their values; we choose those things than impress. We share perspectives, priorities, and affections.

Idolatry is attractive because it is easier to trust the physical than God—the seen than the unseen. Mankind wants something tangible. Idols seem to produce.

Idolatry is attractive because we determine our own way. Idols are man-made; idols are man-made, defined by mankind to give humanity meaning and worth. This concept, this way of thinking, feeds on itself.

Idolatry is dangerous because it masks its true nature.

Idolatry is dangerous because it quietly infiltrates and changes us.

Idolatry is dangerous because it is so insidious, so subtle.

### ***Introducing Pluralism (and other isms)***

Pluralism is a way of thinking. Pluralism is “in your face.” Pluralism proposes multiple priority and value systems. Pluralism sets up alternative powers and authorities. Pluralism demands accepting alternate viewpoint, world views, and lifestyles.

The Synoptic Gospels make much of Jesus’ encounters with competing power and authority—the kingdom described in the Gospels comes with a Messiah who confronts demonic powers and idolatrous powers, who debates with religious authorities, and who is executed by the imperial principalities. This is an important, essential beginning point, because when we talk about idolatry, we are talking about what kinds of powers, principalities, authorities, and value systems can replace God.

Paul continues the talk about principalities and powers, rulers, authorities. In Paul’s day, these concepts represented a wide array of forces, systems, and powers in the world, both visible and invisible. We would today perhaps describe these as systems or structures. There are all sorts of systems and structures that govern our world, social systems and orders that represent commitments and values, concepts that are not always visible or easily identifiable.

When Paul rebukes the spiritual snobbery of the Corinthians, we get a hint of this meaning: 1 Cor. 2:6-8. Paul connects such powers with the government of the empire, religious law, astrology (which many in Paul's day thought to exercise control over human affairs). We might list the state or politics, media, national interest, moral norms, educational institutions.... To systematize the list, we might group "religious structures, intellectual structures (-ologies and -isms), moral structures or codes and customs, political structures (including the marketplace).... The list could be expanded.

What interests me about the other topics included in this series is that we are addressing contemporary versions of many of Paul's "principalities and powers." Me-ism, narcissism, consumerism, materialism, pluralism (my assigned topic), naturalism, humanism, pragmatism, eroticism/sexism...

These are idols—thus the overall theme of Idolatry—because they loom so large in our culture and society. They are present alternative powers, gods which may govern our lives. Maybe life is to be lived, not by the power of God, but by the power of an alternate value system.

Another observation about pluralism: when we think correctly, we see that in addressing pluralism we are not talking about religious structures but about intellectual structures in the culture. When someone suggests the validity of alternate truth claims, that is not so much a religious claim as an intellectual claim—a truth claim. Someone who says the human being is supreme and that truth claims are relative to human supremacy is making an intellectual claim. When one claims the right of human choice or alternate truth claims, that is an intellectual claim. Or when one denies objective truth, or questions the source of truth or the nature of truth, that is at its very foundation an intellectual claim with implications in the realm of religion.

### ***Defining Pluralism***

#### **Merriam-Webster**

Main Entry: **plu·ral·ism**

**1** : the holding of two or more offices or positions (as benefices) at the same time

**2** : the quality or state of being [plural](#)

**3 a** : a theory that there are more than one or more than two kinds of ultimate reality **b** : a theory that reality is composed of a [plurality](#) of entities

→**4 a** : a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization →**b** : a concept, doctrine, or policy advocating this state

#### **Online Free Dictionary**

**1.** *The condition of being multiple or plural.*

→**2. a.** *A condition in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious, or cultural groups are present and tolerated within a society.* →**b.** *The belief that such a condition is desirable or socially beneficial.*

**3.** *Ecclesiastical The holding by one person of two or more positions or offices, especially two or more ecclesiastical benefices, at the same time.*

**4.** *Philosophy*

**a.** *The doctrine that reality is composed of many ultimate substances.*

→**b.** *The belief that no single explanatory system or view of reality can account for all the phenomena of life.*

#### **Thesaurus**

[doctrine](#), [ism](#), [philosophical system](#), [philosophy](#), [school of thought](#) - a belief (or system of beliefs) accepted as authoritative by some group or school

### ***Distinguishing religious pluralism***

**It is easy to read definitions of pluralism, but what does pluralism mean?**

Pluralism demands that life operate under the principles of acceptance and diversity. It is promoted as a system for the "common good" of all. It is a coming together with common recognition and credence to all beliefs and developments of modern social, scientific, and economic societies.

"For pluralism to function and be successful in achieving the common good, all groups have to agree to a

minimal consensus regarding both shared values, which tie the different groups to society, and shared rules. .  
." (Wikipedia) This sounds good but is impractical and even impossible because there will always be certain truths that are non-compromising.

Religious pluralism is a set of worldviews that stands on the premise that one religion is not the sole exclusive source of values, truths, and supreme deity. It therefore must recognize that at least "some" truth must exist in other belief systems. This is one example of "they can't all be right."

### ***Focusing the topic—Christian Religious Pluralism***

My focus is not on the pluralism of the world's major religions and philosophies. My purpose is to examine the growing movement towards pluralism, relativism and compromise within Christianity itself. Many people claim to be Christians because they profess belief in Jesus Christ. However, notions of "belief" have taken on a wide range of definitions in the postmodern Christian church. Specifically, more and more Christian leaders want to escape the label of intolerance and narrow mindedness. They want to be accepted in a postmodern world where everyone is saying, "My truth is different than your truth" and "my way to God is different than your way to God" - so don't judge others based on outdated books, rules and morals.

1. TOPIC. The old question was "is one church as good as another." A related, expanded version of the question developed, "is one religion as good as another." In the contemporary world, we hear both questions.
2. TOLERANCE. Accepting pluralism as a valid (intellectual) worldview demands that one be non-judgmental of others and results in an increasing focus on tolerance. We must distinguish tolerance of and love for people from tolerance of falsehood.
3. TRUTH. Accepting pluralism as a valid worldview results in the rejection of absolute objective truth (truth which is true regardless of circumstances or subjective considerations).

### ***BIBLICAL TEXT—WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?***

Remember our title: The Riddle of the One and the Many

John's cosmic gospel provides a good foundation for addressing this subject.

- Jesus is the "logos"—reasoning, thinking, thought, logic, communication, revelation.
- Jesus speaks of worship in spirit and truth.
- Jesus claims to be truth.
- Pilate asks, "What is truth?"
- Notice the emphasis on truth in John's gospel.

How do these passages fit into a pluralistic world?

#### **I. Truth exists and can be known**

Truth is truth even if it is rejected, he came to his own and they rejected him

Truth was truth even if Pilate could not identify it.

Jesus spoke of the Jews as those who worship what/whom they do know.

Jesus spoke of true worshipers.

True (genuine) knowledge is consistent with truth. One cannot know untruths.

Paul also said truth can be known, Rom. 1:18-20, and that those who reject truth do so without excuse, with wickedness, and willfully.

#### **II. Truth demands objective standards for various aspects of life.**

Truth defines morality and ethics.

Truth provides correct understandings concerning racial and gender issues.

Truth provides correct understandings concerning acceptable religion.

Society cannot be allowed to define truth and morality.

Jesus boldly confronted alternate truth claims in the conflict of two worlds (world views).

Jesus boldly confronted sin.

Jesus boldly confronted prejudice.  
Jesus was willing to pass judgment (make righteous judgments).

### **III. Truth religiously ultimately focuses on Jesus' claims.**

Jesus is liar, lunatic, or Lord.  
Because Jesus is Lord, real worship is therefore in spirit and truth.  
Jesus did not accept (tolerate) the religiously tolerant, but challenged them.

### **APPLICATIONS**

We are faced with an alternative power or authority: "the god of choice." Choice is not bad, but neither is choice a virtue. Choice is not necessarily an advantage. Choice can be either a blessing or cursing. It is the improper use of choice that is idolatry—when our choice places something else ahead of God. Good choices depend upon good information, truth. Truth demands that correct choices be identified, and that incorrect choices be rejected. There is no room for tolerance of incorrect choices.

### **TAKEAWAYS**

Jesus did not die to make us happy but to make us holy.  
Jesus claimed the existence of absolute truth.  
Jesus demanded that people live according to the standards of absolute truth.  
Jesus is truth.