

A LETTER FROM CLAIRE

CONTEXT

Is Jesus the Only Way?

One may assume the letter from Claire in this case study could not have been written by a less likely member of the congregation. She had been reared in one of the most conservative churches in her denomination, was quite active in the student Christian group in the university, and was a regular participant in the university church. But contact and friendship with international students from India and the Middle East incited a change in her, and Claire began to ask fundamental questions about her own faith and the traditional claims of Christianity. The letter reflects the transformation that is taking place.

Claire's reaction to inter-cultural and inter-religious encounter, however is not uncharacteristic of what happens to many Christians –who have accepted unquestioningly the assertion that Jesus is the only Savior. They have heard or read the words of Simon Peter when he said,

"Be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from death, by him this man is standing before you well This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the comer. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:10-12).

What the Apostle declares here is not different from what he „ reported to have said earlier (Acts 2:17-39 and 3:12-26), but there is one striking exception He asserts not only that salvation is found in Jesus Christ, but *only* in him. Clearly it is the conviction that Jesus is the only Savior of humankind that has motivated the vast majority of Christian missionaries to leave their homes and families, to journey to other places, live among other peoples, and attempt to communicate the gospel to them.

On the other hand, it is the exclusive claim of Christians that Jesus Christ is the final and unique revelation of God to humankind that perplexes and offends most Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and followers of other faiths. Sensitive Christian believers have become increasingly aware of this, and many, like Claire, are confused about what they should think and do. A century or so ago Christians like Claire were, for the most part, ignorant of the religions of Africa and Asia. But as people in the West became more aware of the beliefs of other religions, their sacred literature translated and made available, and the study of comparative religions more widespread, the issues faced by missionaries and questions raised by scholars such as Ernst Tröltzsch (1865-1923) and Max Müller (1823-1900) are being considered and discussed not only by university students, but generally among church peoples. How one responds to these issues will determine to a significant degree one's view of the Christian mission.

THE CASE

A Letter from Claire

"Here's the mail. Dr. Forsythe," the secretary said as she came into the pastor's study. The stack was quite small, Jim Forsythe thought, in comparison with what he usually received—only three letters, some church bulletins, and two catalogs.

He looked at each of the envelopes and noted one he had been hoping to receive from Claire Evans, a fourth-year student at the university. Forsythe had been anxious to hear from Claire since his conversation with her three weeks earlier in the university cafeteria, a chance encounter that occurred the day before she left to go home for summer vacation.

Forsythe opened the letter and read it quickly. "She certainly comes to the point," he said to himself. "I asked her to write and tell me more about how she was feeling and raise any questions she had. Well, she has obliged, and now I will have to respond." Jim laid the letter on the desk and muttered to himself, "Uh, this will not be easy."

The University Congregational Church

Jim Forsythe had been pastor of the University Congregational Church in Bowling Green, Ohio, for eighteen months. A number of factors had led him to accept this pastorate, and one of the principal reasons was the insistence by the Pastor Search Committee that "Bowling Green is truly a mission field ... as much a mission field," they had said, "as Africa or India."

This had impressed the Forsythes, Jim and his wife, Katie, because they had talked repeatedly for more than five years about whether they should seek appointment as missionaries. Both expressed an interest in investigating the possibility of being foreign missionaries since their time in seminary, even before their marriage nearly thirteen years ago. Moreover, they had been in contact with their denomination's international board of missions for two years prior to coming to Bowling Green. They were now 33 years old, and their oldest child would be twelve in December. Jim and Katie knew that if they were to be accepted as missionaries by the board, they would have to be appointed before their daughter reached the age of thirteen.

The growth of the church numerically, the stimulating atmosphere of a university community, the challenge of working with and preaching to a congregation composed of people from everywhere, especially the large number of university students—many of whom were internationals—had many of the characteristics and challenges of mission work, at least as Jim perceived it. But there was still the unresolved question of foreign missions, and Jim had found himself thinking more about it now than he had earlier in his career.

Originally from Kentucky, Jim had done his undergraduate university study at Vanderbilt where he graduated with a B.A. in English literature and a minor in American history. Even before his senior year he had struggled with the question of where to attend seminary. His father had died during Jim's last year at Vanderbilt, so it seemed logical for him to return to Louisville, live in his mother's home, and attend Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. Thus, after some deliberation, this is what he did. It was at the seminary that he met and married Katie, and when she graduated, she was able to work and allow him to continue beyond the M.Div. program. Two more years were spent at the seminary, and Jim completed his residency for the Th.D. degree. University

Congregational Church was his second pastorate, although he had served as an associate pastor during his time in seminary.

Claire Evans from Ashland, Kentucky

Claire Evans was one of a dozen students whom Jim had met when he came to talk with the Pastor Search Committee. A small reception had been arranged to allow the student leaders in the church to meet and talk with the prospective pastor.

Jim had been impressed with the whole group, but especially with Claire for several reasons: her cultural and church involvement, her beauty, and her winsome personality. Then after coming to Bowling Green, he had learned even more about her. Her home was in Ashland, Kentucky, where she had been reared in a large fundamentalist congregation.

Claire had spent her sophomore college year in France, and this had delayed her finishing the university in four years. But she was now fluent in French and Spanish and was intensely interested in world issues. She was an active participant not only in the University Church, but also in the InterVarsity Fellowship on campus. Even more significant, Jim thought, Claire sought and made more friends among the international students than anyone else he knew, except possibly Bill Taylor whose father was an agricultural expert with the U.S. Agency for International Development. Bill had spent part of his childhood and youth in the Philippines and India, and like Claire, he had many friends among the international students.

Hardly a Sunday passed that Claire did not bring one or more international students to worship, young men and women from various countries in the world. Her friendship with the male internationals did not appear to Jim to be romantic, but rather a desire to associate with and learn as much about other people and cultures as she could.

As the months passed, however, Jim noted that Claire seemed to be spending more time with the students from India, many of whom were Hindus and Muslims, than with the Latin Americans, Africans, or Europeans. One reason, Jim conjectured, was that there were many more students from India in the university than from other areas of the world.

Claire's cosmopolitanism was unusual, Jim thought, especially in view of her provincial childhood and youth. It was possible that Claire regarded the non-Christian internationals with whom she associated as potential converts, except for the fact that she gave little or no appearance of trying or wanting to evangelize them.

This was somewhat out of character, Jim felt, for one whose theological formation as a child and adolescent had been in a well-known fundamentalist congregation. And the apparent incongruity had prompted Jim at two different times to ask Claire about her experience in the Ashland church. But she had shrugged, smiled or laughed, and said something to the effect, "Oh, you know our pastor. I enjoyed the church when I was younger, and when I am home I attend because my mother and dad are there, but I probably would go somewhere else if I had my choice."

The fact was Jim did not know the pastor of Claire's home church except by reputation, and around the seminary his reputation had been that of a "fire-breathing fundamentalist." Jim sensed, however, that Claire was not comfortable talking about her former pastor and church experience, so he did not press the issue.

Claire's Encounter with Other Faiths

Shortly after the first of the year, Jim noted Claire's attendance in church had become spasmodic, and he said to her, at least on two occasions as she was leaving the morning worship, that he had missed seeing her. Also, when she came to church, she rarely came with anyone else.

Following the Easter break which was early in April, Jim remembered seeing Claire only once in worship. During final examination week at the university he saw her in the university cafeteria. He spoke to her and told her jovially that he had "been wondering about her." She appeared to appreciate his stopping to speak to her and apparently did not resent his comment regarding her absence from worship.

She replied saying that she had been "doing a lot of thinking and would like to talk with him when she came back to school in September. She said that she could not talk that day because she had an exam within the hour. But she said enough to indicate she was questioning some of the theological assumptions she had long held, especially the relationship of Christianity to the world religions. The only specific thing Claire said—which gave Jim a clue to what she was thinking—was a reference to the inclusiveness of Hinduism and the exclusiveness of Christianity.

He said "Claire I know we don't have time to discuss this now, but I would be glad to correspond with you about it while you are away for the summer. Why don't you write to me and spell out in more detail what you are thinking, the questions you have, and I will respond. This will give us a good basis for continuing our conversation when you return in September.

Claire said she would think about it and would try to write a letter as soon as she got settled at home. Jim, however, wondered if she would write, and he was especially anxious about her being in a fundamentalist church during the summer. Would this confuse her more?

Claire's Letter

The first weeks after the close of the spring semester were always a let-down for Jim. Attendance in worship services as well as participation in other church activities were less than half of what they were when the university was in session. Things would pick up, and new people would be arriving for the summer term, but in the meantime, Jim was having a "real downer."

He had thought of Claire several times since their last conversation and as the days passed he became increasingly dubious that he would hear from her. When he saw that one of the letters the secretary had handed to him was from Claire, he opened it with a sense of relief and with a degree of apprehension.

The letter was handwritten and relatively brief:

Dear Dr. Forsythe,

It was thoughtful of you to stop and talk with me the day before I left school, and I appreciate your asking me to write to you.

I suppose I began to question what I believe after repeatedly hearing Christians say "Jesus is the only way." Is Jesus the only way? If He is then why hasn't God revealed things in a like manner

to all people who have earnestly sought to know and carry out His will? Why do they not have the same convictions about Christ that Christians have?

The founders of other religions and people like Gandhi surely must have had a strong conviction that what they were doing was the will of God. Why didn't the Lord straighten them out if they were so wrong?

When Christ said that only through Him could we come to know the Father, could He have meant through living a life like Christ without actually knowing him personally?

These are a lot of questions, I know, but they represent what I have been thinking. If you have time to write, I will be pleased. But I know you are busy, and this can wait until I get back to school.

I am glad to be home for the summer, and I am enjoying the change of pace. Haven't got a job yet, but I'm looking.

Sincerely,

[Signed] Claire Evans

Claire's letter did in fact pose a lot of questions, Jim thought. Yet his initial reaction was that she was raising only one question, and that question, he said to himself, is "Why isn't one religion as good as another?"

"Well, I can't answer this today, but I'll try to come up with something tomorrow." So he slipped the letter into the middle drawer of his desk and left to make some hospital calls.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Have you ever asked yourself the questions Claire poses in her letter? If so, you should find this case provocative. 1. Who are the principal characters in the case? What do you remember about them that you believe is significant? 2. Why is Jim Forsythe concerned about Claire? 3. Can you outline the sequence of events described in the case? 4. How old are the Forsythes? Why is this important? 5. When was Claire's letter written? What did she say in the letter? 6. What do you see as the basic issue(s) in the case? 7. Jim reduces Claire's letter to a single question. Do you agree with him?

SUGGESTED BIBLICAL TEXTS FOR REFLECTION

Genesis 12:1-3. God's commission and promise to Abraham. Matthew 12:15-21. God's chosen servant. Matthew 13:47-50. Parable of the net. John 10:7-16. Jesus the Good Shepherd. Acts 4:1-12. Peter and John before the Council.