

**A CRITICAL AND CONSTRUCTIVE DEFENCE OF THE SALVIFIC OPTIMISM OF
INCLUSIVISM**

by

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ABSTRACT

Questions regarding the fate of the unevangelized have been contemplated for centuries and now, in this post-Christian world, issues of the church's claim that Jesus is the unique Son of God have been added to the debate. Does God truly desire the salvation of all human beings? Is Jesus Christ the full and unequalled revelation of God? This work explores, through means of comparison and contrast, the theological positions of exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism. Particular attention is given to each school's history, biblical arguments, theological arguments, and convictions concerning the purpose of missions, as well as an evaluation of each school's position. The author concludes that while exclusivism maintains a high Christology and pluralism a wide-ranging salvation, only inclusivism adequately harmonizes these positions in a cogent manner.

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INTRODUCTION

“What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”¹ This is the assertion, disguised as a question, Abraham declares to God as he pleads for the lives of the righteous, and wicked, in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” It is not a question to which one expects an answer, but a rhetorical question that all those with faith in God ask knowing the answer must be, “Yes!” God will do what is righteous. God will judge appropriately. This question, posed by an insignificant pagan Semite of a world long past, raises many other questions for all Christians today, and none of them rhetorical. What is the right thing for God to do with the righteous and the wicked? Who are the righteous? Why would God spare an entire city because a handful of righteous persons take residence there? This time of rapid globalization and rekindled tensions between world religions make these questions, and the new questions they spawn, all the more important. Yes, the Judge of the earth will do what is right, but what is that?

The questions above cannot be considered idly for they have serious consequences. The challenge of Abraham, and its logically ensuing questions, leads to new questions that all faithful Christians must consider. Does the Christian faith require its citizens to believe that we, as Christians, are the sole arbiters of truth? Do Christians alone have access to God while the rest of the world’s population offer prayers and petitions that go unheard? Does being outside of a clear understanding of God’s revelation in Jesus mean that one is forever lost or damned? Or from a different perspective, are all world religions essentially the same and Christianity is but one among the many? Is Christianity merely one more cultural expression responding to a “God” that is beyond all comprehension? Finally, is the Christian faith the full revelation, but not the only revelation of God? Is Jesus Christ the incarnation of the one and only God who seeks to save and heal all believers be they Christian or not? These are the questions that twenty-first century Christians must ask.

¹ Genesis 18:24-25. All biblical references in this document are from the New International Version.

Many have sought to articulate clear and comprehensive theologies which adequately deal with these questions. This work is an attempt to identify, describe, and critique three of those such theologies. This work is not an attempt to give the last word but an opening response. It is a critical work that evaluates some of the answers offered and yet it is constructive for this work suggests a more reasonable, that is, faithful response given the nature of revelation and the character of God.

The three approaches explored in this work are exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism. While this is an artificial taxonomy it will be helpful nonetheless, but only with the understanding that those who use these titles have distinctive approaches to each topic and issue. Exclusivism is defined and identified as the claim that “Jesus Christ is the only Savior, and explicit faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation.”² This view maintains that Christianity alone has the truth of God and the means of salvation. Exclusivism is sometimes equated with Calvinism but this is inaccurate for exclusivists can be either monergists or synergists. Pluralism, or normative religious pluralism, “maintains that the major world religions provide independent salvific access to the divine Reality.”³ It seeks to promote world justice and peace by noting the cultural filters which keep each religion from making exclusive truth claims. Finally, inclusivism maintains that Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God and that salvation is universally accessible. Inclusivists vary in what this salvation might look like and how God effects such a deliverance, whether through other religions or in spite of them, but the inclusivists agree that God’s saving power is not limited by humanity’s knowledge of Jesus. Some speak of inclusivism being synonymous with universalism, the belief that all humans will one day be saved, but this too is inaccurate.

Exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism can also be defined by their attitudes regarding the fate of the unevangelized. Exclusivism has been given the subtitle of *Salvific Pessimism* for the exclusivist is very doubtful about the salvation of all persons who have not heard, understood, and positively responded to the gospel message and is also pessimistic about God using the non-Christian as a vehicle of religious truth. Pluralism has been given the subtitle of *Salvific Absolutism* for it maintains that all the great world religions are equally effective in

² Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 11.

³ Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, “Introduction,” in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 15.

bringing salvation as well as being equivalent resources of religious truth. Finally, inclusivism has been given the subtitle of *Salvific Optimism* for it maintains a hopefulness that God will make his salvation available to an extensive audience and that the world's great religions might be used to some extent in effecting his wide and profound salvific will. These titles should not lead the reader into any emotive connotations but are meant to accurately reflect the mind-set of each theological approach.

The thesis question of this work is conditional. It states that 1) *if* Christianity teaches that God desires all to be saved and *if* God is revealed uniquely in Jesus Christ and 2) *if* exclusivism and pluralism each stress one assertion to the omission of the other, then 3) only inclusivism effectively respects each assertion in the first premise by seeking equilibrium in these soteriological perspectives. This work will investigate not only the conclusion but also the premises. Does Christianity teach that God desires all to be saved? Does the Christian faith teach that Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God? In the end the ultimate question of whether one of these theological positions is true, while the others are false, will not be settled here. This work takes a more humble approach suggesting that while neither exclusivism nor pluralism are wholly wrong, both are certainly problematic. Inclusivism, while not entirely faultless, is certainly the most reasonable.

The method of study in each chapter is to survey four areas of each theology. First is the history of the movement. The inclusion of this section is not to imply that the age or originality of a theology is an argument for truth but to show that each position has a long and rich history. All three of these theologies stand upon the shoulders of many great thinkers. Second is the biblical arguments given to support each theological treatment. This section includes not only specific texts used but also hermeneutical approaches to the biblical text itself. Third is an examination into the various theological arguments given to support each position's particular stance. Fourth is a survey of each position's approach to missions, that is, what it believes is the purpose of religious discourse. Conversion, which leads to salvation, is generally understood to be the ultimate goal of missions, so this section also explores how each theology defines salvation and the means by which it is achieved. The final section in each chapter is a brief evaluation of the potential strengths and problems of each position. As stated above, none of these theologies are perfect or complete and this section notes some of the strengths and as well as problems of each.

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of books and articles published probing the issues of religious pluralism and the scope of God's salvation. It is not the goal of this work to resolve the many issues raised by the study of religious pluralism, but it is this author's hope that in dealing with these issues this work might provide more light than heat.

EXCLUSIVISM:
SALVIFIC PESSIMISM

The exclusivist states unequivocally that all religious truth regarding God and his ways is known exclusively through the teachings of Christianity and that salvation is dependent upon a hearing of this truth and a conscious acceptance of it. In general, the exclusivist believes that all religious truth resides in the teachings of Christianity and that Jesus is the one and only revelation of God. But this is only half of the exclusivist argument. Included with a belief in the finality of the Christian truth is the argument that salvation is limited to those who have heard this truth and have made an affirmative response to it. Therefore, the Christian exclusivist has a threefold argument: an ontological argument which states that Christianity is ultimately the one and only true religion, secondly, a soteriological argument which states that salvation is accomplished solely through the work and sacrifice of God in the person of Jesus Christ, and thirdly, an epistemic argument which holds that salvation is limited to those who have meaningfully responded to this truth. It is upon these arguments that the exclusivist model is built.

Whenever one attempts to label a set of beliefs held by a large and diverse group of people, he or she may cut corners to fit everyone into an exacting definition. This is the case regarding exclusivism. Exclusivist beliefs can be, and often are, held by those who eschew that particular label. Ronald Nash, a firm advocate of exclusivism and one who uses the term in his book, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*,⁴ also uses the term “restrictivism.”⁵ This term implies that salvation is restricted to those who have heard and positively responded to the Christian message. Some who affirm the notions held by those who use the titles “exclusivist” and “restrictivist” sense that these terms have unfairly developed negative connotations and thus opted for different terms. R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips are examples of those who have chosen to use “particularism,” hoping that it will convey the notion of exclusivism and yet not carry the negative implication.⁶ This paper will limit itself to the term “exclusivism.”

⁴ See Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*

⁵ Ronald H. Nash, “Restrictivism,” in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, John Sanders ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 107-139.

⁶ R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, “A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach,” in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995). The editors of the book state that “...we believe that in our current politically correct environment, the terms *exclusivism* and *restrictivism* preclude a fair hearing,” pages 16-17.

There are other complications to limiting oneself to a single term. Under the term exclusivist, one might see both the names of Karl Barth and Carl F. H. Henry, and conclude that each held similar views in this matter. However, this is simply not the case. While both Barth and Henry were exclusivists, believing that Christianity is the unique expression of God's revelation in Christ and that salvation comes only by the grace of God, the two disagreed when it came to the final destiny of the unevangelized. Soteriologically, Henry could also be labeled a restrictivist, limiting salvation to those who have made a conscious response to the calling of God, while Barth, who is often charged with being a universalist, held out hope for the salvation of all regardless of their response.⁷ While there is no single archetype of exclusivism a general breakdown of the exclusivist model will be given as well as criticisms of this theology.

“Evangelicals believe that Jesus is the only savior. There is no other savior and no other religion, we believe, that can bring human beings to the saving grace of God.”⁸ Exclusivism has long been a mainstay of conservative and orthodox Christianity and includes such historical advocates as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards as well as later evangelicals like Carl Henry, R.C. Sproul, and Ronald Nash.⁹ Exclusivists, like inclusivists, will claim that their understanding is the most faithful to biblical revelation. Theological and philosophical arguments are secondary to their argument. There is also a very defensive stance taken by modern exclusivists. This approach to the topic is rarely one of constructively supporting exclusivism so much as critically refuting pluralism and inclusivism. Exclusivism, thus presented, takes on a less theological stance and more of an apologetic posture.¹⁰

⁷ John Sanders, “Introduction,” in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, John Sanders ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 12-13. See also Carl F. H. Henry, “It’s Not Fair?” in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, James Sigountos and William Crockett eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 245-55; and Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 4/3* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-1969), 461-478.

⁸ Nash, “Restrictivism,” 107.

⁹ While the entire list of exclusivists throughout history would be too numerous to list, those mentioned have made some of the most significant contributions to the theology as characterized in its more narrow definition.

¹⁰ This is certainly the case with Ronald Nash. His book *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* has two parts “Pluralism” and “Inclusivism.” Each of these parts has arguments that critique those theologies yet Nash does not offer a constructed theology of exclusivism. The back cover of the book even states that Nash “makes a case for exclusivism” but no formal arguments are made. Nash received similar criticism from his fellow contributors in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* John Sanders begins his response to Nash by saying “Let me begin by saying I wish professor Nash had clearly stated the restrictivist position and made a constructive case for it.” (140) Gabriel Fackre echoes Sanders’ sentiments (and my own) when he states, “We learn from Ronald Nash’s chapter what restrictivism is *not*. Why is there so little about what this theory *is*?” (150) While I have singled out Ronald Nash, he is not the only exclusivist who has taken such an approach. While there are many theologians who have made extensive arguments for classical Christian orthodoxies (such as limited atonement) and thus have taken an

History

While the exclusivist would argue that the history of this theology dates back to the first century apostles, the first theologian to emphasize a fewness salvation was Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354-430 AD). Augustine was certainly the greatest theologian of the church's first millennium, perhaps of all time, and has therefore had tremendous influence on this topic.

Augustine was one of the first to emphasize monergism.¹¹ He held that because human nature was so badly damaged and scarred by the fall of Adam, and because sin was inherited generationally, no human could willfully choose God. God therefore, in total sovereignty, chose some to be saved and others to be damned. God controlled who came to a saving faith and who did not, an action always opposed by the will of those saved. According to Augustine, no one wants salvation but God's grace gives those predestined to be saints the will to choose the Father. This grace was "granted to the saints predestined to God's kingdom to enable them both to will and to do what He expects of them."¹²

How, Augustine asked, does God determine who shall be saved and who shall be lost? It is not favoritism, according to Augustine, it is simply a great mystery for which we will never have an answer. "God has mercy on those whom He wishes to save, and justifies them; He hardens those upon whom He does not wish to have mercy, not offering them grace in conditions in which they are likely to accept it."¹³ One hint Augustine gives as to why the number of the saved shall be few is his belief that the "number of the elect is strictly limited, being neither more nor less than is required to replace the fallen angels."¹⁴ While this reveals why so few will be saved it does not account for why God chooses some and rejects others. Perhaps the answer, for

exclusivist stance, it is more common to see a theologian or apologist *assume* exclusivism as they critique counter positions.

¹¹ The focus here is on monergists and their doctrine of exclusion, but this hardly means that synergists have all been something other than exclusivists. Many synergists have suggested that God will provide a means of hearing the gospel. Aquinas, Arminius, John Henry Newman, and Norman Geisler all believe God universally gives an opportunity for salvation prior to death while Clement of Alexandria, George MacDonald, and Gabriel Fackre believe this universal opportunity will be postmortem. It is here that the lines of what "exclusive" and "inclusive" entail get blurred. One may believe that God will provide an opportunity for all to be evangelized and yet maintain, as Barth did, that all non-Christian religions are merely points of darkness. Or that non-Christian religions bear witness to God as does general revelation but that an explicit faith and knowledge of Jesus is required for salvation.

¹² J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, revised ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978), 367.

¹³ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 369.

¹⁴ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 368.

Augustine, was that “many more are left under punishment than are delivered from it, in order that it may thus be shown what was due to all.”¹⁵

Augustine’s fewness theology did not precisely divide the world between Christians (saved) and pagans (damned) for he held that there are “decent Christians who have been called and baptized, but to whom the grace of perseverance has not been given.”¹⁶ Apparently, being a member of the church was no guarantee of one’s eternal destiny, but Augustine held that it was necessary to be in the church for there is no salvation apart from it. While God’s grace could work outside the church, as in the case of Cornelius, this grace was incomplete if the person did not join the ranks of the Catholic church and partake in the sacraments.¹⁷ Augustine also held that, there existed both the visible or empirical church and the invisible church; the latter contained authentic Christians. This invisible church included believers prior to the incarnation. “From the beginning of the human race, whosoever believed in Him, and in any way knew Him, and lived in a pious and just manner according to His precepts, was undoubtedly saved by Him, in whatever time and place he may have lived.”¹⁸ This included not only Israelites but those from other nations such as Job and Enoch, though Augustine believed these to be rare.¹⁹ These preincarnation elect believed in the promise of a coming savior. It is from this Augustine concludes that the teaching in 1 Timothy 2:4, “God desires all men to be saved,” means that God desires there to be elect from every type of race.²⁰ God does not desire all to be saved but all *kinds* to be saved. This becomes a very important teaching for monergists who maintain a fewness doctrine.

Finally, it should be noted that, according to Augustine, even though God elects those who shall be saved it is still necessary for the elect to hear the gospel and receive baptism. Even an infant who dies prior to baptism is forever lost. This should not be shocking, according to Augustine, for all infants enter this world full of sin and corruption. They are selfish, envious,

¹⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, Marcus Dods trans. (New York: Random House, 1950), 21.12 quoted in John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 55.

¹⁶ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 369.

¹⁷ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 412-413.

¹⁸ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 52-53.

¹⁹ Pinnock, *Wideness*, 40.

²⁰ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 368-369.

and proud.²¹ And while an infant's limbs are not yet functional the infant's mind is filled with bitterness and jealousy.²² All of this demonstrates the need for God's salvation and grace for there is no one who is innocent.

Augustine's theology was extremely influential on all facets of the western church, especially to Reformers who would come some thousand years after him. Martin Luther (1483-1546), like Augustine before him, believed that a right knowledge of God is necessary for salvation. While general revelation or natural theology may have provided a saving knowledge prior to sin, the fall has "destroyed not only freedom of the will but also the intellect's ability to know God through natural reason apart from special revelation."²³ "Anyone who has a god, but not the Word," according to Luther, "has no god at all."²⁴ Roger Olsen summarizes Luther's thoughts on those of other faiths as "whoever seeks God outside of Jesus Christ as God's Word in person finds the devil and not God."²⁵ General revelation, then, only leads to a glorification of the self and idolatry. Reason, Luther held, was a "great whore" which attempted to gain a knowledge of God without the gospel.

Luther agreed with, and even amplified, Augustine's monergism, with a theology that suggested:

Behind the waiting Father of loving face and outstretched arms lies the hidden, dark, mysterious God of all-determining power who is the very cause of every evil thing as well as every good thing in nature and history. Even though this dark divine force has little to do with the gospel message, Luther pointed to it as the necessary background to all history. Nothing whatever can exist or happen apart from God's direct plan and causation... For Luther the devil was both God's enemy and God's instrument, "The devil is 'God's devil.'" God works all in all and even in and through Satan and the godless.²⁶

In this it is shown that Luther held that all things which happen, even the loss of those outside evangelism, happen because of God's hidden will. Anyone who is saved or lost is saved or lost

²¹ William Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 116.

²² Augustine, *Confessions* Henry Chadwick trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 9.

²³ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 384.

²⁴ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 384.

²⁵ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 384.

²⁶ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 384.

based upon God's "all-determining power." For Luther, God's love was certainly subordinate to God's power.²⁷

Luther also maintained that God does not effect salvation on those outside the church, even if they rightly believe. "Those who remain outside Christianity, be they heathens, Turks, Jews or false Christians (Roman Catholics), although they believe on only one true God, yet remain in eternal wrath and perdition."²⁸ Luther held that one not only needed a right knowledge of God, but also God's particular grace which is provided to them for salvation.

John Calvin (1509-1564), like Luther, followed the path set by Augustine. He asserted that general revelation can show that God is creator but that "after the fall of the first man no knowledge of God apart from the Mediator has had the power unto salvation."²⁹ In fact, Calvin's statement regarding general revelation that "the Lord indeed gave them a slight taste of his divinity that they [philosophers] might not hide their impiety under a cloak of ignorance" suggests that God gave just enough knowledge of himself to condemn but not enough to save.³⁰ Like Luther and Augustine, Calvin taught that a knowledge of God is imparted by the Father alone and has nothing to do with the hearer. In response to those who believed God's grace could extend outside the church or the word preached, Calvin said:

All the more vile is the stupidity of those persons who open heaven to all the impious and unbelieving without the grace of him whom Scripture commonly teaches to be the only door whereby we enter salvation... No worship has ever pleased God except that which looked to Christ. On this basis also, Paul declares that all heathen were "without God and bereft of hope of life."³¹

Predestination was a small part of Calvin's theology,³² but like the pin of a hand grenade, it makes all the difference whether it is in place or not. If by God's total sovereignty everything that ever happens only happens by God's will then those who are lost are so because God wills them to be. Calvin knew that his theology seemed to be in conflict with such biblical passages as 1 Timothy 2:3-4 and 2 Peter 3:9. To explain this Calvin suggested a dual will of God—one

²⁷ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 389.

²⁸ Martin Luther, *Larger Catechism*, II. iii quoted in Pinnock, *Wideness*, 40.

²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. XX, John T. McNeill ed., Ford Lewis Battles trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.6.1.

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.18.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.6.1.

³² William Placher states that "Most people think this doctrine [predestination] as occupying a far more important place in Calvin's thought than it actually did. He dealt with predestination late in the *Institutes* and not at

revealed and universal the other secret and particular. Roger Olsen explains that in Calvin's theology we find "God's revealed will offers mercy and pardon to all who repent and believe. God's secret will foreordains some to eternal damnation and renders it certain that they will sin and never repent."³³ According to Olsen, Calvin had no tolerance concerning those who objected to, and found unjust, his doctrine of two wills or double predestination. To these Calvin declared, "For as Augustine truly contends, they who measure divine justice by the standard of human justice are acting perversely."³⁴

Calvin, with Luther and Augustine, brilliantly articulated a theological monergism which led to a fewness doctrine. Many theologians have followed this path including Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, J.I. Packer, R.C. Sproul, Ronald Nash, and others. An enigma in the exclusivist camp, however, is the great neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth. Barth's theology was radically centered on the "Absoluteness of God" and God as "Wholly Other." By this he maintained a monergism, yet without double predestination. This has led many to speculate whether Barth was a universalist.³⁵ Even though Barth's doctrines of salvation and sovereignty apply to this discussion it is his thoughts on religion that will be the focus.

Barth's exclusivism focuses on the distinction between religion and revelation. Religion is a sinful, arrogant, and fully human endeavor that seeks to understand God on human terms and overcome estrangement by human efforts alone.³⁶ Salvation, however, comes only by true revelation. Paradoxically, revelation destroys all religion, including Christianity, and creates the true religion, Christianity.³⁷ By this, Barth asserts that all other faiths or religions are void of any light. No light means no revelation, no saving grace, and no Jesus. This suggests that a real

all in one of the catechisms he wrote, and this certainly was not the starting point of his theology." Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 221.

³³ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 411.

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.17 quoted in Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 411.

³⁵ While Barth normally eschewed the question of his apparent universalism he did address the issue in one of his last works, *The Humanity of God*, saying that "one should not surrender himself in any case to the panic which this word [universalism] seems to spread abroad, before informing himself exactly concerning its possible sense or non-sense." He also asked those critical of this notion to consider Colossians 1:19 which speaks of God, through Christ, reconciling "all things" to himself. Lastly, he asks those who believe universalism to be a "danger" to think about the danger of the "eternally skeptical-critic theologian who is ever and always legalistic and there in the main morosely gloomy?... This much is certain, that we have no theological right to set any sort of limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ." For more information regarding Barth's doctrine of salvation see Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus Is Victor!: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Salvation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976).

³⁶ Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach and David Basinger, *Reason & Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Press, 1998), 262.

dialogue cannot exist between Christianity and other faiths.³⁸ Barth even warned against seeking “points of contact” in non-Christian faiths.³⁹ It is this very narrow, and sometimes harsh, assessment of non-Christian faiths that many exclusivists follow today saying that Christianity alone bears the light of Christ and that all other faiths are but darkness. Barth certainly did not intend to disrespect the individual believers of other faiths but he did seek to emphatically state that there is no religious truth outside the revealed truth of Christianity.

Some would suggest that this brief summary of exclusivist theologians is a normative history of the Christian faith; that because the majority of Christian theologians have shared this model it must be the faithful one. While exclusivism is certainly pervasive today it is hardly the “exclusive” theology of Christian theologians, and while it has a rich and notable history, so do its alternatives.

Biblical Arguments

Christians, to support their claim of revealed truth, appeal to a book that was written hundreds of years ago. This book—the Bible—has been a subject of an enormous amount of study and criticism which has left the integrity of its trustworthiness seriously in doubt. If the Bible were universally regarded as an authoritarian source book for religious truth, many of the questions we deal with... would be easily resolved.⁴⁰

Utter reliance on the Bible is a common sentiment among exclusivists who believe Christianity to be the only revealed religion. Not only do exclusivists appeal to the Bible in order to support their theology, but also, because of attacks on biblical “integrity and trustworthiness,” they begin their defense of a restricted salvation with an equally passionate defense of biblical authority.⁴¹ This is true in the case of R.C. Sproul whose quote above opens chapter one of his book, *Reason to Believe*. Sproul makes an argument for biblical infallibility before employing chapters two and three as polemics against pluralism and universalism.⁴² In spite of Sproul’s statement that if the “Bible were universally regarded as an authoritarian source book for religious truth, many of the questions we deal with... would be easily resolved,” we see that simply believing that the

³⁷ Peterson, *Reason*, 263.

³⁸ Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 26.

³⁹ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies*, 26.

⁴⁰ R.C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe: A Response to Common Objections to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Lamplighter Books, 1982) 19.

⁴¹ Exclusivists will also generally begin with the modern assumption that what is original is most true and thus herald exclusivism as the oldest and only genuinely orthodox theology.

Bible is *the* authority is no guarantee that many or most questions will be “easily resolved.” Either Sproul is ignorant to the whole host of diverse interpretations held by those who believe the Bible to be the authoritative norm of theology or he is wedding a particular hermeneutical understanding to his notion of “authoritarian source book.” It appears that Sproul is simply implying what Geivett and Phillips state unequivocally, “In the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, we have a permanent deposit of divine revelation in *propositional form*.”⁴³ The Bible, then, is not only authority, but also a deposit of divinely given propositional truths. It will be shown that this approach to biblical authority and its witness is very important to the exclusivist argument for it is not merely faith in Christ that leads to salvation but a particular knowledge of him.

Exclusivists maintain that for one to gain access to the truth of the universe and ultimate reality one must turn to God’s revelation in the Bible. The belief in an infallible or inerrant Bible is unavoidable for most exclusivists,⁴⁴ for if salvation is limited to those who have right knowledge of Jesus Christ, and if this knowledge is solely contained in the Bible, then God must have supernaturally maintained the integrity of the scriptures; they are the only means by which people can know God. If God had not provided an inerrant text then salvation would have been known only by those in the first few generations after Christ. Since we have an authoritative, reliable, and inerrant text, according to many exclusivists, the Scriptures are the proper starting point.⁴⁵

In disagreeing with both pluralist and inclusivist theologies, exclusivists employ biblical passages which they maintain support the fact that Jesus is the one and only savior of the world and that one needs an explicit knowledge of him in order to be saved. In this section a brief sample of these passages will be explored as well as some alternative approaches.

A favored passage to defend exclusivism is found in the Gospel of John, chapter fourteen, in which Jesus, in reply to Thomas’ question of how the disciples are to know the way which Jesus is going, says “...I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.”⁴⁶ The argument is that Jesus is declaring himself to be the one and only

⁴² See Sproul, *Reason to Believe*.

⁴³ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 228. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ Karl Barth would be a notable exception.

⁴⁵ It will be shown later that many inclusivists hold similar beliefs about the Bible.

⁴⁶ It is rare for me to find these passages of scripture exegeted in the exclusivist’s arguments. For example R.C. Sproul quotes or references this passage eleven times in his book *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie that Binds*

opportunity available for any and all to obtain salvation. The emphasis is that Jesus is *the* way to the Father because he is *the* truth and thus only those who accept this truth and follow this way will secure life. Jesus is not simply giving them a truth that they are to accept but he *is* the only truth that leads to salvation. Jesus, according to Geivett and Phillips, used the “I am” statements in order to show that he did not merely *know* the way to the Father but in order to show Jesus to *be* that way.⁴⁷ The point is further made by Jesus’ use of “no one” (οὐδεὶς), which restricts those who can come to the Father.⁴⁸ Only those who know the truth that Jesus is the way will find life. Sproul asserts that in this passage we can see Jesus emphatically teaching exclusivism. According to Sproul, “Here is exclusivity with a vengeance. Jesus uses a universal negative proposition when he says ‘no one comes to the Father except through me.’ The term *except* indicates a condition that must be met for a result to occur. The result in view is coming to the Father. The necessary condition is that it must occur ‘through me’.”⁴⁹ For Sproul this passage is the backbone of exclusivism. Simply put, “the reason I believe that Christ is the only way to God is because Christ Himself taught that.”⁵⁰ For Ronald Nash, as well, this passage could not be any clearer. He says, “Jesus asserts in no uncertain terms” that he alone is the way to salvation.⁵¹ James A. Borland adds, in regard to John 14:6, “Jesus was fairly emphatic about the absolute impossibility of reaching heaven apart from himself.”⁵²

For a pluralist such as John Hick, this sort of passage is easily dismissed. Hick states, regarding this and other such passages from the Gospel of John (including 10:30 and 14:9), “among mainline New Testament scholars, both conservative and liberal, Catholic and Protestant, there is today a general consensus that these are not pronouncements of the historical Jesus but words put into his mouth some sixty or seventy years later by a Christian writer expressing the theology that had developed in his part of the expanding church.”⁵³ For the

Evangelicals Together (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999) but never exegetes it. Likewise, Ronald Nash in his book, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* references the passage five times without exegesis or careful explanation. It appears that many of these authors in this context believe their interpretations to be “common sense.”

⁴⁷ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 236.

⁴⁸ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 236.

⁴⁹ Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right*, 119-120.

⁵⁰ Sproul, *Reason to Believe*, 37.

⁵¹ Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* 16.

⁵² James A. Borland, “A Theologian Looks at the Gospel and World Religions,” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33/1 (March 1990), 8.

⁵³ John Hick, “A Pluralist View,” in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 53.

inclusivist, however, the historicalness of the passage is of less concern, for even if the Jesus of history did not make such a bold claim the post-resurrection Jesus surely could have revealed this truth to the church through his first century prophets. What is of the utmost importance to the inclusivist is that the uniqueness of Jesus as God's agent of salvation should not be dismissed. What is being debated is what it means to proclaim Jesus as the way, truth, and life and that no one comes to the Father but by him.

In a reversal of fortune biblical scholar George Beasley-Murray suggests that the "negative form of v 6b has in mind the resistance to the Way, the Truth, and the Life suffered by the Word, but the reality to which it points is positive for humanity."⁵⁴ To emphasize this point Beasley-Murray then quotes renowned biblical scholar F.F. Bruce, "Jesus' claim, understood in the light of the prologue to the gospel, is inclusive, not exclusive. All truth is God's truth, as all life is God's life; but God's truth and God's life are incarnate in Jesus."⁵⁵ Clark Pinnock also questions the exclusivists' understanding of this passage and echoes Beasley-Murray stating, "Certainly Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father but by him...No one else can show us the way to find God understood as Abba, Father. In saying this, Jesus is not denying the truth about the Logos enlightening everyone coming into the world...He is not denying God at work in the wider world beyond Palestine and before his own time."⁵⁶ If the exclusivist is merely saying that God effects salvation through Jesus Christ then the inclusivist finds no disagreement. If exclusivists add that this verse is restricting the benefits of God's work in Jesus Christ to those who have right knowledge of Jesus Christ then they have exceeded the scope of this passage.

A second key passage for the exclusivist is Acts 4:12. The context of this passage is that Peter and John are defending themselves before the Sanhedrin after healing a lame beggar. As part of their defense they exhort, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." Geivett and Phillips give four points to support this verse as being an undeniable teaching of exclusivism. First, they note Peter's broad use of the phrase "under heaven" which they say indicates how

⁵⁴ George Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 36 John* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 253.

⁵⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Basingstoke: Pickering & Inglis, 1983), 298-299 quoted in Beasley-Murray, *John*, 253.

⁵⁶ Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1992), 79.

“extensive his exclusion of all other names actually is.”⁵⁷ Salvation comes alone through the name of Jesus. Second, they argue that Peter does not limit the reach of those to whom this name is given. By saying, “given among mortals” and not “given to you” or “given to the Jews,” Peter is making a universal statement that is not limited to those present at the hearing.⁵⁸ From this point it can be concluded, “the requirement of salvation by belief in Jesus’ name is universal.”⁵⁹ Thirdly, they say the term “must” (ἀνάγκη) is almost always, in Luke-Acts, directly or indirectly related to Jesus as “the one who fulfills God’s sovereign plan.”⁶⁰ In their fourth point, Geivett and Phillips suggest that Peter’s use of the term “name” “includes specific knowledge concerning Jesus as savior.”⁶¹ The preaching of the Gospel can be said to be equivalent to bearing witness to the “name” of Jesus. For example in Acts 9:15 Paul sets out to carry Jesus’ name to the Gentiles.⁶² This is clearly a stronger epistemic argument than the others offer. Their conclusion is that the mentioning of a name requires a focus on the object of faith, Jesus Christ, and by mentioning the term “name” Jesus is more than simply the source of salvation, he is the means that must be acknowledged.⁶³

Geivett and Phillips are certainly not alone in their use of this passage. R.C. Sproul amplifies this passage stating, “No other religious leader was a God-man. No other religious leader has atoned for the sins of his people. Christ and Christ alone was sinless and qualified to offer the perfect sacrifice to satisfy the demands of God’s Justice. There is no other name under heaven through which men must be saved.”⁶⁴ Gareth Reese, in his book, *New Testament History: Acts*, implies that Peter’s purpose in this statement is to make clear not simply that salvation is given by Jesus alone, but more emphatically that there is no salvation in any other name or power.

There is salvation in no other person—only Jesus. There is emphasis upon the negative, which in the Greek stands in the very first part of the sentence. There is NO chance. There is NO other way. By Peter’s inspired statement every other major world religion, including the Jewish, stands impoverished when it comes to

⁵⁷ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 230.

⁵⁸ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 230.

⁵⁹ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 230.

⁶⁰ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 231.

⁶¹ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 232.

⁶² Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 232.

⁶³ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 232-233.

⁶⁴ Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right*, 123.

saving a man from his sins. None are equal to Christianity. None are valid at all! None put a man right in God's sight!⁶⁵

It is clear that Reese believes Peter to be making a statement about a restrictive salvation. His understanding of this passage has Peter making a negative emphasis, that there is no chance of salvation outside of Jesus, instead of a positive one, that God has fulfilled his promise of healing in the person of Jesus.

Is it logical to deduce from Peter's statement, "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" that "we must conclude that according to the Bible, those who take refuge in other so-called gods will be given the opposite of salvation, which is eternal punishment"?⁶⁶ Again, is Peter making a negative assertion regarding the fate of those outside Christianity or making a positive assertion regarding God's healing effected through Jesus? The context of this passage is very important. In the previous chapter Peter and John had just healed a lame beggar (Acts 3:1-10) and are now on trial, not simply for "proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead" for they were asked, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?" That is, how did they heal this man? Peter says that it is because of Jesus that the beggar stands before them in good health and that there is salvation in no other name. What is most interesting about this passage is the link between the words used for both "healing" and "salvation." In verse nine the word used in reference to the man being healed is *sewtai* but this is also the word that is used in verse twelve by which it is necessary that all mortals must be saved (*soqhna i*). Peter (or the author of Acts) is suggesting that salvation and healing are synonymous.⁶⁷ The healing event and this proclamation are completely tied together. But the exclusivist tries to take the passage beyond its context by claiming that Peter is emphasizing exclusivity and an epistemological response. Geivett and Phillips take a further leap of logic when they propose that this use of *ἀσθ* suggests "it is difficult to argue that Peter allows that the salvation of which he speaks in Acts 4:12 did not

⁶⁵ Gareth L. Reese, *New Testament History: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1976), 180.

⁶⁶ Matt Perman, *Christian Exclusivism Explained and Defended*, accessed at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/8449/exclus.html> on June 12, 2002.

⁶⁷ For more information on the use of "salvation" in Luke-Acts see Ben Witherington III, "Appendix 2: Salvation and health in Christian Antiquity: The Soteriology of Luke-Acts in Its First Century Setting" in *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

require knowledge of the person of Jesus.”⁶⁸ If Geivett and Phillips had kept the passage in context they would see that Peter and John did not wait for the beggar to respond with a proper faith statement or the “required knowledge of the person of Jesus” prior to his healing. They simply healed him. It is certainly possible that the beggar did confess Jesus prior to his healing (salvation), but the text does not share such information. There is little doubt that Peter is making use of the opportunity to preach that both present and eschatological salvation is found in no one other than Jesus, but what cannot be gained from this passage is the exclusivist’s notion that right knowledge is necessary for God’s salvation.

It can be argued that in both Acts 4:12 and John 14:6 the exclusivist wishes to add extra meaning to these verses. It is not enough that these passages boldly say that Jesus is the way of salvation and wholeness; these passages must also say that Jesus is the effector of salvation *if* one has right knowledge and a proper response. No inclusivist denies that Jesus is *the* way, truth, and life. Neither do they deny that in Jesus’ name is the power unto salvation. What the inclusivist questions regarding the exclusivist’s use of these passages is the emphasis upon the epistemological and not the ontological.⁶⁹ These passages certainly make exclusivistic claims about Jesus’ place among humanity and that by him alone does God save, but these passages do not explore the scope, wideness or narrowness of Jesus’ effective salvation nor what is required of a person to obtain that salvation.

To bolster his or her argument the exclusivist needs concise biblical teachings which clearly state that all who do not respond to the gospel, or God’s truth, will forever be lost. For this, many turn to Romans 10:9-15:

...if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes in him will not be disappointed.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless

⁶⁸ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 231.

⁶⁹ Geivett and Phillips make it clear that they believe there is no distinction in this passage saying “Peter does not appear to be referring to Jesus merely as the ontological ground of salvation—that is, as the sole *source* of atonement. Rather, he is indicating what must be acknowledged about Jesus before one can be saved.” 232-233.

they are sent? Just as it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things.”

This passage, according to Geivett and Phillips, clearly states that “To be saved, a specific confession has to be made, and a specific set of truths must be believed.”⁷⁰ If this is so, then those truths must be learned from others who go out and spread the gospel. Hearing, then, is a prerequisite for believing the gospel and believing is a prerequisite for being saved. Paul has book-ended his theology of salvation in his letter to the Romans, according to Geivett and Phillips, by beginning with a teaching on general revelation and ending with this section in which Paul “stresses the urgent purpose of mission—that the mouths of the as yet unevangelized can confess the name and lordship of Jesus.”⁷¹ The opening chapters of Romans teach how “all humans without exception are guilty sinners and are therefore deserving objects of God’s wrath,”⁷² it is Romans 10:9-15 that closes the doctrinal part of Paul’s letter with a strong missionary calling.

Geivett and Phillips say that it is “difficult to account for the evangelistic mandate,” in light of this passage, “and for the suffering of God’s witnesses are called upon to endure, on the supposition that the unevangelized do not need to hear in order to be saved.”⁷³ This is a compelling issue, for if God can and will save outside the hearing of the gospel then those who give their lives to missionary work have to consider what is at stake. Geivett and Phillips end their treatment of this passage with a call to “common sense:”

The most natural assumption to make about this passage is that apart from the faithful labor of the human evangelist the unbeliever will have no opportunity to hear that which must be believed in order to be saved. No alternative means of salvation for the unevangelized is alluded to. If there were another alternative that offered the wide hope... Paul’s argument here might seem misleading, if not deceptive.⁷⁴

Geivett and Phillips reach their conclusion based upon Paul’s statement that, “if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” Is this a necessary conclusion? Paul is certainly

⁷⁰ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 235.

⁷¹ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 235.

⁷² Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 234-235.

⁷³ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 235.

making a positive statement that if one hears and believes he or she will be saved but that does not automatically equate that one is saved *only* if one hears and believes. “But logically this means nothing more than that confession of Christ is *one* sure way to experience salvation.”⁷⁵

According to John Sanders, “Paul does not say anything about what will happen to those who do not confess Christ because they never heard of Christ.”⁷⁶ While Paul may not have been appealing to modern logic the issue of conditional statements certainly fits here. Simply because “all who hear and believe are saved” does not necessarily mean, “all who do not hear and believe are not saved.”⁷⁷ The argument is fallacious and stretches beyond what can logically be gained from the text. In this regard Clark Pinnock states:

I maintain that Peter does not address the issue of the unevangelized in Acts 4:12 and that Paul does not address it in Romans 10. Both apostles are speaking about messianic salvation, which has come as the fulfillment of, not as a negation of, revelation that came before. They are celebrating the beauty of the gospel of Christ, not decrying earlier forms of the gracious divine working on which people had to depend before the gospel came.⁷⁸

From this biblical text we can know that those who hear and believe the gospel will be saved, but the fate of those who never hear or do not respond is not addressed in this context.

This is merely a sampling of the texts that exclusivists offer in support of their theology of a restricted salvation, but these are key texts which are most often used by exclusivists.⁷⁹ However, as noted above, these texts are less persuasive to the inclusivist who believes these passages have been misinterpreted, or at the least, stretched beyond their inherent meaning and context. For an exclusivist like Ronald Nash this is a troubling conclusion. Nash states that it is understandable to disagree over some issues but, “it is quite another to discover that we [exclusivists] have simply been mistaken about the meaning of such essential passages as

⁷⁴ Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 236.

⁷⁵ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 67.

⁷⁶ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 67.

⁷⁷ Simply put “if A then B” does not equate to “if B then A.” The classic example of this is, “if it rains the sidewalk will be wet.” If A equals “it rains” and B equals “the sidewalk is wet” then this makes sense, but we cannot reverse this and have the same logic, “if the sidewalk is wet it must be raining” for any number of other possibilities such as sprinklers, may have been the cause of the wet sidewalk. This same argument can be found in Sanders’ *No Other Name*, 67-68.

⁷⁸ Clark Pinnock, “Response to R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips,” in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 254-255.

⁷⁹ Geivett and Phillips offer a surplus of biblical verses including Gen. 6-8, Acts 26:17-18, and Col. 1:13. For their complete list see Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View,” 237-239.

Romans 10:9-10, Acts 4:14 and John 14:6.” Nash concludes that inclusivists are “asking Christians today to reshuffle the deck and commit themselves to a totally new understanding of how God saves the lost.”⁸⁰ However, if a text has been misunderstood, then a new interpretation is needed and it will be shown below that the inclusivist reading is hardly a “totally new understanding.” If we conclude, as the exclusivist does, that these verses and others teach a “fewness salvation” then it seems we are left with a rather dreary view concerning the vast majority of the earth’s population and little hope that God’s desire that all be saved is nothing more than a wish.

Theological Arguments

Obviously the exclusivist does not rely simply on “proof-texts” for his or her argument, but also offers a well-developed systematic theology which is built upon the works of many notable theologians. This section, however, will be limited to a brief survey of some of the arguments used to support such an understanding of God’s salvation.

In developing this theology, and in light of their biblical interpretations, the first question the exclusivist should raise is, “Why does the Bible teach exclusivism?” In other words, “why would God impose such a strict standard of salvation if he desires all to be saved?” In a world full of numerous and diverse religions, why would God limit his grace to only one, and one that has yet to reach every people group? Since the exclusivist professes a limited access to God’s grace, criticism is often leveled toward the exclusivist as being intolerant, narrow minded, or arrogant. When this accusation was posed to Ravi Zacharias, his response was that exclusivistic teachings are not limited to Christianity but are evident in most religions. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs are all maintain some form of exclusivism.⁸¹ Zacharias is saying that it is not unusual for a religion to claim a “god-given right” to special religious truth.

For the exclusivist, it is not merely a matter of defending Christian “truth,” but Truth itself. Zacharias likens religious truth to scientific truth when he argues that it is quite natural for religious truth to be restricted and exclusive, for scientific truth is exclusive and does not wait for a vote.⁸² This is to guard against relativism and the more tentative postmodern understandings of “truth” and subjectivity. This is a very important point for Ronald Nash, who devotes an entire

⁸⁰ Nash, “Restrictivism,” 108.

⁸¹ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 148-151.

chapter of his book *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, to the question of truth, reason, and pluralism. Nash maintains that religious truth is no different than any other truth and rests upon laws such as the “excluded middle” and “non-contradiction.”⁸³ According to Nash, if anyone would become a pluralist, he or she “must first abandon the very principles of logic that make all significant thought, action, and communication possible.”⁸⁴ Nash rejects the notion that religious truth is more existential and subjective than propositional and objective. William Lane Craig also links the exclusivity of objective truth to the Christian faith saying, “The problem seen by postmodernists is that if the Christian religion is objectively true, then multitudes of people belonging to other religious traditions find themselves excluded from salvation... and therefore destined to hell or annihilation.”⁸⁵ Thus, for Nash, Craig, and other exclusivists, the first reason why God would make Christianity exclusive is not out of intolerance or narrow mindedness but because truth itself is exclusive.

Again the question is asked, “why would God limit salvation?” For the exclusivist this is the wrong question, the real one is, “why should God save anyone?” As R.C. Sproul asks, “If man has in fact committed cosmic treason against God, what reason could we possibly have that God should provide any way of redemption? In light of the universal rebellion against God, the issue is not, why is there only one way, *but why is there any way at all?*”⁸⁶ The exclusivist generally builds his or her theology upon the shoulders of classical Christian concepts such as original sin, total depravity, limited and substitutionary atonement, and eternal hell. James A. Borland makes many of these assumptions as he sets up his argument for the exclusiveness of Christianity stating:

Christianity teaches that man was created a perfect finite creature, a mixture of material and immaterial. By choice he is now fallen but is still redeemable. He has but one life on earth and will be resurrected bodily (Heb 9:27). He will either spend eternity with God and the redeemed, or else he will exist in conscious everlasting torment with the fallen angels and the rest of unredeemed mankind. Since man has offended God, man must bear the penalty of death.⁸⁷

⁸² Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 150.

⁸³ Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior*, 54.

⁸⁴ Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior*, 55.

⁸⁵ William Lane Craig, “Politically Incorrect Salvation,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, Timothy R. Phillips and Denis L. Okholm eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995) 82.

⁸⁶ Sproul, *Reason to Believe*, 43.

⁸⁷ Borland, “A Theologian Looks at the Gospel,” 5.

The fallen state of humanity is a universal condition and one that has affected humanity's judgment and will. While exclusivists assert that all of humanity, throughout history, is fallen and has chosen hell, they also assert that there is hope for those who hear the gospel. The exclusivist rejects notions that God is unkind and unloving by not providing a means of salvation to all everywhere, stating that God is justified in not saving anyone and yet he has graciously given his son as a sacrifice so that those who believe upon his name will be saved.⁸⁸

Many of the critics of exclusivism do not question that humanity is in a fallen state and utterly lost without God's grace (although understandings of these doctrines vary). The critique comes when the exclusivist restricts salvation to only those who have made a conscious response to the gospel. What about those who have not had the opportunity to hear the gospel? Or those who do not have the capacity to understand it? What about those who have been offered counterfeit versions of the gospel only to be hurt and henceforth refuse to give an audience to the message? While these are important questions, the exclusivist focuses upon the opinion that one *must* believe in Christ and Christ alone to be saved. It is not enough, according to exclusivists, that Christianity is true; all those who are to be saved must recognize this fact and act accordingly. This line of argument is against the inclusivist who proclaims the truth of Christianity and professes it as the source of salvation but does not believe that salvation is limited to only those who have heard and responded to the gospel. The argument is built upon verses such as John 3:18-19, 2 Cor. 4:3, and 2 Thes. 1:8-9. These and other verses give conclusive testimony to the exclusivist that God does not merely want us to be "believers," but Christians; that it is necessary that one believe in the name of Jesus. In regard to those who are devout followers of other religions, the exclusivist might say, "one may believe sincerely, but be sincerely wrong." The one who rejects the message of Jesus rejects God and his salvation.

John MacArthur, in regard to a saving knowledge, states that, "we are told that eternal life is obtained through the knowledge of the true God and Jesus Christ... Since Jesus Himself is the true God incarnate the fact of His deity (and by implication the whole doctrine of the Trinity) is a fundamental article of faith."⁸⁹ A.W. Pink argues that a right knowledge of Christ is essential for salvation and asks how it is even possible to believe on Christ if one does not know

⁸⁸ While most of the exclusivists that are cited in this essay are Reformed theologians not all exclusivists hold to such theologies as election, predestination, or limited grace.

⁸⁹ John F. MacArthur, *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 111.

Christ? “None can come to Christ while they are ignorant about Him.”⁹⁰ The knowledge of Christ that saves, moreover, is not a theoretical or “head” knowledge but a knowledge of the heart. New Testament Jews, according to Pink, were an example of head knowledge without heart knowledge. They “were instructed in the Scriptures, and considered themselves well qualified to teach others; yet the Truth had not been written on their hearts by the Holy Spirit.”⁹¹ The Holy Spirit is the one who imparts a saving truth yet this deeper knowledge is preceded by an acquaintance with Christ. In short, Pink maintains that one can only be saved by a spiritual and supernatural knowledge of Christ that comes from the Holy Spirit alone but this knowledge is limited to those who have heard, or have a knowledge, of Christ. What about those who have not heard?

R.C. Sproul responds to the question, “What about the poor native who never heard of Christ?”⁹² The question is whether it is truly just and good that God should condemn those who have never had an opportunity to hear the gospel and make an informed decision. Sproul first responds to the notions that these people who have never heard are innocent, and that punishing the innocent is immoral. Sproul, assuming the doctrine of original sin, states, “The innocent person doesn’t need to hear of Christ. He has no need of redemption.”⁹³ The implication is that if one is guilty of any sin, one cannot be innocent at all. It is not that one can be guilty of some acts and yet innocent of others. If one is guilty of any trespass he or she is guilty of all; rejecting Christ whose message one has never heard does not make one any less guilty. (Sproul makes little room for the Catholic doctrine of invincible and vincible ignorance). This is all a moot point according to Sproul for all are guilty of actually rejecting Christ. Romans chapter one is the proof text for this line of thinking. It is argued that God will neither judge nor condemn any innocent person who has never heard the truth, but according to Sproul, all have heard the truth. He cites verses 18 and 19 which state, “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.” Thus, it is

⁹⁰ A.W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975), 86. Pink even states, after but a few lines of text, that this principle is so obvious that “it needs arguing no further.”

⁹¹ Pink, *Doctrine of Salvation*, 87. Pink goes on to speak to his reader stating, “you may be a diligent student of the New Testament...[and] believe all that the Scriptures say concerning Christ, and earnestly teach them to others, and yet be yourself a stranger to Him spiritually.”

⁹² Chapter title from his book *Reason to Believe*, 47.

⁹³ Sproul, *Reason to Believe*, 49.

by “general revelation” that God has made himself known and “God does not reveal himself only to a small elite group of scholars or priests but to all of mankind.”⁹⁴ This passage, then, teaches that all have been given “plain,” “clear” and “unambiguous” access to knowledge.⁹⁵ The logical conclusion must be, according to Sproul, that all humankind knows the Father, either by general or special revelation, but also that all humankind has rejected the Father. In summary, it could be stated that, consistent with Sproul’s Calvinist theology, the saved are not those who have not rejected Christ, for all have rejected Christ, but those who have not been rejected *by* Christ.⁹⁶

Sproul also rejects the notion that God respects the honest, albeit erroneous, attempts by non-Christians to worship God as they understand Him. Some inclusivists hold that God recognizes that many do not have proper instruction on how God desires to be worshipped and thus can only worship as they see fit. Sproul maintains God not only does not honor such attempts but is in fact affronted by such acts. He states:

To be zealous in the worship of idols is to be zealous in the insulting of the glory and dignity of God. If God clearly reveals His glory and that glory is replaced by the worship of creatures, the ensuing religion is not pleasing, but displeasing to God...Pagan religion is viewed then not as growing out of an honest attempt to search for God, but out of a fundamental rejection of God’s self-revelation.⁹⁷

John MacArthur adds, “Actually it is Satan who doesn’t care what we believe—or how sincerely we believe it—as long as what we believe is error. To portray God as tolerant of all forms of worship is to deny the God of Scripture... If we believe the Bible, we cannot concede that other religions might be true as well.”⁹⁸ Borland echoes these thoughts when he says:

Every heathen who has ever gotten saved has had to believe that same gospel. The eunuch was saved that way. Cornelius was saved that way. The jailer at Philippi was saved that way. I was saved that way, and so were you if you name the name of Christ. And I do not believe we have any warrant to claim that God is doing things differently today, no matter how frequently it may be surmised.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Sproul, *Reason to Believe*, 52.

⁹⁵ Sproul, *Reason to Believe*, 52.

⁹⁶ Sproul is arguing that the remote “pagan” is guilty for rejecting the Father, who is known through general revelation. Knowledge of Christ is a knowledge of redemption. One is guilty before Christ is preached or rejected, but a rejection of Christ then brings a “double jeopardy.” See pages 55-56.

⁹⁷ Sproul, *Reason to Believe*, 54-55.

⁹⁸ MacArthur, *Reckless Faith*, 92.

⁹⁹ Borland, “A Theologian Looks at the Gospel,” 10.

While “God judges according to the knowledge people have” God is still insulted by and injured by the idolatry of non-Christian religions. The non-Christian religions of the world do not redeem people and, according to Sproul, “may add to their guilt.”¹⁰⁰

Noticeably missing from Sproul’s (and Borland’s) argument that none are innocent and all have received revelation, is any mention of infants and the mentally retarded. Nash does not come to a firm conclusion on the subject, but does offer some thoughts. Nash implies that if God allows babies who die in infancy and the mentally retarded into heaven, then it is inconsistent not to offer the same to those who have never heard. He offers a quote from a colleague of his at Reformed Theological Seminary, Roger Nicole. Nicole responds to the question, “Is it compatible with Scripture and the Reformed Confession to think that infants dying in infancy may be saved? And if so, is it only true of some infants or of all dying in infancy?” Nicole’s (and Nash’s) answer is, “The Westminster Confession’s clear answer to the question states, ‘Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth (10.3).’”¹⁰¹ Nash reminds his readers that all humans, even infants (and presumably the mentally retarded) are under the curse of Adam and thus that is why they die, but seems to hold out hope for their souls since they have yet to commit a “bodily sin” (II Cor. 5:10).¹⁰² It is interesting though that Nash does not rest on the notion of election and leave it at that. It could be argued from the doctrine of election that God, in His sovereign will, has elected some to glory and some to destruction and thus any questions regarding God’s limited salvation would move from the issue of only those who have heard and responded to the notion of the elected.

For some, the Reformed approach to exclusivism is not the right approach. William Lane Craig, an apparent synergist and free will theologian, believes that a “middle knowledge” approach to God will support his fewness doctrine. Craig states that God “draws all people to himself by his prevenient grace.” He also adds that “People who make a free and well-informed decision to reject Christ thus seal their own fate: they are self-condemned.”¹⁰³ It is from this, however, that Craig tries to argue that it is consistent to hold that “God is all-powerful and all-loving yet that many persons do not hear the gospel and are lost.” How is it that both of these

¹⁰⁰ Sproul, *Reason to Believe*, 58-59.

¹⁰¹ Nash, “Restrictivism,” 118-119.

¹⁰² Nash, “Restrictivism,” 119.

¹⁰³ Craig, “Politically Incorrect,” 87.

can be true? God draws all to himself and people seal their own fate by rejecting God, and God remains all-powerful and all-loving yet many are lost because they have not heard the gospel? For Craig, the answer lies in God's divine knowledge. God infallibly knows how every creature, if given the opportunity to hear, will respond to the gospel. God knows that some will accept the gospel and God knows some will reject the gospel and it is by this knowledge that God places the individual geographically. Craig suggests, "It is reasonable to assume that many people who never hear the gospel would not have believed it even if they had heard it. Suppose, then, that God has so providentially ordered the world that *all* persons who never hear the gospel are precisely such people."¹⁰⁴ Craig believes that this preserves God's love for he has supplied all these persons with a sufficient grace, even though he knows they will reject it. In this then, "God is already exhibiting extraordinary love toward them, and bringing the gospel would be no additional material benefit to them."¹⁰⁵ Craig also states:

Hence, no one could stand before God on the judgment day and complain, "Sure, God, I didn't respond to your revelation in nature and conscience. All right. But if only I had heard the gospel, *then* I would have believed." God will say to them, "No, I knew that even if you had heard the gospel, you still would not have believed. Therefore, my judgment of you on the basis of my revelation in nature and conscience is neither unloving nor unfair."¹⁰⁶

God's judgment, then, is not based on general revelation, as suggested by Calvin and Sproul, but on God's knowledge of an individual's prospective rejection of the actual gospel message. Craig concludes, "Far from being cruel, God is so loving that he arranges the world such that anyone who would respond to his saving grace under certain sets of circumstance is created precisely in one such set of circumstances, and he even provides sufficient grace for salvation to those he knows would spurn it under any circumstances."¹⁰⁷

It would seem natural at this point that one should ask Craig whether it is moral for God to create a being that he absolutely knows will reject his grace and thus have to spend eternity in hell. While Craig does not address this question specifically, he seems to anticipate it when he says:

Since God is good and loving, he wants as many people as possible to be saved and as few as possible to be lost. His goal, then, is to achieve an optimal balance

¹⁰⁴ Craig, "Politically Incorrect," 93.

¹⁰⁵ Craig, "Politically Incorrect," 93.

¹⁰⁶ Craig, "Politically Incorrect," 93.

¹⁰⁷ Craig, "Politically Incorrect," 94.

between these—to create no more of the lost than is necessary to attain a certain number of the saved... It is possible that in order to create this many people who are saved, God also had to create this many people who are lost. It is possible that had God created a world in which fewer people go to hell, then even fewer people would have gone to heaven. It is possible that in order to create a multitude of saints, God had to create an even greater multitude of sinners.¹⁰⁸

Craig never says why God would *have* to do these things or why an “optimal balance” is necessary. Regardless, for Craig, this approach somehow preserves both God’s love and power. In fact, it does just the opposite. God’s power, under this argument, is subject to some cosmic “balance” that apparently does not allow God to save more even if he so willed. God seemingly wants to save all but cannot because of this need for balance. It also demeans God’s love for all people because God has created most people to be objects of wrath so he can save this smaller group. God’s “love,” then, objectifies and uses the many for the benefit of the few. This is an even stranger notion given the Bible’s witness to God most often using the few to effect his will for the many. Craig’s argument fails to preserve either God’s power or love.

Finally, the exclusivist handling of the notion that God desires all to be saved (I Tim. 2:4, Tit. 2:11, I John 2:2, and II Peter 3:9) must be addressed. The word in dispute is *all*. Ronald Nash questions whether the use of *all* implies all sorts of people and not all individuals. According to Nash, these passages (I Tim. 2:4, Tit. 2:11, I John 2:2) teach that, “Christ did not die just for Jews or for males or for educated people or for powerful individuals. He also died for Gentiles, for women and children, for barbarians, for slaves and the poor... All these passages... tell us what God has done for all human beings without distinction.”¹⁰⁹ Nash’s point is that these verses do not suggest that God will make salvation universally accessible to all people but that salvation will be given to all *kinds* of people.

John Piper also addresses these passages in his article, “Are There Two Wills in God?” Like Nash, Piper suggests that these passages may simply mean that “‘God’s willing all persons to be saved’ does not refer to every individual person in the world, but rather to all *sorts* of persons.”¹¹⁰ Piper’s final assessment is an argument Calvin, Edwards, and countless other

¹⁰⁸ Craig, “Politically Incorrect,” 92-93.

¹⁰⁹ Nash, “Restrictivism,” 124. It is interesting that Nash never addresses II Peter 3:9 which does not say *all* but states *everyone*.

¹¹⁰ John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God?” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspective on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 108.

Reformed theologians have suggested: God has, at least, two wills. “God decrees one state of affairs while also willing and teaching that a different state of affairs should come to pass.”¹¹¹

After giving examples of God’s apparent dual will, Piper returns to the issue of God’s will that all be saved.

What are we to say of the fact that God wills something that in fact does not happen? There are two possibilities. One is that there is a power in the universe greater than God’s that is frustrating him by overruling what he wills...The other possibility is that God wills not to save all, even though he is willing to save all. Because there is something else that he wills more, which would be lost if he exerted his sovereign power to save all.¹¹²

Piper rightly points out that Arminians and Calvinists differ in what they believe God’s higher commitment to be.¹¹³ For Arminians, it is “human self-determination and the possible resulting love relationship with God” and for Calvinists “the greater value is the manifestation of the full range of God’s glory in wrath and mercy... and the humbling of man so that he enjoys giving all credit to God for his salvation.”¹¹⁴ Finally, Piper asks if God’s offer of salvation to all is genuine, made with the heart, and truly compassionate.¹¹⁵ His answer is, “God has a real and deep compassion for the perishing sinners... God’s expressions of pity and his entreaties have heart in them... Yet not all these longings govern God’s actions. He is governed by the depth of wisdom expressed through a plan that no ordinary human deliberation would ever conceive.”¹¹⁶ For Piper and other exclusivists God does love and desire all to be saved but his wisdom does not permit him to act on this desire and actually save the non-elect. For the synergist God’s wisdom in this matter would appear to keep him from even making salvation universally accessible. It seems that God’s sovereignty must be secured even at the cost of his love.

Through all these arguments the exclusivist centers his or her theology on the finality of the work and salvation of Jesus Christ. All humans are lost, deserving of condemnation, and in need of a saving knowledge that general revelation simply cannot provide. Non-Christian religions are not only flawed and unacceptable forms of worship, but they are also dark points of

¹¹¹ Piper, “Two Wills,” 109.

¹¹² Piper, “Two Wills,” 123.

¹¹³ Although he suggests that both Arminians and Calvinists agree that God has two wills, this is certainly not the case for all Arminians. For example see Clark H. Pinnock, *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 13, and Randall G. Basinger, “Exhaustive Divine Sovereignty: A Practical Critique,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 196.

¹¹⁴ Piper, “Two Wills,” 124.

¹¹⁵ Piper, “Two Wills,” 127.

human idolatry that further estrange humans from God. And while God deeply loves humanity he does not offer, or actually provide for, salvation for all people. Some are either not elected by God's saving grace or they die in their sins without ever being given an opportunity to respond to the gospel.

What is most problematic about this theology? First, Sproul's reasoning (and that of many exclusivists) is one-sided. The revelation that is given by God is not enough to save but is unquestionably enough to condemn. It is as though God gave just enough knowledge about himself to the world to thwart any possible charge of injustice which might be leveled against him for condemning those who do not believe. It seems Sproul is saying that humankind has no excuse in order that God might have an excuse to reject and limit his grace.¹¹⁷ As Dale Moody asks, "What kind of God is he who gives enough knowledge to damn [a man] but not enough to save him?"¹¹⁸ This is the primary problem with these arguments; they operate like a theodicy trying to find reasons to justify what apparently does not make sense. All these arguments endeavor to justify what they believe to be God's right in not making salvation accessible to all humans. The problem is the overwhelming biblical testimony which speaks of God seeking to save the lost and desiring all to be saved.

Missions

The final exclusivist issue that will be covered is the notion that the Bible's emphasis on missions presupposes a restrictive salvation and that if there is a path to salvation that does not require one to hear and claim the name of Jesus then missions are unnecessary and even hurtful. Nash argues that the missionary must assume that all are lost; otherwise, why go to such lengths and great personal sacrifice to preach if one could be saved by their own sincerity or postmortem evangelism? Nash offers this scenario:

But notice what happens to many of these people when a missionary, at great personal sacrifice, leaves home and family to bring the gospel to their village. If then they hear but refuse to believe, the primary consequence of the missionary's sacrifice is to assure their condemnation. If the missionary had stayed away and

¹¹⁶ Piper, "Two Wills," 128-129.

¹¹⁷ Sproul's defense does not make sense primarily because he is such a strong advocate of Reformed or Calvinistic theologies. If it is true, as Sproul has stated in many of his works, that God has elected some to salvation and some to destruction solely out of the hidden wisdom and mystery of God, then any discussion about general revelation or innocence seems intended merely to appease his critics.

¹¹⁸ Dale Moody, *The Word Of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 59 quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 68.

continued to enjoy the comforts of home, the eternal hope of the unevangelized would never have been jeopardized.¹¹⁹

Nash questions whether an inclusivist theology would be a powerful disincentive for missions. His conclusion is that it is “one thing for a theory to be false; harmless errors can sometimes be ignored. But errors that strongly dispose people toward actions that can compromise the church’s mission on earth and place obstacles in the way of evangelism are too serious to ignore or excuse.”¹²⁰

It is quite common for exclusivists to claim that if their theology diminishes then there will be no impetus for missions. For instance, John Sanders quotes Enoch Pond, a nineteenth-century New England pastor and theologian, who, at the prospect that some non-Christians might find salvation in their own religions stated:

What a dreadful conclusion is this!... Not less than six hundred millions of the present inhabitants of our globe are heathens... A mighty stream is ever pouring them over the boundaries of time; and when once they have passed these boundaries, where do they fall? Alas!... They fall to rise no more... Now these are not fictions, but *facts*—facts fully established by the Scriptures... Here is a broad current rushing downward from the heathen world into the lake which burneth with unquenchable fire, on which hundreds of millions of immortal beings are descending, and by which thousands upon thousands are every day destroyed.¹²¹

In this we see a powerful call for missions, for daily there are those dying and entering the gates of hell. Another offers this analogy, “the case may well be compared to a doctor who discovers a completely effective cure for all forms of cancer. He would not say, ‘There may be some other treatments that succeed in isolated instances.’ Instead he would labor to the utmost to make his sure remedy available to all the world to rid mankind of this fearful plague.”¹²² For the exclusivist, knowing Christ is the only *sure* way to be saved, thus missions are necessary if we wish to seek and save the lost.

The exclusivist places the focus of missions upon the conversion of unbelievers in order that they might be saved from hell. R.C. Sproul states that, “Salvation is the ultimate or

¹¹⁹ Nash, “Particularism,” 135.

¹²⁰ Nash, “Restrictivism,” 136. Nash does not even consider the possibility that the purpose of missions might expand beyond conversion of the lost.

¹²¹ Enoch Pond, “The Future State of the Heathen,” *Christian Review* 22 (Jan. 1857): 41 quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 48.

eschatological rescue from sin and its consequences, the final state of safety and glory to which we are brought in both body and soul.”¹²³ Salvation for the exclusivist is largely eschatological. The goal of mission is to get the damned to heaven. Sproul recognizes that the “New Testament speaks of salvation in various ways,” but maintains that “The present reality of salvation is an anticipation and foretaste of salvation in its promised fullness.”¹²⁴

In the end, the exclusivist model of missions is what Paul Knitter calls a “replacement model.”¹²⁵ Since only Christianity is true and contains the knowledge necessary for salvation, and because all other religions are idolatrous attempts to save oneself, the end goal is to replace all the false religions of the world with the one true religion—Christianity. R.C. Sproul states this emphatically when he says:

Muhammad made no atonement and Muhammad is dead. Buddha made no atonement and Buddha is dead. Confucius made no atonement and Confucius is dead. These religious leaders were capable of saving no one, not even themselves. Faith in them or in their teaching is not adequate for salvation. Until the church understands this, believes it, and acts on it, the church will be disobeying the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19).¹²⁶

Evaluation

Exclusivism has had a long history with wide acceptance in the Christian church. The belief that God has uniquely revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ *and* that salvation is limited to those who believe and confess the proper truths is a mainstay in Evangelicalism. It is not the accusations of arrogance and narrow-mindedness that evoke concerns about exclusivist theology, but nagging questions about God’s justice, mercy, and love. How is it that a God who intends the salvation of all persons (II Pet. 3:9), would make such salvation impossible for the vast majority of people throughout history? Even if the exclusivists’ principle of general revelation is granted and it relieves God of any guilt or injustice in condemning the unevangelized, it still falls grossly short for there is no hope of salvation provided in that revelation.

¹²² Roger Nicole, “One Door and Only One?” *Wherever 4* (1979): 3 quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 49-50.

¹²³ Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right*, 50.

¹²⁴ Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right*, 50.

¹²⁵ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies*, chapters 1 and 2. In these chapters Knitter describes exclusivism as a “full replacement” while inclusivism is a “partial fulfillment.”

¹²⁶ Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right*, 123.

The chief concern some have with this exclusivist model is that it limits accessibility to God's salvation. If one is to take seriously the notion that God desires all to be saved then exclusivism falls short. Is it not natural to think that if God desired the salvation of all he would provide a means for their salvation that was actually, and not merely potentially, available? The exclusivists do not think so. Their argument is either that God does not actually desire all persons to be saved (rather all kinds of persons), and therefore God unilaterally elects a few to salvation and a multitude to damnation (monergism), or that God does desire all persons to be saved, but that their salvation is impossible without right belief on the hearers' part (synergism). Both of these arguments leave God lacking. The monergist approach seriously damages the doctrine of God's agapic love, while the synergist argument renders God impotent and unable to effect his own will. John Sanders asks, "Why do restrictivists speak of the great power and will of God in other doctrines but when speaking of the unevangelized prefer to emphasize the power of human sin? Over the power of God's love?"¹²⁷ The goal is to speak in meaningful ways about the actual love of God for all persons while at the same time acknowledging the resourcefulness of God when it comes to him effecting his will.

The exclusivist rightly champions the role of Christ in God's plan of salvation. Jesus is the unique expression of God's nature and the one mediator between humanity and God. Concerns abound when the exclusivist restricts God's saving will to those with a right epistemic expression of some particular doctrine. To be saved, according to the exclusivist, one must acknowledge a proper understanding of who and what Jesus Christ is. Faith is no longer trust lived out, but a right knowledge that entails particular theological positions. General revelation is sufficient in establishing guilt, but is inefficient as a means of salvation. If salvation is only granted to those who obtain a right knowledge of Christ, and if this knowledge is only available to a select few (limited either by God's election or geographical location), then this saving knowledge is dangerously akin to gnosticism. Those who can secure this constrained knowledge of God will be saved, and those who only have and respond to general revelation will be lost. This approach not only undermines the biblical stories of those who demonstrate authentic faith with a limited knowledge,¹²⁸ but it places God's will utterly at the mercy of his church. God has

¹²⁷ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 61.

¹²⁸ For example Mark 2:1-12, Luke 7:1-10, and Acts 10.

certainly partnered with the church to effect his will but does this mean that God's entire salvific will is limited to the church?

Exclusivism emphasizes God's inimitable expression of himself in Jesus and rightfully maintains that Jesus is unique among history's religious leaders, but it fails to emphasize God's effectual love for all persons. A reasonable soteriology must not diminish the ontological presence of God in the person of Jesus Christ, but neither should it escalate the role of epistemology in God's plan.

PLURALISM:
SALVIFIC ABSOLUTISM

It is difficult to think of western philosophies or Christian theologies that advocate pluralism without considering the Presbyterian theologian John Hick. Hick, along with Paul Knitter, Raimundo Panikkar, and others set forth a theology which asserts that all religious truth claims are grounded in an understanding of the world influenced by culture, tradition, and personal experience. These claims must be understood as pluralistic. Since each person is “blindly exploring the elephant,” truth and salvation cannot be exclusive to any one religion. This chapter explores some of the arguments in favor of the pluralist position, yet the focus will primarily revolve around two of pluralism’s leading voices, Hick and Knitter.

While the exclusivist is doggedly Christocentric, the pluralist is comprehensively theocentric. No longer is Jesus the center of worship but rather God as a veiled, although pervasive, mystery. While pluralism is theocentric, terms like “Yahweh,” “Father,” and even “God” are absent because of their contested histories. Instead, Hick’s theocentrism uses terms like the “Real,” the “Transcendent,” or “Ultimate Reality.” “The Real—is one, the symbols by which it is perceived and expressed will be many.”¹²⁹ Despite the fact that Hick used anthropomorphic language early in his theology, he began to use indefinable titles for God as it became more clear to him that God (or the Real) is beyond human comprehension.¹³⁰ The Real, then, is the Kantian noumena that no one can ever know in itself (*an sich*), yet Hick believes that the world’s great religions do reflect “the Real as humanly known.”¹³¹ As Hick states, “In its generic form the distinction is between the Real as it is in itself and the Real as variously humanly conceived and experienced as the personal God-figures and the non-personal ‘absolutes’ of the world religions.”¹³² In short, pluralism believes that the Real (God) is ever present in all the world’s great religions and is equally known (and unknown) in all these traditions. As we will see, it is not that some statements about the Real are true and others false,

¹²⁹ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies*, 117.

¹³⁰ Hick, “A Pluralist View,” 47-51. Hick cites a variety of early Christian theologians who also held that all notions of God are beyond all human comprehension, including Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Martin Luther, Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth.

¹³¹ Hick, “A Pluralist View,” 49.

¹³² Hick, “A Pluralist View,” 49.

but all are metaphors which are validated by their own efficacy in bringing salvation to the traditions in which they are meaningful.¹³³

History

From its very beginning, Christianity has been faced with the challenge of competing religions. The gospels were written as part declaration and part apologetic. The first challenge to the church was brought by some Jews and rabbinical schools, but soon the Christian church had to face the challenge of Greek and Roman pagan cults and mystery religions such as Gnosticism. The challenges these religions posed were not simply competition for adherents but a challenge for Christianity to distinguish itself from the rest. It was difficult to separate Christians and Christianity from these religions by virtue of their geographic location, and more importantly, their cultural prevalence. The early church was mixed with Jews and Greeks, philosophers and farmers, who brought with them laws and liberties, parables and myths, orthodoxies and orthopraxies. While there was much diversity in the early formative years of Christianity, “the other religions addressed by early Christian writers were not ones clearly separated from Christianity.”¹³⁴ In the fourth century, Christianity became the official religion of Rome and kept that status in Europe for many centuries. Pluralism was of no concern for all the world was Christian. It was not until the sixteenth century, “after the discovery and colonization of the ‘West Indies’ and ‘East Indies,’ that Christian Europe truly began to struggle with other religions that were a world apart.”¹³⁵

The Reformation of the sixteenth century sparked a new era, not only in Christianity but in the human history of the western world. The Catholic church was broken in half and the dominance that began in the fourth century came to an end. With this reform came religious freedoms in practice and thought. The Reformation also brought something that had not existed in Western Europe in the 1,100 years of Catholic dominance—wars of Christian against Christian. The sixteenth century brought reform but the seventeenth century brought war.¹³⁶

¹³³ Peterson, *Reason & Religious Belief*, 265.

¹³⁴ Roger A. Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch: Modern Historical Thought and the Validity of Religious Truth,” in *Critical Issues in Modern Religion*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 347.

¹³⁵ Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 347.

¹³⁶ Richard Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 47. It is understood that there had been battles over doctrine but certainly not at the scale of which the Reformation produced. These wars were not simply over doctrine but also power, for each side continued to believe that a state church was crucial to the wellbeing of society.

In the early seventeenth century wars began in France between Catholics and Calvinists. From 1618 to 1648, the Thirty Years' war brought death and chaos to all of Europe as Protestants and Catholics fought for control, and in the 1640's, a Puritan revolt broke out in England that lasted through the end of the decade.¹³⁷ This bloodshed over religious beliefs led many Christian thinkers to reevaluate biblical loyalty and Christian essentials.¹³⁸ Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, was one such man. Disgusted with the wars and bloodshed between the Catholics and Protestants, Herbert sought a way to resolve the problem. In his 1624 book, *De Veritate*, he argued that the Bible was the primary problem in the crisis. Prior to the sixteenth century there was one Bible, the Latin Vulgate, and one interpretation, the official interpretation of the Catholic church, but because of Martin Luther, the Bible was in the hands and languages of the people.¹³⁹ "With that development, the Bible became an open book, subject to a variety of interpretations... diverse interpretations legitimated religious schisms that ultimately led to war."¹⁴⁰ Herbert believed that humans needed to turn to the second canon of faith, nature. The Bible was complex, nature was simple, the Bible was subject to all sorts of interpretations, nature was clear and obvious to all who studied it.¹⁴¹ Nature was the second divine book but would soon become the first.

Herbert sought to show that nature taught the fundamental truths that stood at the core of all religion. For example:

There is a Supreme God. The Sovereign Deity ought to be worshipped. The connection of virtue and piety... is and always has been held to be, the most important part of religious practice. The minds of men have always been filled with horror for their wickedness. Their vices and sins have always been obvious to them. They must be expiated by repentance. There is reward or punishment after this life.¹⁴²

According to Herbert, this is the essence of Christianity. And so why go any further? Herbert's goal was not to start a new religion or even to produce a new denomination. His goal was practical: to end the killing, but his writings (along with those of John Locke) became very influential in what would become a new religious movement: deism.

¹³⁷ Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 47.

¹³⁸ The battles were more likely fueled by desires of political control and basic power struggles.

¹³⁹ Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 47-48.

¹⁴⁰ Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 48.

¹⁴¹ Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 48.

¹⁴² Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 242.

Deism was the illegitimate child of the Enlightenment and Protestant Christianity. It sought to harmonize the perfectly ordered world of Newton with a Christianity baptized by Enlightenment sensibilities, Lockean empiricism, and a strong ethos of reason. Although influential in its founding, Herbert was not a deist. The first deist was most likely John Toland, whose book, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, argued that “nothing contrary to a purely rational, natural religion accessible to all people may be considered authentic Christianity and that no real truth of Christianity is above or beyond reason.”¹⁴³ Revelation was nonsense, according to Toland, for it could not meet the rigorous standards of reason and logic. Jesus, as well, fared no better, for Toland treated him as merely a religious and social reformer, not the unique Son of God.¹⁴⁴ The second great proponent of early deism was Mathew Tindal, whose 1730 book, *Christianity as Old as the Creation: Or, The Gospel A Republication of the Religion of Nature*, became known as the “Deists’ Bible.”¹⁴⁵ Tindal followed the course set by Toland and said that “true Christianity is nothing more than a rational ethical system set against a vaguely theistic background.”¹⁴⁶ In the deists’ purging of all that did not meet Enlightenment standards they also purged Christianity of Christ. William Placher notes that the deists “distrusted appeals to authority and the miraculous, but they also turned away from anything beyond natural religion in part for moral reasons. If Christian faith, as opposed to the universal principles of natural religion, is necessary to salvation, then God has abandoned most of humanity, which has never even heard about Christianity, to damnation.”¹⁴⁷

Deism’s fourfold stance was: religion must be reasonable, universally accessible to every reasonable individual, primarily about moral and social issues, and finally, skeptical of all supernatural revelations and miracles. This stance left no room for a Jesus who was Savior or Christ in any ontological way. The Unitarian Church, established in 1774, became the unofficial church of deism, although few deists actually joined the church.¹⁴⁸ In the Unitarian church there was no talk of the trinity, Jesus as the Son of God, or even the Bible as revelation. It was a rejection of Christocentrism in favor of theocentrism.

¹⁴³ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 527.

¹⁴⁴ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 527.

¹⁴⁵ Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy: Volume V* (New York: Image Books, 1946), 165.

¹⁴⁶ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 528.

¹⁴⁷ Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 243.

¹⁴⁸ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 531-532.

Pluralism and deism are hardly synonymous but the seeds of pluralism were certainly planted by, or if not planted earlier then watered by,¹⁴⁹ this philosophy. Deism, building on the Protestant revolt and Enlightenment reason, made it acceptable to challenge the authority and reasonableness of traditional Christianity. Deism was not long lasting however, so for many, the only choice was between orthodox Christianity and atheism, or as one Enlightenment thinker said, “a deist is someone who has not lived long enough to become an atheist.”¹⁵⁰

Deism was a hard rational exploration of religion that produced a Christianity void of anything unique. It was stripped clean of all that appealed to the emotive and innate. By the nineteenth century there were those who sought to defend Christianity, not with reason and logic, but with appeals to romanticism and the intuitive. In 1799, Friedrich Schleiermacher introduced his book *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* in which he challenged the overly rationalistic reduction of Christianity. Schleiermacher argued that the Christian faith could not be reduced to the purely rationalistic, at the expense of the affective, but that God’s revelation takes place in the *Gefühl*. “*Gefühl* is an untranslatable German word that conveys ideas of a deep, inner awareness.”¹⁵¹ Religions in general, and Christianity in particular, are about a universal inner awareness that all humans experience. They are experiences of the infinite, that which is beyond the self, yet that on which the self is totally dependent.¹⁵²

Schleiermacher’s *The Christian Faith*, published in 1821 and revised in 1830, was a more “conservative” work, but nonetheless purposed that religion begins with the individual and not God. *Gefühl* or “God-consciousness” is the basis of theology. Theology is not so much reflection on the supernatural but the universal experience of dependence. This is what is authoritative, for scripture itself can only be interpreted by this experience.¹⁵³ Whereas the deist subjected all doctrine to the strict hand of reason, Schleiermacher judged all doctrine by this “God-consciousness,” and all that fit this criteria would be allowed.¹⁵⁴ This did not mean that he did not value the Bible or the great tradition of Christianity, but they had to be understood not as absolute authority but as records of others’ *Gefühl*.

¹⁴⁹ Some may even say “fertilized.”

¹⁵⁰ The quote is attributed to Denis Diderot although no source is given. “Evidence of the Deism of the US Founders,” accessed at <http://www.bobkwebsite.com/evdnceofdeismofusfndrs.html> on Sept.23, 2004.

¹⁵¹ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 543-544.

¹⁵² Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 544.

¹⁵³ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 544-545.

¹⁵⁴ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 545.

Schleiermacher rejected traditional notions of Christology, especially the incarnation, and taught that Jesus Christ was completely like the rest of humanity except, “from the outset he has an absolutely potent God-consciousness.”¹⁵⁵ Schleiermacher’s Christology was a functional and not an ontological one. He wrote, “the Redeemer, then, is like all men in virtue of the identity of human nature, but distinguished from them all by the constant potency of His God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in Him.”¹⁵⁶ It is clear that Schleiermacher treated Jesus as merely an “exalted human being” and not as God incarnate.¹⁵⁷ Schleiermacher’s goal was to defend Christianity from a possible death created by a hard rationalism. “It was a defense that risked implying...that Christianity was simply the religion of one culture, with no absolute or universal claim of truth.”¹⁵⁸

In the work of Schleiermacher (and other Romantics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge), a different route can be seen from that of the deist but the apparent destination is the same: a Christianity that is essentially no different from any other religion. The emphasis on a personal experience or God-consciousness is found in many of the pluralists, most notably John Hick. What makes this emphasis “pluralistic” is not a strong appeal to a universal human affect, for many inclusivists suggest this same notion, but rather the suggestion that personal experience is the only normative revelation. Neither scripture nor Jesus is a revelation of God; these are merely records of personal experiences as interpreted by the individual or group and the example of one person’s highly intuitive *Gefühl*.

The modern era brought with it a new approach to the study of religion. No longer was Christianity uncritically regarded as the only significant religion. Writings by Hume, Voltaire and Kant¹⁵⁹ had challenged orthodox Christianity’s exclusive claims and reasonableness while discoveries and translations of Ancient Near East texts, as well as European language translations of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, led to more critical approaches in the comparative study of religions. The twentieth century produced perhaps the first full-fledged Christian pluralist, Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), whose early efforts to support the superiority of

¹⁵⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart eds., 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1928), 76 quoted in Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 546.

¹⁵⁶ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 385.

¹⁵⁷ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 546.

¹⁵⁸ Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 275.

Christianity officially ended in 1923 when he wrote that the “quest for the ‘best’ and ‘most valid’ religion was both hopeless and inappropriate.”¹⁶⁰

Troeltsch was a German theologian and historian, instrumental in exploring the implications of studying religion by the historical method. Religions should be studied in relation to their history and culture, according to Troeltsch, but this method raises many questions and concerns about the universal nature and claims of Christianity, and in fact, all religions.¹⁶¹ Troeltsch was also a person set in a particular history and culture, and while his works reflect nineteenth century Europe, they have been deeply influential upon twenty-first century pluralists.

The end of the nineteenth century saw new methods of religious and biblical study, as well as the establishment of particular presuppositions. The historical-critical method, combined with anti-supernatural assumptions, led to the conclusion that Christianity was not a universal and unchanging faith but that it “had been formed by, and in turn had influenced, its changing cultural, historical, and political contexts.”¹⁶² With these assumptions and methods Troeltsch began to study the evolution of religions and to critique the existence of a single essence of religion as had been purported by earlier scholars such as Hegel. The “essences” of religion that most scholars had found in the past were merely watered-down versions of Christianity. The historians, according to Troeltsch, had interjected their own biases and beliefs into their findings. Troeltsch concluded:

[T]he Christian religion never appeared as an unconditioned absolute at any moment of history. It had always been a succession of religious movements, loosely connected through historical time by enduring texts and institutions. However, at every stage is had been conditioned by the particular forces of its social environment. Christianity is not one religion but many, each of which is wholly embedded in its own historical era.¹⁶³

Troeltsch’s conclusions mean that the Christian faith must be understood as simply one religious option among many.

¹⁵⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, trans. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960). Although not quite a pluralist, Kant’s statement “There is only one (true) religion; but there can be many faiths” (that is, creeds) demonstrates some early roots of this line of thinking.

¹⁶⁰ Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 356.

¹⁶¹ Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 347.

¹⁶² Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 352.

¹⁶³ Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 354.

These conclusions did not cause Troeltsch to abandon his Christian faith, but he did find conflict between being a critical historian and being a Christian believer. As Roger Johnson notes, the conflict was “between the believer’s experience of religion, as the source of truth and eternal life, and the historian’s view of religion, as nothing but one culturally relative phenomenon among others.”¹⁶⁴ It was because of this conflict that Troeltsch sought to establish, not the absoluteness or truthfulness of the Christian faith, but its validity and value. In Troeltsch’s 1902 book, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, he argued that there were significant differences among the world religions and therefore people had to use normative judgments in evaluating these differences.¹⁶⁵ He found that the “personalistic redemption religion of Christianity is the highest and most significant developed world religious life that we know... The authentic life it contains will endure in every conceivable future development.”¹⁶⁶ While this hardly sounds like the words of a pluralist Troeltsch’s historical-critical method and scholarly exposure to the Asian faith of Buddhism was taking him from the ahistorical absoluteness of Christianity to a historically conditioned and relatively valid Christian faith *as compared to* the other world religions. Christianity was the “most developed” or “most valuable” when compared to the more primitive religions.¹⁶⁷ It needs to be remembered, however, that Troeltsch was also the product of his times and certainly believed that western European culture was the most civilized and developed culture the world had produced.

In the final year of his life Troeltsch produced the 1923 essay, “The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions” in which he rejected his early attempts to establish Christianity as possessing the “highest degree of validity attained among all the historical religions.”¹⁶⁸ He did not abandon all value of the Christian faith but certainly dismissed any unique value or highest value. The Christian faith was valuable on pragmatic and existential levels but not as a truth that transcends culture and history. In fact, the only defensible appeal for Christianity was “the glorious European civilization and the spiritual power of the inner experience.”¹⁶⁹ It could be

¹⁶⁴ Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 354.

¹⁶⁵ Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 355.

¹⁶⁶ Ernest Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. David Reid (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1971), 117 quoted in Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 355.

¹⁶⁷ Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 355.

¹⁶⁸ Ernest Troeltsch, “The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions,” in *Christian Thought: Its History and Application*, Friedrich von Hügel ed. (New York: Meridian, 1957), 22 quoted in Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 356.

¹⁶⁹ Johnson, “Ernest Troeltsch,” 357.

argued that Troeltsch's final conclusion was that "Christianity was the supreme religion—for Europeans."¹⁷⁰

Troeltsch's legacy can be found in the thoughts and writings of such pluralists as John Hick, Paul Knitter, and perhaps most notably the historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Through Troeltsch the study of world religions moved from an idle curiosity to a full-fledged discipline. He was not the first to question the absoluteness of the Christian faith but made use of historical-critical methods to study religion in ways that would support later approaches to pluralism. He also opened the doors for suggesting that Jesus' uniqueness should be "understood as a personal confession without objective or universal binding."¹⁷¹ In Troeltsch we see a critical approach to religion that began with the Enlightenment thinkers as well as an experientially based faith that can be traced to Schleiermacher. The fields of religious theology were now ripe for the likes of W.C. Smith, Paul Knitter, John Hick, and more.

Finally, no history of pluralism would be complete without mentioning John Hick (b.1922). While his work is explored in greater depth below it would be a gross oversight to not include him in this history. "I began my Christian life as a fundamentalist," says John Hick.¹⁷² He grew up in the Church of England in the early and mid-twentieth century. While originally a law student, Hick was transformed by evangelical theology and decided to enter the ministry of the Presbyterian Church of England. His life as a conservative would be short lived, however, for intellectual doubts concerning the validity of the Bible began to creep into his faith. Problems concerning biblical narratives such as the "sun standing still," scientific challenges from evolution, and moral concerns such as eternal torment in hell for all non-believers led Hick to question his conservative evangelicalism.¹⁷³ Hick also encountered persons of other faiths, from other historical and cultural standpoints with the same feelings of an infinite and divine reality.¹⁷⁴ These experiences and intellectual doubts would lead Hick to what he would call his own "Copernican Revolution."

In 1973, Hick's book, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, marked his official adoption of a pluralist theology. In this book Hick used the analogy of an astronomical revolution. He had

¹⁷⁰ S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 173.

¹⁷¹ Galvin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 13.

¹⁷² Hick, "A Pluralist View," 29.

¹⁷³ Hick, "A Pluralist View," 31.

¹⁷⁴ D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 28.

moved from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican view of religion. Just as the Ptolemaic understanding of the universe proposed the earth as the center and all other heavenly bodies revolved around it, the Christian Ptolemaic theology believed that it was the center of the religious universe and all other faiths must be aligned with it if they are to know truth and find salvation. The Copernican view of the universe told us that the Earth was merely one planet of many and each planet revolved around the sun. Likewise, the Christian faith or church was not the center of the universe but was one faith among many which revolved around the Real. It was a “shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the center to the realization that it is *God* who is at the center, and that all religions...including our own, serve and revolve around him.”¹⁷⁵

Biblical Arguments

Similar sections in the chapters concerning exclusivism and inclusivism explore biblical arguments in support of those positions, but in this chapter the “biblical arguments” will not contain arguments *from* the Bible but arguments *about* the Bible. This section will be an exploration into the apparent problems of relating the Bible to a notion of special revelation. While this is being approached from a decidedly Christian perspective, the pluralist critique can, and in fact should, be applied to all religious scripture that is read as being anything other than metaphor.

In the book, *More Than One Way?* John Hick summarizes his pluralistic views about truth, God, salvation, and of course, the Bible. In the section entitled “The Religious Way of Experiencing-As and Revelation,” Hick lets the reader know right away his view of the Christian scriptures.

The Bible is a collection of documents written during a period of about a thousand years by different people in different historical and cultural situations. The writings are of a variety of kinds, including court records, heavily edited and slanted history, prophetic utterances, hymns, letters, diary fragments, memories of the historical Jesus, faith-created pictures of his religious significance, apocalyptic visions, etc.¹⁷⁶

One thing that the Bible is not, however, is any sort of normative message from God to humans. The Bible is exclusively the record of human experiences of religious significance and meaning

¹⁷⁵ John Hick, *The God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 131 quoted in D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 23.

¹⁷⁶ Hick, “A Pluralist View,” 33.

applied to natural, political, social, and deeply personal events. The experiences are from particular persons, in particular times, and in particular cultures. The language needs to be clear, the Bible and every other religious text, opens the reading community “to the divine presence to which it witnesses.”¹⁷⁷ The witness is not based on the text but on the reader, as Hick notes butterflies, snowflakes, and mountains equally, though less clearly, serve the same function as scriptures.¹⁷⁸ The Bible is purely a human invention for it is simply the theology of many people(s) writing over a long period of time. However, the Bible does serve to inspire the reader just as other natural events have been known to do.

Hick is not saying that the Bible holds no value, it is valuable, just as all true myths are valuable. A true myth is “a story, or description, that is not literally true but that nevertheless expresses and tends to evoke an appropriate attitude towards the subject of the myth.”¹⁷⁹ The Bible, then, evokes feelings about God, and if the myth evokes the right feelings then it is true. Combining this with what Hick says elsewhere about the value of religion, true myths are those which produce virtues such as liberation, hope, and selflessness while false myths, usually believed literally, promote intolerance, prejudice, and selfishness. The right feeling of the true myth is selflessness.

Hick’s strongest myth language is centered around the incarnation. This may be Hick’s most significant offering to the pluralist position. Hick articulates his defense of the myth of incarnation in his book *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*. In this book, Hick intends to show that while *Jesus* was a historical figure of the first century CE, *Christ* is a mythic figure whose development began in the early church and whose evolution can be seen from the writing of the first gospel, Mark, to the final gospel, John. The demarcation is between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Christ. Hick generally focuses upon the Gospel of John, though he believes all the New Testament demonstrates this, for John contains the most deliberate incarnational language with the logos prologue and the many “I am “ statements. Hick, through the use of higher criticisms, concludes that all statements attributed to Jesus about his own divinity are the words of the author or community of the Gospel of John and not that of Jesus. Hick argues that the vast majority of New Testament scholars do not believe that Jesus made any statements about

¹⁷⁷ John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 112.

¹⁷⁸ Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 112.

¹⁷⁹ Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 229.

his own divinity¹⁸⁰ and therefore the early church, recognizing Jesus as a God-conscious man, made these statements for him in their liturgies. In short, Hick believes that Jesus was not God in any sort of incarnational way but merely a man. As he states:

In my view, he [Jesus] was unambiguously a man, but a man who was open to God's presence to a truly awesome extent and was sustained by an extraordinarily intense God-consciousness. It was this that made God real to others and revolutionized the lives of many who met him, summoning them to live in the way that is natural in God's presence, a life of trust and love, and of healing and peace-making in a broken world.¹⁸¹

The theological implications of this approach to the incarnation will be explored below. For now, it is clear that for Hick, and most if not all pluralists, the incarnation is something that cannot be supported historically.

Even though the incarnation is mythic, an emphasis on the mythic or metaphoric language should not upset traditional Christians, according to Hick, and should not be seen as a call to abandon their traditional ways of thinking. Just as traditional Christians understand the metaphoric language of such uses as Good Shepherd, Word of God, and Son of Man, they should be able to apply the same understanding to deeply incarnational terms like "Son of God."¹⁸² The Bible, then, is a theological text that at times employs history and should be read as such. Hick and other pluralists maintain that the Christ of faith is a figure which evolved from the early oral tradition, to the community driven gospel, and into the many theologically rich church creeds. The Bible should not be understood as *the* revelation of God, for all religious texts, as they produce selflessness, liberation, and salvation, can be seen as revelations from God.

It is difficult to get clear and unambiguous statements about the Bible's place in pluralism. In fact, any student who casually investigates the indexes of pluralist texts will scarcely find the subject "Bible" listed. The Bible seems to be a topic that is passé, out of fashion. The pluralist now fully operates out of a presupposition that the Bible is one more of the world's great religious myths.

¹⁸⁰ John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 91; John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 27.

¹⁸¹ Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 91-92.

¹⁸² Knitter, *Introducing Theologies*, 119-120.

It is certainly true that modern biblical scholarship has shown that there are a variety of theologies and pictures of Jesus found in the four gospels. There is no doubt that these are documents of faith and not simply historical treatises, but does that automatically or *ipso facto* mean that they are void of all history or that there is no clear demarcation between what is historical and what is “mythical”? What Hick fails to articulate is that while something is historical it can also be mythical and further, something that is mythical can also be truth in more than simply an existential sense. For example, Hick speaks of the title “Son of God” as being mythical and metaphoric. Surely this title is mythic language, for are we to believe that Jesus was made up of Mary’s DNA and God’s DNA? Of course the title of “Son of God” is a metaphor, but being a metaphor does not preclude it from meaning that Jesus was God in the flesh and all that might entail. Failure to explain the mystery of the event is not a sufficient reason to dismiss it. Lesslie Newbigin responds to the notion of a purely mythic incarnation saying that:

It is indeed true that the being of God is beyond comprehension by the human mind. But this does not mean that we are free to make our own images of God. Nor does it warrant the denial that God could have acted to make himself known. Both the luminosity and the depth of the divine mystery are presented to us in the incarnation, the whole fact of Christ. In Christ we find both a holiness that must burn up all that is unholy, and a tender mercy and compassion which goes to the uttermost limit to receive the unholy. No human mind can grasp the depth of that mystery. But, having been laid hold of by it, no human being can think of it as merely one among many symbols of an unknowable reality. To affirm that this is truth, not merely truth for me but truth for all, is not arrogance. It is simply responsible human behavior.¹⁸³

Maybe the pluralist should not be so quick to dismiss any and all truth that may lie beyond the mythic. Perhaps C.S. Lewis’ call to speak of Jesus as the “myth made fact” deserves more attention than the pluralist is willing to give.¹⁸⁴

Another point that Hick makes is that it is modern biblical scholars who generally hold that Jesus never made statements that equated himself with God. While the extensiveness of that claim could be debated it is certainly possible that Jesus was the incarnation of God the Father

¹⁸³ Lesslie Newbigin, “Religion for the Marketplace,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Galvin D’Costa ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 138-139.

¹⁸⁴ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, Walter Hooper ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 66-67.

and yet did not make this known prior to the resurrection. The Gospels, as stated above, are faith documents that interpret the events and experiences of particular faith communities but this does not mean that the risen Christ could not speak truthfully through his inspired prophets, such as the author of the Gospel of John. Is it too radical to believe that John's gospel correctly bears the truth concerning Jesus even if it does not contain this truth in an historically approved method by modern standards? Are we to conclude that even though Jesus was the incarnation of God he could not continue to teach and enlighten his disciples and his church through his prophets in novel ways? It seems that both the exclusivist and the pluralist have suppressed the power and resourcefulness of God and cannot see past their own presuppositions.

Theological Arguments

Theological arguments for, or approaches to, pluralism are varied. The book, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* sets the basic standard, categorizing the approaches under three primary headings: The Historico-Cultural Bridge: Relativity; The Theological-Mystical Bridge: Mystery; and The Ethico-Practical Bridge: Justice.¹⁸⁵ Another approach to categorizing pluralism could be the philosophical approach of John Hick, the historical approach of W.C. Smith, and the liberation approach of Paul Knitter, but these, too, are fairly artificial. The lines that separate various pluralists are hazy at times and simply nonexistent at others. Therefore, this section will not break the pluralist theologies into neat categories but will simply explore some common themes found throughout the pluralistic writings.

Christology

As noted above, the pluralist maintains that the New Testament documents are unreliable for conveying anything other than mythic truths regarding Jesus as the Christ. It should be asked, however, if all religions are responding to the universal Real in their own way, what happens to the uniqueness of Jesus as the Christ? For many, it is this aspect of the pluralist theology that causes the most concern. While Christian uniqueness is certainly in question, "a pluralistic Christology... does not at all question *whether* Jesus is unique but only *how*."¹⁸⁶ Paul

¹⁸⁵ Paul Knitter, "Preface," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* John Hick and Paul F. Knitter eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), ix-xii. A variation of this model is also set up in Knitter's book, *Theologies of Religions*.

¹⁸⁶ Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 35.

Knitter is suggesting that a pluralistic Christology or Christianity need not lay claims to Jesus as the exclusive and only savior but merely as one savior among many. The key to understanding such a theology lies in the way that Knitter and Hick redefine key terms such as “savior” and propose fundamental reinterpretations of the “incarnation” and “resurrection.” Since Jesus is the central figure of Christian theology Hick and others must offer a new “Christology.”

In discussing the uniqueness of Jesus, Hick and Knitter are not simply asking whether Jesus was a rare and distinctive person but whether Jesus was the sole Son of God and as such, the only means of salvation.¹⁸⁷ Hick’s extensive writings on the subject of incarnation and the historical Jesus do not break new ground, but rely heavily upon the works of many modern text critics. Hick begins by echoing those critics, stating that Jesus did not make claims of divinity. Hick suggests that even though we can never know for sure what Jesus actually said or didn’t say, there is enough evidence to lead “the historians of the period to conclude with an impressive degree of unanimity, that Jesus did not claim to be God incarnate.”¹⁸⁸ Any claims that Jesus was, or is, the incarnation of God cannot be founded upon the teachings of Jesus but upon the theology of the early church. Orthodox teachings, such as the Nicene creed, are not born out of truth but out of spiritual needs. These are not unique to Christianity but are pervasive in many of the world religions. Mahâyâna Buddhism, Hinduism, Greek mythology, and many other religions include claims of their spiritual teachers being God in the flesh and so, according to Hick, it is not surprising that the Christians during the first few centuries of their faith would also deify Jesus.

The Son of God, second person of the trinity, is for Hick a projection of human ideals upon another human. Hick states that there is a kind of Feuerbachian projection going on when individuals and communities assign their ideals of a Christ-figure onto a gifted human teacher.¹⁸⁹ This is not merely true of Christianity but of all religions which understand their Christ-figures to be unique. In short, the notion that Jesus was somehow the embodiment of God, and all that might signify, is no more than a mythological construction by the early church; a myth that has

¹⁸⁷ John Hick, *The Center of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 26.

¹⁸⁸ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 27. In this passage, Hick lists several scholars who have provided works which support his idea.

¹⁸⁹ John Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, John Hick ed. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1977), 167-168.

prevailed for many years. If Jesus is not the Christ what was he? Can he still be considered the center of Christianity?

According to Hick, Jesus was a “man marvelously open to God, living consciously in the divine presence and responsively to the divine purpose.”¹⁹⁰ For Hick’s pluralism to be Christian in nature, though, Jesus needs to have been unique (but not divine), and Lord (but only metaphorically). Jesus had a God-consciousness that was special but apparently no more special than Mohammad’s, Guatama’s, or Confucius’.¹⁹¹ We should not fault Jesus’ earliest followers for giving him the title of Lord and Messiah though:

Jesus’ specially intimate awareness of God, his consequent spiritual authority and his efficacy as Lord and as giver of new life, required in his disciples an adequate language in which to speak about their master. He had to be thought of in a way that was commensurate with the total discipleship which he evoked. And so his Jewish followers hailed him as their Messiah, and this somewhat mysterious title developed in its significance within the mixed Jewish-Gentile church ultimately to the point of deification.¹⁹²

Even though his earliest followers deified him, we, as twenty-first century Christians, should reject such doctrines and titles for they are not supported by modern scholarship nor do they foster the pluralistic ethic. In the end, Christian pluralistic Christology must see beyond the myths of miracles and resurrection and the metaphors of incarnation and trinity, and instead recognize that these notions are human inventions expressing a mystery too difficult to express in literal language. Jesus, then, is but one symbol of many in which we find a representation of the Transcendent. Jesus is the revelation of the Real, but he is *our* revelation, our symbol. In the greater marketplace of faith, he is *a* revelation but not *the* revelation.

The pluralist believes Christianity needs to move beyond such claims as “Jesus Christ is God,” for these statements amount to saying that “Jesus Christ is the tribal God of Christians over and against the gods of other peoples.”¹⁹³ These types of beliefs and claims limit dialogue, according to Stanley Samartha, and as will be shown, interrelational dialogue seems to be the chief goal of pluralism.

¹⁹⁰ Hick, *The Center of Christianity*, 27.

¹⁹¹ Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 57.

¹⁹² Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 173.

¹⁹³ Stanley J. Samartha, “The Cross and the Rainbow,” in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, John Hick ed. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1977), 79. Not all pluralists wish Christians to abandon all traditional ways of speaking about Jesus, but all pluralists do wish Christians to know that their language is metaphoric, not scientific. For more information see Knitter, *Introducing Theologies*, 119-120.

Truth

Is pluralism best understood as a product of the modern world or is it in line with the postmodern and its inherent attack upon metanarratives and the truth? While there are many postmodernists who see the pluralist agenda as supporting imperialistic forms of capitalism and its desired globalization (a charge Hick denies),¹⁹⁴ pluralism is also at times lumped together with postmodernism and its suspicion of objective propositional truth. Although Hick circumvents the term “postmodern,”¹⁹⁵ there is notably much similarity between the pluralist approach to religious truth and that of the postmodernist.¹⁹⁶ Hick, who was greatly influenced by Kant and his epistemic notions of phenomenon and noumena, builds upon Kant’s categories in helping us understand his idea of religious truth. Hick says “it was Kant above all who made it clear that the human mind is always active in perception and always plays a creative role in our awareness of our physical environment.”¹⁹⁷ Truth then is expressed in the various religions through creeds, traditions, rites, and rituals as phenomenological expressions of the noumenal Real or Ultimate. Since the pluralist maintains that nearly all¹⁹⁸ religions have diverse and even opposing truth claims, Hick holds that the truth-claims of different religions are actually “linguistic pictures or maps of the universe, whose function is to enable us to find salvation/liberation, the limitlessly better quality of existence that the nature of reality is said to make possible.”¹⁹⁹ Hick then is endorsing much of the postmodern claim that truth is merely “language games.” Claims of religious truth and the doctrines built upon it are earthly, albeit sacred, inventions. As Hick states:

¹⁹⁴ John Hick notes a number of works by Kenneth Surin in which such accusations are made. The postmodernists believe that diversity may be lost in the supposed pluralist agenda which seeks to find a common thread in all the world’s major religions. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religion*, 37-45. See also Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 48-51.

¹⁹⁵ Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 38.

¹⁹⁶ It is not my claim that John Hick follows a decisively postmodern approach to truth. One could make the argument that Hick is quite modern in his theology since he begins with a rather inductive approach by examining the characteristics of the world religions and then comparing them. In addition, Hick does proclaim a strong metanarrative in that there is one Ultimate Reality in which some religious claims can be more truthful or accurate than others.

¹⁹⁷ Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 46. Hick notes that he does not accept Kant’s notion of universal concepts.

¹⁹⁸ Hick notes that many religions are not authentic responses to the Real, such as Satanism and the Jonestown cult. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 78-79.

¹⁹⁹ John Hick, “On Grading Religions,” *Religious Studies* 17 (1981): 461 quoted in Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* 58.

I see theology as a human creation. I do not believe that God reveals propositions to us, whether in Hebrew, Greek, English or any other language. I hold that the formulation of theology [religious truth] is a human activity that always, and necessarily, employs the concepts and reflects the cultural assumptions and biases of the theologians in question.²⁰⁰

Hick's assertion then is that the truth claims of one religion which contradict the claims of another are not problematic since each religion is merely creating its own myth out of its unique traditions and experience. These traditions and myths become *true* when the disciple is liberated and empowered by his or her belief. Hick is less concerned with religious truth as expressed in propositions than with existential, subjective, and personal truths that come from life-changing aspects of religion.²⁰¹

Paul Knitter maintains a similar line of reasoning. He recognizes his indebtedness to many postmodern thinkers when he says, "We can never really grasp the world as it is, but only as we see it through our particular historical filters."²⁰² He continues the thought saying, "there is no one foundation for, or expression of, or criterion for truth which is, as it were, given to us from outside the diversity of historical filters."²⁰³ Knitter's thoughts are unambiguous when he states that "there can be no *final* or normative word, no *one* way of knowing truth that is valid for all times and for all people."²⁰⁴ Knitter, like Hick and others, believes that the pluralistic approach to religion is faithful to the human limits of knowledge and the social constructions of reality. In the end there is no knowledge, only belief.

Do Hick's and Knitter's statements deny that there is any truth? No. They are simply saying that all propositions of that truth are pluralistic in nature, but truth itself need not be. It is here that the pluralist approach is more modern than postmodern. As Stanley Samartha writes, "Pluralism does not relativize Truth. It relativizes different responses to Truth, which are conditioned by history and culture. It rejects the claim of any particular response to be absolute."²⁰⁵ Hick himself also seems to imply a single truth when he recounts the parable of the

²⁰⁰ Hick, "A Pluralist View," 36.

²⁰¹ Peterson, *Reason & Religious Belief*, 266.

²⁰² Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 39.

²⁰³ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 41.

²⁰⁴ Paul Knitter, "Karl Rahner and Beyond: A New Meeting of World Religions," in *Critical Issues in Modern Religion*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 405. Italics are Knitter's.

²⁰⁵ Stanley J. Samartha, "The Holy Spirit and People of other Faiths," *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 42, Oct. 1990, 253 quoted in Kosuke Koyama "A Theological Reflection on Religious Pluralism," *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 51, Apr. 1999, 160.

blind men and the elephant. The story is about several blind men who are each touching a different part of an elephant, the trunk, tail, leg, tusk, and so on. Each blind man believed he was touching something different, a snake, a plow-share, a pillar, but in reality each was touching the elephant. The point of the story, for Hick, was that the report by each man was “true, but each referring only to one aspect of the total reality and all expressed in very imperfect analogies.”²⁰⁶ This seems to imply that Hick is suggesting that there is in fact one truth even though we are all blind men feeling our way in the dark and relying on our own distinctive perspective. Truth then seems to be real and singular but beyond any understanding. The only truth that Hick seems to think matters is that there is a truth. The various claims and cultural manifestations based on apparent experiences of the truth seem to matter very little. Metaphysical notions are rejected by Hick as “undetermined questions” and make no difference in the life of the disciple.²⁰⁷ This cannot be the case in *every* metaphysical question, for Hick has already stated that the Real is the ground of all religious experience and this, in itself, is a metaphysical claim. While Hick may avoid some doctrinal issues, such as the afterlife and creation, he must address and make some metaphysical assertions if he is to propose a better approach to God and Christianity, which in fact is his purpose.

The Real

As mentioned above, Hick speaks not of God or Father but of the Real, the One, and the Transcendent. “God” is that reality which all the world religions are seeking to know and experience. And each plays a part, for as Hick states:

The different world religions—each with its own sacred scriptures, spiritual practices, forms of religious experience, belief systems, founder or great exemplars, communal memories, cultural expression in ways of life, laws and customs, are forms and so—taken together as complex historical totalities, constitute different human responses to the ultimate transcendent reality to which they all, in their different ways, bear witness.²⁰⁸

Raimundo Panikkar, however, disagrees with Hick on this point. Panikkar believes that Hick has smuggled his western sensibilities into what it means to be a pluralist. While Hick has the One or the Real, Panikkar says there is no such common denominator to which religious ideas and convictions can be reduced. For Panikkar “God” is one *and* many. The religions are

²⁰⁶ Hick, *The God and the Universe of Faiths*, 140 quoted in Peterson, *Reason & Religious Belief*, 265.

²⁰⁷ Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 52-54.

not pieces of the same puzzle but different pieces of many puzzles, so one will never be able to fit them all together to create one appealing picture. To speak of “God” as One or Real is to miss the authentic mystery, according to Panikkar, that is inherent, not simply in the world religions, but in God.

It is not simply that there are different ways leading to the peak, but that the summit itself would collapse if all the paths disappeared. The peak is in a certain sense the result of the slopes leading to it...it is not that this reality [the Ultimate Mystery] *has* many names as if there were a reality outside the names. This reality *is* the many names and each name is a new aspect.²⁰⁹

Not all pluralists avoid the use of the word “God,” but there is an undercurrent that limits any discussion of God. The pluralist is careful to eschew all cultural, traditional, or personal biases when speaking of God, at least as much as that is possible. All religious expressions, be they God, Christ, Allah, Brahma, Yahweh, or whatever are simply signs that denote something(s) far greater and more mystical than any human could ever conceive.

Missions

Salvation, according to Hick, is the “central business of religion.” It is what religion is all about.²¹⁰ However, Hick completely rejects all notions of orthodox soteriology. If he rejects the incarnation and resurrection, this is completely consistent. Salvation is not about the atoning death of Christ, or being justified in God’s sight, but about human transformation.²¹¹ The Christian faith has traditionally tied a cosmic eschaton to the notion of salvation, that in the end, God’s justice and mercy will no longer be alienated from humanity. This varied kind of cosmic afterlife salvation is prevalent in most of the world religions from the Buddhist Nirvana to the Hindu Brahman to the Islamic heaven. While critics of Hick, both within and without pluralism, charge that there are deeply different and conflicting beliefs in these various theologies, Hick claims they all share an essential core. Hick notes that while these approaches to salvation are different, “the question is whether they’re different forms of the more fundamental generic aim of moving from a profoundly unsatisfactory state to a limitlessly better state in right relationship

²⁰⁸ Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 77.

²⁰⁹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown God of Hinduism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 24, 19 quoted in Knitter, *Introducing Theologies*, 129.

²¹⁰ Hick, *The Center of Christianity*, 74.

²¹¹ See Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, chapters 11 and 12.

to the ultimately Real.”²¹² It is not the supposed differences the pluralists focus on, but the similarity of losing oneself in the supreme being, however that being is understood. For Hick the most substantial aspect of salvation is the human awakening and a move from the ego to the other.

The focus of Christian salvation, according to Hick, is the transformation that takes place in the believer from a selfish, ego-driven being that is often more animal than human, to a “Reality-centered” being who can then find its humanity. Salvation is not a notion of “yesterday you were damned and today you are saved.” It is a slow and gradual process in which “God’s saving activity is his gradual creating of ‘children of God’ out of human animals.” He continues, “Salvation consists of human beings becoming fully human, by fulfilling the God-given potentialities of their nature.”²¹³ This is a long and gradual process that takes a lifetime. Based on this understanding, salvation has a definite moral character. For the Christian, salvation will be demonstrated by the fruit one produces. Hick notes that many times Jesus put salvation in practical terms of service. Passages such as Matt. 25:31-46 (Parable of the Sheep and the Goats) explain that if we care for others we care for Christ, and Matt. 7:16-17 (By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit) states that those who are of God will produce after their kind. Hick uses these kind of biblical passages to suggest that all moral transformation is good—not simply moral transformation as informed by the Christian religion. Using this moralistic approach to salvation, Hick refutes the uniqueness of Christian salvation by noting that Christians themselves are neither unique nor superior. As a whole, Christians are no more caring or loving than the followers of other religions according to Hick, so:

if we define salvation as the actual human change, a gradual transformation from natural self-centeredness (with all the human evils that flow from this) to a radically new orientation centered in God and manifested in the “fruit of the Spirit,” then it seems clear that salvation is taking place within all of the world religions—and taking place, so far as we can tell, to more or less the same extent.²¹⁴

²¹² Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 107.

²¹³ Hick, *The Center of Christianity*, 74.

²¹⁴ Hick, “A Pluralist View,” 43.

Salvation then is a worldwide phenomenon that is not limited to one religion, but is demonstrated in all of the world's great religions.²¹⁵

Knitter, suggesting a slightly more radical model of salvation than Hick, affirms the liberation theologian's approach in equating salvation with a here and now freedom from such things as socioeconomic, nuclear, and ecological oppression.²¹⁶ While this is not a very new or radical conception of salvation, his foundation for this liberating salvation is. Knitter maintains that for this kind of liberation to happen the world religions must come together under a common banner, but as he states:

the center, starting point, or foundation for the meeting of religions would not be Christ (or Buddha, Krishna, Muhammad), nor God (or Brahman, Allah, Nirvana) but liberation: that is, the shared concern for the sufferings and welfare of humanity and the earth. In Christian terms, it would not be a Christ-centered or a God centered, but a "salvation-centered" dialogue with other religions.²¹⁷

By this, Knitter is foregoing any kind of postmortem liberation and is replacing hope in Christ or God for salvation with a shared praxis of liberation by the world religions. Only by this can we one day hope to be saved (or in fact save others).

Finally, what can be said about mission? The Christian religion seeks proselytes and understands its goal to be the conversion of all non-believers. Hick holds this to be an outdated belief that hit its peak (and its nadir) in the European colonization of the Third World. For Hick, this attempt to convert the world has in many ways been a "complete mistake." The focus must be on religious dialogue that does not seek to convert the dialogue partner for this only produces alienation and enmity.²¹⁸ The goal of religious dialogue, according to Hick, is for each theologian to gain insight into his or her own doctrine in light of this new awareness of other world religions. We cannot presume that we can tell the other world faiths how to develop their traditions, but they cannot tell the Christian either.²¹⁹ In the end, there can and will be disagreement and critique, but it will be of a nature that sends the theologians of each faith back to work within their own traditions to work toward a more unified, just, and spiritual world.

²¹⁵ As noted above, Hick does not believe that all religions are good or that they equally provide the means to self-transformation.

²¹⁶ Knitter, "Karl Rahner," 415. Knitter is so salvation focused he dismisses both the labels of "Christocentric" and "theocentric" in favor of a theology that is "soteriocentric."

²¹⁷ Knitter, "Karl Rahner," 415.,

²¹⁸ Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 121.

²¹⁹ Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 121.

Evaluation

There are a few issues that keep this from being a viable theology even though there is much that is attractive. The first is that while many other religions can understand their ideas of incarnation to be mythological, it is not as easy for Christianity to do so. Jesus holds a place in the Christian faith that Gautama or Krishna do not hold in their respective religions. To reduce Jesus to the status of “enlightened prophet” or a human with a superior God-consciousness betrays the very fabric of Christianity. It is not that one cannot hold such beliefs, but to do so and yet keep the title “Christian” is difficult, if not impossible. It is true that there are a variety of ways to understand what the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus might mean but perhaps Hick has gone too far to be able to call his approach “Christian.” Knitter calls his pluralism Christian for it, in his opinion, advances the “kingdom” by advancing peace and justice.²²⁰ Knitter’s emphasis is on praxis (as in most liberation theologies) and a belief or practice which serves the end of peace and justice (liberation) is “still Christian” since it helps Jesus’ vision come to fulfillment.²²¹ This reduction of Christianity begs the question of whether any institution or individual who seeks justice is in fact Christian, especially when “Christian” means nothing more than seeking justice and liberation. Is this not one small step away from Rahner’s “Anonymous Christians,” a theology that is held in disdain by pluralists? For the pluralist, Jesus was simply one great man among many, but he was not ontologically unique. He was a good man with a high God-consciousness, but not *the* Christ. The pluralist wishes to retain the title “Christian,” however redefined, but the title seems to be little more than a traditional sentimentality.²²²

Perhaps the most significant obstacle that arises is that Hick is not really suggesting that each individual religion has access to the truth, but that Western liberal pluralism has the real

²²⁰ For a complete picture of Knitter’s justification for the definition of “Christian pluralism” see Paul Knitter, “Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 181-197.

²²¹ Heim, *Salvations*, 77.

²²² For instance, Raimundo Panikkar wishes to shift from the noun “Christianity” to “Christianness,” for the title “Christian” has too negative a connotation and history and is seen as synonymous with imperialism, just as Christendom is viewed by many Christians today. For more information see Raimundo Panikkar, “The Jordan, The Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 104-114.

truth.²²³ Lesslie Newbign raises this point when he recalls Hick's parable of the elephant and shows that the parable is told from the point of view of the king who apparently has an objective and unobstructed view. The story suggests the king (the pluralist) is not locked into the cultural understanding (blindness) of the searching men.²²⁴ If the pluralist is correct, that none can have access to the actual truth, then they are in the same predicament as every other faith. Why should we see their approach as any more valid? Is it because they believe their view to be objective and detached? It may even be that Hick's phenomenological understanding of the Real as a loving entity is in fact incorrect, for this merely demonstrates that his Christian tradition colors his view. In the end, while the pluralist approach appears morally superior to that of the exclusivist it does not solve the problem of access to, or definition of, the truth.

The synopsis of pluralism has been brief. Certainly these few pages cannot, nor did they attempt to, capture pluralism for all it is. This has merely been an overview. Just as Hick believes there is a principal core that runs through all religious systems, there seems to be a core that runs through all pluralists systems: nominalism. The pluralist seems to maintain a very limited realism when it comes to religion. They speak of the "Real" or the "Transcendent" and even the "mystical," but always in quotes (at least implicitly). All religious language is metaphor, yet it speaks of the Real. This language is profitable, yet in the end only for one's own faith journey. It seems Western pluralism is merely one more faith among many, which raises a critical point in the light of Newbign's critique. Pluralists want pluralism to be an approach to religious dialogue, but pluralism is simply one more religion with which to dialogue. To conclude, the pluralism of Hick, Knitter, and others is really not a pluralism of religions but a religion of pluralism.

²²³ Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths: Building Bridges to Faith Through Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 113-119.

²²⁴ Lesslie Newbign, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 9-10.

INCLUSIVISM:
SALVIFIC OPTIMISM

While it may be a crude oversimplification, inclusivism can be understood as a middle ground between exclusivism and pluralism. The inclusivist agrees with the exclusivist belief that there is a finality in Jesus Christ, that he is the complete revelation of God. The inclusivist also affirms, with the pluralist belief, that God's grace and love are universal and not limited to those with a right noetic structure regarding Christ. God is omnipresent and so is his Spirit of grace and love. A difficulty for inclusivists, though, is that they have few allies. The exclusivist believes they have "sold out" to the liberal theologies of the day, while the pluralist maintains that their model has not gone far enough and still hides prejudices toward disciples of other faiths. Of the three models, the inclusivist is the most difficult to summarize. It is a theology that is Catholic and Protestant, evangelical and mainline, biblically based and theologically argued.²²⁵

What is inclusivism? Borrowing from John Sanders, inclusivists affirm that salvation is effectually and particularly found in the person of Jesus Christ, but they "deny that knowledge of his work is necessary for salvation... they hold that the work of Jesus is ontologically necessary for salvation... but not epistemologically necessary."²²⁶ The gift of salvation is not void if the receiver does not know the identity of the giver. Jesus is the unique expression and means of God's salvation but because God is a genuine lover of all humanity and knows our human limitations, his salvific will is worked through *believers* and not just Christians. In this work the notion of inclusivism will be understood as the belief that God is effecting his salvific will in the lives of countless human beings worldwide, even those who have not heard the gospel, and that we as Christians have a realistic hope that God has saved, is saving, and will save a great multitude of people.

Some theologians approach questions regarding "those who have never heard" from an agnostic stance, admitting that in principle God might save some adherents of other faiths but that we simply have no way of knowing this for sure. John Stott, for example, has maintained an agnosticism infused with a cautious optimism. He maintains that while we know that Jesus is the only savior we do not know "exactly how much knowledge and understanding of the gospel

²²⁵ A brief list of inclusivist theologians includes Catholic theologians: Karl Rahner, Galvin D'Costa, and Hans Kung; mainline Protestants: Wolfhart Pannenberg and Lesslie Newbigin; evangelicals: Clark Pinnock and John Sanders.

²²⁶ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 215.

people need before they can cry to God for mercy and be saved.”²²⁷ He rightly expects the final number of those redeemed to be “actually countless,” but concludes we should remain “agnostic.”²²⁸

I believe the most Christian stance is to remain agnostic on the question... The fact is that God, alongside the most solemn warnings about our responsibility to respond to the gospel, has not revealed how he will deal with those who have never heard it. We have to leave them in the hands of the God of infinite mercy and justice, who manifested these qualities most fully in the cross.²²⁹

Another approach that inclusivism must be distinguished from is universalism.

Universalism claims that Jesus Christ alone is the truth of God and that he is the only means of salvation, but also that all the world’s population will be reconciled to God in Christ. How all persons will be saved is where disagreements arise. Some hold that through God’s total sovereignty he will unilaterally make all persons believers, while others suggest that God will save all Christians immediately, but will purge others of their sins in hell before their eventual salvation. What they all agree on, however, is that God’s saving will can never be thwarted, not even by free agents of God’s own creation.

The salvific optimism that is found in inclusivism is also somewhat varied. Some inclusivists believe that God will give every person an opportunity to accept or reject Christ at the moment of their death. This view seems to remove any real substance from the present and suggests that one need not live for, or with, Christ in the here and now. It seems to render this life rather meaningless. Another option is eschatological evangelism, suggesting that after death, those who never had an opportunity to accept Christ will get that chance. This approach is built on some rather ambiguous verses found in 1 Peter 3 and 4. Eschatological or post-mortem evangelism faces the same problem the universal opportunity model faces, the meaninglessness of this life. If God’s only purpose is to get people to heaven, then this approach might be helpful, but it seems as though God desires us to do good and noble things in this life. Both of these approaches ignore issues like the meaning of suffering and character or soul development. While these brands of inclusivism have problems they are vast improvements on exclusivism.

²²⁷ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God’s Word to Today’s World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 319.

²²⁸ Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 319.

²²⁹ David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 327 quoted in Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 38.

The inclusivism being developed in this work takes a different approach, but the efforts and thoughts of these alternative inclusivisms are not dismissed and are certainly appreciated in the history of this theology.

The inclusivism of this paper builds on the idea that God desires all to be saved, not later but now. God is currently reconciling all things unto himself and that includes those outside the Christian church. This approach to inclusive salvation (sometimes called *wider hope* or *accessiblism*) sees faith as the key element of a salvific process that will one day be completed by God. Faith, not knowledge, is the requirement God has of all persons, for knowledge is dependent upon factors beyond our control, but faith is a personal response to the universal Spirit of God, however conditioned by the light one has.²³⁰ God is a lover of all persons, not simply later, but here and now, and desires all to be saved now as well as later. This wider-hope inclusivism believes God is at work in the lives of all people who are reaching out to him based on the truth they have and understanding him given their particular narrative. While there are some fundamental differences of opinion among inclusivists regarding how God might effect his salvation to those who truly desire it, what is constant is a hope and an optimistic expectation that the God who desires all to be saved will do all that is necessary to fulfill his greatest desires.

History

Is inclusivism a late theology in the history of Christian thought? With the rapid and sweeping changes that have taken place in theology in the last couple centuries, some might conclude that inclusivism is a rather recent development, that it is simply one more (illegitimate) child of the Enlightenment. This assessment would be wholly false. Theological explorations and assertions concerning a wide hope and scope of God's salvific plan actually date to before Jesus. The Apocryphal book of *Enoch* (2nd century BCE) speaks of God rewarding those who were "born in darkness" and yet did what is right. Passage 105:25 says, "And now will I call the spirits of the good from the generation of light, and will change those who have been born in darkness; who have not in their bodies been recompensed with glory, as their faith may have merited." This discussion of a wider salvation also took root with some rabbis in the school of Hillel and those which followed. E.P. Sanders notes Rabbi Joshua who expressed that "there

²³⁰ This concept is known as the "faith principle" and will be explored below.

must be righteous men among the heathen who have a share in the world to come.”²³¹ While this may not have been the principal view of God’s salvific plan, it does show that the theological seeds of a wider salvation were being sown quite early.

With the advent of Christ and the founding of the church, belief in a universally accessible salvation firmly took root in the second century. These early church fathers did not seek a way to justify inclusivism, it simply came naturally in their development of a Logos Christology. In the first century, in both Hellenistic and Semitic thought, the concept of a Logos, or *Dabar*, was quite prominent. “In the mind of the Hellenistic philosopher, Logos represented a principle of intelligibility, immanent in the world; to the pious Jew, *Dabar* referred, by way of literary personification, to Yahweh’s personal manifestation and revelation.”²³² These two concepts come together, for many theologians, in the Johannine prologue.²³³ The Logos was both God’s revelation and his immanent intelligibility and paradoxically the Logos was the cosmic Christ and the Palestinian Jew. God was uniquely revealed in this person and yet this had universal significance.

The first of the church fathers to develop a Logos theology was Flavius Justinus or Justin Martyr (c.130-165). For Justin, the Logos was a means of revelation. The Father, who acts through the Son, revealed himself personally in Christ. According to Justin, God had revealed himself in Christ (Logos) prior to the incarnation. Justin states that all who live according to the Word are Christians:

We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably [] are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham, and Ananias, and Azarias, and Misael, and Elias, and many others whose actions and names we now decline to recount, because we know it would be tedious. So that even they who lived before Christ, and lived without reason, were wicked and hostile to Christ, and slew those who lived reasonably.²³⁴

²³¹ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 147 quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name?* 268.

²³² Jacques Dupuis, S.J. *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 54.

²³³ It is not being asserted that the author of the Fourth Gospel intended to make such a philosophical or theological statement by calling Christ the Logos. Why Christ was called the Logos in this text is highly disputed. What cannot be disputed is that this passage was used by several church fathers to establish a Logos Christology.

²³⁴ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* XLVI. All quotes in this section are taken from *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I* accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/>

In this Justin boldly claims that those before Christ who lived reasonably or

Justin further developed this theology in his *Second Apology*, where he states that the Logos has been imparted in all races of humanity. “And those of the Stoic school since, so far as their moral teaching went, they were admirable, as were also the poets in some particulars, on account of the seed of reason [the Logos] implanted in every race of men were, we know, hated and put to death.”²³⁵ Justin believed that the Word resided, not simply in every race, but in every person. The Logos is the seed that dwells in the philosopher and the uneducated.

But these things our Christ did through His own power. For no one trusted in Socrates so as to die for this doctrine, but in Christ, who was partially known even by Socrates (for He was and is the Word who is in every man, and who foretold the things that were to come to pass both through the prophets and in His own person when He was made of like passions, and taught these things), not only philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated, despising both glory, and fear, and death.²³⁶

These quotes hardly exhaust the material which could be used to demonstrate Justin’s belief that Christ was present in the generations that preceded the incarnation as well as those of his own time even if they had a less than complete understanding.

Jacques Dupuis summarizes Justin’s thoughts under several points including that Justin held to differing kinds of religious knowledge but that all religious knowledge has the Logos as its source. For our purposes the last point is most important, “all persons who have known the Truth and lived righteously are Christians, for, and insofar as, all have partaken of, and lived according to, the Logos who is all Truth.”²³⁷

It should not be assumed that Justin was a pluralist in the sense that all religious worship is acceptable to God. Justin was very critical of idol worship as well as the mystery religions. He also maintained that those to whom the Logos revealed himself directly have been blessed with a complete manifestation while those outside an episteme of the incarnation have received the Logos partially.²³⁸ For Justin, Christ existed and acted beyond the borders of an episteme of him. Any persons who live by truth and act morally do so by the Logos, which is in all. For

²³⁵ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, VIII.

²³⁶ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, X.

²³⁷ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 59.

²³⁸ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 53, 59.

Justin, Christianity existed prior to the incarnation and beyond the visible boundaries of church. It seems that Justin Martyr had a theology of “anonymous Christians” centuries before Karl Rahner.²³⁹

Irenaeus (c.120-202) is best known for his assaults on gnosticism, but along with this, Irenaeus also developed a theology that included a belief in a wide scope of salvation. As the founder of a “theology of history” Irenaeus spoke of dispensations that allowed for Mosaic and pre-Mosaic salvation.²⁴⁰ Irenaeus, as did Justin, believed that God was knowable (if even in a limited sense) to all. God had “implanted” knowledge of himself in all human beings.

For though it is true, as they declare, that they were very far separated from Him through their inferiority [of nature], yet, as His dominion extended over all of them, it behooved them to know their Ruler, and to be aware of this in particular, that He who created them is Lord of all. For since His invisible essence is mighty, it confers on all a profound mental intuition and perception of His most powerful, yea, omnipotent greatness. Wherefore, although "no one knows the Father, except the Son, nor the Son except the Father, and those to whom the Son will reveal Him," yet all [beings] do know this one fact at least, because reason, implanted in their minds, moves them, and reveals to them [the truth] that there is one God, the Lord of all.²⁴¹

Knowledge of God the Father was not limited to the incarnate Son, but was present in all. In suggesting that all humans have a knowledge of God, Irenaeus was making an argument for God’s salvation and not merely condemnation, as in the case of Calvin. Irenaeus stated:

For it was not merely for those who believed on Him in the time of Tiberius Caesar that Christ came, nor did the Father exercise His providence for the men only who are now alive, but for all men altogether, who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation have both feared and loved God, and practised justice and piety towards their neighbours, and have earnestly desired to see Christ, and to hear His voice. Wherefore He shall, at His second coming, first rouse from their sleep all persons of this description, and shall raise them up, as well as the rest who shall be judged, and give them a place in His kingdom.²⁴²

What is most interesting about this passage is Irenaeus’ inclusion of the phrase “according to their capacity.” It seems as though Irenaeus was qualifying what was required of all given their

²³⁹ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 60.

²⁴⁰ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 60.

²⁴¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II.6.1. All quotes in this section are taken from *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I* accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/>

²⁴² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV.22.2.

place in history. Regardless of what he meant by this particular phrase, Irenaeus certainly demonstrated an explicit belief that God's salvation has a truly universal intent.

It could be argued that Irenaeus had a restricted view of salvation and apparently limited grace to those in the church. For example, Irenaeus states, "For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth. Those, therefore, who do not partake of Him, are neither nourished into life from the mother's breasts, nor do they enjoy that most limpid fountain which issues from the body of Christ."²⁴³ The difficulty that arises, however, is placing this in the context of Irenaeus' understanding that the gospel had been taken to all the world by the apostles. When Irenaeus is critical of those "outside" the church, he is addressing the person who he believes has left or perverted the apostles' teachings. This would certainly become the standard understanding of the medieval theologians and the force behind *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.²⁴⁴ Even though Irenaeus limited God's Spirit to the church it is generally held that he was optimistic about the salvation of the unevangelized.²⁴⁵ Terrance Tiessen summarizes the work of Irenaeus and offers nine reasons to support Irenaeus' optimism. Two of the reasons Tiessen suggests that Irenaeus was optimistic were Irenaeus' belief that, "God wills the salvation of humankind, who are condemned only in consequence of their voluntary unbelief and disobedience" and "God's just judgment of sinful people assumes their voluntary rejection of divine saving revelation to *all* people."²⁴⁶ Tiessen is cautious, but still concludes that "Irenaeus was headed in the direction of accessiblism," and given the context of Irenaeus' work there is good reason to believe he was optimistic about those "outside" the church having the opportunity to be saved.²⁴⁷

Because of his positive use of non-Christian texts and philosophies, Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215) has been called a "prototype of a liberal theologian."²⁴⁸ Clement willingly used the Hellenic philosophies at his disposal unlike many Christians of his time who he said were "frightened at the Hellenic philosophy, as children are at masks."²⁴⁹ With

²⁴³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.24.1

²⁴⁴ For more information on the implications of this see Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, chapter 3.

²⁴⁵ Some of those who make this conclusion include Jacques Dupuis, Clark Pinnock, and John Sanders.

²⁴⁶ Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 50-51.

²⁴⁷ Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 51.

²⁴⁸ Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, Stanley Godman trans. (NY: Pantheon, 1959), 34 quoted in Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 84.

²⁴⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI.10. All quotes in this section are taken from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/>

Clement's high esteem for philosophy, it is not surprising that he believed that God had worked through the Greek philosophers in much the same way he worked through the Hebrew prophets.

Clement saw a strong link between knowledge and salvation (maybe more so than faith), but he believed that there were greater and lesser levels of knowledge. While Clement championed a deep and personal knowledge, which comes from the Logos, he also believed that there was an elementary, common knowledge that could be acquired by all through reason (logos).²⁵⁰ By this, Clement argued for a general revelation by which all humans could approach God, even if by inferior means. "So the Lord of all, of Greeks and of Barbarians, persuades those who are willing. For He does not compel him who (through choosing and fulfilling, from Him, what pertains to laying hold of it the hope) is able to receive salvation from Him. It is He who also gave philosophy to the Greeks by means of the inferior angels."²⁵¹ By this knowledge, God made a way of salvation for those outside the Mosaic covenant. In fact, Clement referred to philosophy as a covenant for the Greeks.²⁵²

Clement surely held that God seeks to bring salvation and knowledge to all, whether Greek or Jew (or even Asian or Indian). For the Greek there was philosophy, for the Jew the Law, and for all, Clement said, "there was always a natural manifestation of the one Almighty God, among all right-thinking men."²⁵³

Justin, Irenaeus, and Clement were not alone in their optimistic thinking, for other Patriarchs shared similar views about those outside the church. For example, Clement of Rome (c.30-100) said, "Let us look stedfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious that blood is to God, which, having been shed for our salvation, has set the grace of repentance before the whole world. Let us turn to every age that has passed, and learn that, from generation to generation, the Lord has granted a place of repentance to all such as would be converted unto Him."²⁵⁴ Origen (c.185-c.254), as well, held a strong inclusivist theology, even though deeply mixed with Greek sensibilities, believing that all of God's enemies would one day be subject to Christ even if the process was slow:

²⁵⁰ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 65.

²⁵¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VII.2.

²⁵² See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI. 5.

²⁵³ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* V. 13.

²⁵⁴ Clement of Rome, *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* VII. *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I* accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/>

It is not without reason, then, that he who is abandoned, is abandoned to the divine judgment, and that God is long-suffering with certain sinners; but because it will be for their advantage, with respect to the immortality of the soul and the unending world, that they be not quickly brought into a state of salvation, but be conducted to it more slowly, after having experienced many evils.²⁵⁵

These church fathers saw the particular advent of Christ as a universal hope of salvation. They did not diminish Christ ontologically, as do contemporary pluralists, nor did they limit the saving work of Christ (Logos) to a right epistemic posture as do exclusivists. In summary, these patriarchs “all spoke of the seminal word or reason in which all humankind partakes, and they considered that persons who live by this word of God were in effect Christians, even though they had never heard of Jesus or were able to confess him.”²⁵⁶

The optimism of the patriarchs, however, would not continue into the next church era. The exclusivism of Augustine became the accepted formula of the church and the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* gained a wide acceptance and a rigid interpretation.²⁵⁷ Christianity became the official state church and all citizens of the empire Christians. Even though there was a strong contingent of inclusivists in the early church, the architects of orthodoxy, most notably Augustine of Hippo, adopted exclusivism. By the 5th century, all other religions were legally banned in the Roman Empire, and it was even forbidden for non-Christians to hold public office.²⁵⁸ For a thousand years, there seemed to be little need to discuss salvation outside the church for there appeared to be few outside the church, save a sparse pagan or Jew. Even though this was the general consensus there were those who left the door open for God’s grace among the unacquainted.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), a product of the Middle Ages, was an advocate of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* and believed that there was only a smattering of unevangelized. Aquinas held that there were different requirements for the clergy and the laity. The clergy were held to a higher standard of theological insight, while the laity, which included Gentiles, were given

²⁵⁵ Origen, *Origen de Principiis* III.1.13. *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV* accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/> While Origen promoted more of a universalism than simply a universally accessible salvation, his optimism reflects the theology of the time.

²⁵⁶ Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1992), 36.

²⁵⁷ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 84. Dupuis argues that this axiom did not always imply that those who had no knowledge of the gospel would be lost, but that those who shunned the gospel or perverted it would be subject to God’s wrath. Not until Christianity became the state Church of Rome did the axiom entail Jews and pagans. 86-90.

greater allowances for error.²⁵⁹ Aquinas, while believing that baptism is necessary for salvation, made allowances for a “baptism by desire.”²⁶⁰ Aquinas had a deeply held conviction that explicit faith was necessary for salvation, something that inclusivists challenge, but he also believed that God would make an opportunity for all to come to that faith. If any who lived before the incarnation were saved it was by a faith that believed in God’s providence even if the faith was not explicit.²⁶¹ Aquinas even gave a scenario of a person being raised by wild animals and concluded that, “If anyone were brought up in the wilderness or among brute animals, provided that he follow his natural reason in seeking the good and avoiding evil, we must most certainly hold that God would either reveal to him, by an inner inspiration, what must be believed, or would send a preacher to him, as he sent Peter to Cornelius.”²⁶² Even though we do not see a clear inclusivism in Aquinas’ thoughts, it is plain that he made way for God to extend grace to the unevangelized and that no one would suffer because of ignorance.

The Protestant reformation was a harkening back to the narrow monergism of Augustine. Both Luther and Calvin held very strict forms of exclusivism, but the third pillar of the Reformation, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), believed that salvation was accessible outside the church. Zwingli was a firm monergist who believed that God unilaterally elects all who come to faith but he denied that all the elect must have an explicit faith in Christ. In his book *Exposition of the Faith*, Zwingli, addressing King Francis, said that when the faithful die they can expect to see:

two Adams, the redeemed and the Redeemer, Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, Phinehas, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, and the Virgin Mother of God of whom he prophesied, David, Hezekiah, Josiah, the Baptist, Peter, Paul; Hercules too and Theseus, Socrates, Aristides, Antigonus, Numa, Camillus, the Catos and Scipios; Louis the Pious and your predecessors the Louis, Philips, Pepins and all your ancestors who have departed this life in faith. In short, there has not been a single good man, there has not been a single pious heart of believing soul from the beginning of the world to the end, which you will not see there in the presence of God. Can we conceive of any spectacle more joyful or agreeable or indeed sublime?²⁶³

²⁵⁸ Knitter, “Karl Rahner,” 396.

²⁵⁹ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 157.

²⁶⁰ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 157.

²⁶¹ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 114.

²⁶² Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q XIV, a. 11, ad 1um quoted in Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 115.

²⁶³ Ulrich Zwingli, “An Exposition of the Faith,” in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, Geoffery Bromily ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 275-276 quoted in Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 57.

It should not be thought that Zwingli believed that being a person of good works or piety led to one's salvation. Zwingli believed that those were expressions of being elect. Since men like Socrates and the ancestors of King Francis were apparently good men they must have been elect. These thoughts, however, were not typical of most reformation theologians. Few believed, as Zwingli did, that the "elect who hear of Christ respond in faith, and the elect who do not hear of Christ respond with a virtuous life because the law is written on their hearts."²⁶⁴

The eighteenth century founder of Methodism, John Wesley (1703-1791), may have been one of the firmest advocates for inclusivism since the Patristics. Wesley lived at the dawn of the Enlightenment and at a time in which new lands, peoples, and religions were being discovered. Wesley, who firmly held to a belief in universal prevenient grace, held that knowledge of God was not necessary for salvation. "The benefit of the death of Christ is... extended... even unto those who are inevitably excluded from this knowledge. Even these may be partakers of the benefit of his death, though ignorant of the history, if they suffer His grace to take place in their hearts, so as of wicked men to become holy."²⁶⁵ Wesley, in opposition to exclusivistic theologies, said that he could not "conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation...it is far better to leave them to Him that made them, and who is 'the Father of the spirits of all flesh'; who is the God of the heathens as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made."²⁶⁶ He suggested that God never left himself without a witness and that at times he would miraculously make a way for the unevangelized to hear the gospel, as in the case of Cornelius. According to Sanders, Wesley's "preferred solution to the problem [of the unevangelized] was along inclusivist lines" meaning that Wesley held to a "faith principle" theology more so than a "universal opportunity" model.²⁶⁷

God required less of those who were outside the reach of the gospel, for it would be unfair of God to blame the unevangelized for failing to accept what they never knew. "Inasmuch as to them little is given, of them little will be required... No more therefore will be expected of them... we have reason to hope, although they lived among the heathens, yet were quite of another spirit; being taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion."²⁶⁸

²⁶⁴ Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 58.

²⁶⁵ John Wesley, Letters, 2:118 quoted in Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 62.

²⁶⁶ John Wesley, "On Living Without God," in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 7:353 quoted in Sanders, *No Other name*, 249-250.

²⁶⁷ Sanders, *No Other name*, 250.

²⁶⁸ John Wesley, "On Faith," in *The Works of John Wesley*, 7:197 quoted in Sanders, *No Other name*, 250.

The assurance of salvation was what separated the Christian from the faithful heathen, and those outside the Christian community were “*servants*, but not *sons*.” However, if they continue to walk in faith they will be sons.²⁶⁹ Wesley made great progress in recovering the salvific optimism of the Patriarchs.

A luminary and profound influence for many twentieth century Christians is C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) who, although not formally a theologian, has helped shape many evangelical thinkers. Even though Lewis has been a powerful force in evangelicalism, which is dominated by exclusivism, there is little doubt he was a proponent of inclusivism.²⁷⁰ Like all inclusivists, Lewis maintained the finality and uniqueness of Christ, from whose name salvation comes. Lewis also said, “of course it should be pointed out that, though all salvation is through Jesus, we need not conclude that he cannot save those who have not explicitly accepted Him in this life.”²⁷¹ Lewis challenged the notion that one must rightly confess Christ before he or she can be saved. He even went a step beyond the argument from ignorance and said, honest rejection of Christ, however mistaken, will be forgiven and healed—‘Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him’.²⁷² By this statement Lewis is not only saying that those who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel have an opportunity for salvation but those who reject it! He is not advocating universalism, though, for in his classic work *The Great Divorce*, Lewis says, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done’.”²⁷³

While he saw error and darkness in non-Christian religions, Lewis also saw goodness and truth, believing that those who honestly seek truth and goodness seek God and will be saved. In *Mere Christianity* Lewis states, “There are people in other religions who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it.”²⁷⁴ Lewis also advanced this theology in several of the books of his seven part fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The most compelling of these comes from the final book in the series, *The Last Battle*, in which Aslan, the Christ figure, grants salvation to Emeth even though he was raised in another land and

²⁶⁹ Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 562.

²⁷⁰ John Sanders summarizes Lewis’ inclusivism in *No Other Name*, 251-257.

²⁷¹ Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 102.

²⁷² Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 111.

²⁷³ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 72.

²⁷⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 65.

served a different lord, Tash. Emeth, expecting to receive death from Aslan for his service to Tash, receives mercy instead.

Then I fell at his feet and thought, Surely this is the hour of death, for the Lion (who is worthy of all honour) will know that I have served Tash all my days and not him. Nevertheless, it is better to see the Lion and die than to be Tisroc of the world and live and not to have seen him. But the Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, Son, thou art welcome. But I said, alas, Lord, I am no son of Thine but the servant of Tash. He answered, Child, all the service thou has done to Tash, I account as service done to me. Then by reason of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord, is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one? The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou has done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore, if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then, though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, Child? I said, Lord, thou knowest how much I understand. But I said also (for the truth constrained me), yet I have been seeking Tash all my days. Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.²⁷⁵

From this passage it is clear that Lewis rejects a Hick-like pluralism for he suggests that God is not the same as those found in the non-Christian religions. He also rejects the exclusivism of Sproul in portraying God (Aslan) as counting the service done in another god's name to himself.

The history of inclusivism certainly contains some lean periods, especially between the fifth and nineteenth centuries. Even though the twentieth century saw inclusivism bloom in Protestantism, it is in Catholicism that we see inclusivism become soteriological orthodoxy. This is a huge step in Catholic theology of religions.

Between the years of 1962 and 1965, over two thousand bishops gathered in Rome to discuss how the Catholic church might respond to the changing times. The result of the council is a work that has come to be known as Vatican II. While the Council of Florence (1442) took a very inflexible attitude concerning the salvation of those outside the Catholic church, Vatican II would turn this on its head. The document "*Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Church's Relation

to Non-Christian Religions” encouraged all Christians to lovingly engage in dialogue and cooperate with the followers of other religions and to “acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these persons.”²⁷⁶ Even though this declaration was a late addition to the council and was originally meant to only address Christianity’s relationship with Judaism,²⁷⁷ the council nonetheless affirmed God’s assurance of salvation to those who, “without any faults of theirs, have not arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life.”²⁷⁸ While this was not a blanket proposal of religious pluralism (or even inclusivism according to some) it nonetheless changed the hyper-exclusivistic proclivity of the Catholic Church.

The theology of Karl Rahner was instrumental in the inclusivistic shift found in Vatican II. Rahner’s influential “anonymous Christians” theology suggests that those outside the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the concrete history of salvation, who sincerely and obediently follow the religious traditions of their community, are to be understood as Christian, although anonymously since they are not aware it is Christ they obey in their own measure. In an interview, Rahner suggested that while there is a path unto salvation outside the Catholic Church and Christianity, it is still provided by Christ:

‘Anonymous Christianity’ means that a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity... Let us say, a Buddhist monk... who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian; if not, I would have to presuppose that there is a genuine path to salvation that really attains that goal, but that simply has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. But I cannot do that. And so, if I hold if everyone depends upon Jesus Christ for salvation, and if at the same time I hold that many live in the world who have not expressly recognized Jesus Christ, then there remains in my opinion nothing else but to take up this postulate of an anonymous Christianity.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (London: Penguin, 1956), 149 quoted in Pinnock *Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 99-100.

²⁷⁶ Knitter, “Karl Rahner,” 399. The quote is from NA 27: 2-4 of the document.

²⁷⁷ For more information on the history of the Second Vatican Council and this declaration addition see Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, chapter six. This declaration, being a late addition, might account for Paul Knitter’s criticism that the document is ambiguous, zigzagging back and forth between affording salvation for those in other religions and salvation in the Church alone. Knitter, “Karl Rahner,” 399.

²⁷⁸ *Lumen Gentium* 16 quoted in Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 162.

²⁷⁹ Karl Rahner, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews 1965-1982* (New York: Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 1986), 135.

This approach by Rahner is constructed upon three building blocks consisting of theology, anthropology, and Christology. Rahner's theology proclaims a God whose love for all humanity is demonstrated in a universal salvific will. Rahner affirms a common inclusivist sentiment, noting that if God truly and authentically loves all persons, his grace will not be hidden or excluded from anyone. As spiritual beings God has provided a built in drive for us to love and be loved and when we reach outside ourselves, especially in the face of death, we are responding to the mystery of God.²⁸⁰ The anthropological building block notes that humans are essentially historical and social beings; we cannot escape a sociocultural and historical context. Because of this, God's salvific will cannot be above history and culture, but must be found within the very workings of culture. Rahner was not arguing for individuals to *only* follow their conscience, for he believed that God's grace was found within the ecclesial community or religion.²⁸¹ Christology completed Rahner's inclusivism, declaring that Jesus Christ was both the center and final cause of salvation. Jesus Christ, according to Rahner, is the fullest and final revelation of God's saving activity.²⁸² The Second Vatican Council and various Catholic theologians, primarily Karl Rahner, have helped the Catholic Church to begin addressing the issues of being Christocentric in a pluralistic world.

This brief history of inclusivism, while all too brief and full of omissions,²⁸³ demonstrates that this theology is not a fad, modern sentimentalism, or even a movement kindled by the "American value of fairness."²⁸⁴ While there is room to argue that this theology might be in error, it would be entirely false to claim that it is simply a modern movement or one that has only an underprivileged history.

Biblical Arguments

Biblical support for an inclusivist understanding of salvation can seem a bit daunting for there are no biblical verses that unequivocally state, "Thus says the Lord, 'I will save those who honestly seek me within the context of their own faith even though they have no special

²⁸⁰ Knitter, "Karl Rahner," 399-400.

²⁸¹ Knitter, "Karl Rahner," 400.

²⁸² Knitter, "Karl Rahner," 401.

²⁸³ Some of the names that could have been explored in the history include: Pope Gregory VII, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Peter Abelard, Francis of Assisi, Richard Baxter, and Jerome Zanchius, and this does not take into account the many 20th century thinkers who uphold inclusivism.

²⁸⁴ Sanders quotes J.I. Packer who characterized inclusivism in this way at the "Evangelical Affirmations" conference. See *No Other Name*, note 6, page 136.

revelation of Jesus Christ’.” Such a passage, though helpful, would still be subject to debate. Despite the fact that there are some verses in support of an inclusivist theology, the real confirmation is not in specific verses or “proof texts,” but in narratives which reveal the will and character of God in persons such as Melchizedek and Cornelius. The trajectory of scripture itself may be the best biblical witness we have to God’s salvific will. The historical narrative of salvation, beginning with Abraham, moving through Israel, reaching maturity in Jesus, and exploding via the church is the story of the depth and width of God’s saving love. The luxury we have of being able to look back upon biblical history is that we can note God’s intention of saving the world and making that salvation evident and real in the work of Christ. Isolated verses and stories can only get us so far, but when strung together, they reveal a God with a salvific plan to save all by his grace and mercy.

Any apology for an optimistic soteriology must include the Pastoral Epistles. Within these three letters are statements of the author’s (or authors’) belief that God is eager to see all come to a knowledge of him but also that God is already the savior of all persons. These epistles teach that God is desirous that all come and experience salvation and know him as Lord but also that God is presently, not simply potentially, the savior of all persons. In this brief summary four passages will be considered: 1 Timothy 2:3-4: “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” 1 Timothy 2: 5-6: “...for there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for *all* men...” 1 Timothy 4:10: “...we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.” And Titus 2:11: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.”²⁸⁵

1 Timothy 2:3-4 clearly addresses God’s desire that all persons come to salvation. This passage is set in the context of the epistle’s author charging Christians to pray for everyone, including kings and authorities.²⁸⁶ It should also be noted that when this passage is yoked with 2 Peter 3:9 (“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is

²⁸⁵ It is the claim of some exclusivists that the Pastorals do not give evidence of a universal salvific will, but that God has a hidden will and one that only seeks to save the elect. For more information regarding such issues see I. Howard Marshall’s “Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles” in *The Grace of God the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* Clark Pinnock ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1989).

²⁸⁶ Issues surrounding the date and authorship of the Pastorals might actually strengthen this argument, for if these epistles are post-Paul. The context of praying for such authorities who were responsible for the death of

patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance”), there is even a stronger demonstration of God’s wanting of all persons to be saved.

God’s desire for the salvation of all people is not merely a wish or some whim that God has not done anything about. The passage that follows, 1 Timothy 2:5-6, states that God has effectually made salvation possible for *all* persons through the work of Jesus Christ: “...for there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for *all* men...” Jesus gave himself not for any particular group alone nor was his ransom sufficient merely for the “elect,” but for all. Jesus has not simply paid a debt for some and not others but for all humans.²⁸⁷ Other passages in the New Testament speak of Jesus’ death and resurrection as being applicable to all persons. Romans 5:18-19, “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”²⁸⁸ Revelation 5:9, “And they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from *every tribe and language and people and nation*’.” According to Tiessen, these passages speak of “Christ actually accomplishing salvation by his death, not just making people savable.”²⁸⁹ These passages speak so powerfully of the effectual work of Christ that a common understanding is that salvation is not simply universally accessible but universal. This would be in contradiction to the many biblical passages which speak of eternal punishment for those who have rejected Christ and refused to believe.²⁹⁰ The Gospel of John, chapter three,

Paul, but also stating that God wills the salvation of all men, apparently even these who were seeking to do harm to the church, means that God’s grace could even be extended to such dangerous people.

²⁸⁷ It should be expressed in light of these passages that, even if God does will all to be saved, it is clear that God’s will can be thwarted for not all will be saved. It seems that God’s gift of salvation is limited to those who respond in faith and love. Perhaps God cannot impart salvation to those who do not act out in faith. This would imply that our love for, and faith in, God is a part of salvation, communion with God. Therefore, God wills all to be saved and has given the gift universally but salvation necessitates our free response and God cannot force his will of salvation on those who do not desire his fellowship.

²⁸⁸ For a discussion on the use of “all” versus “many” see Marshall, “Universal Grace,” 59-61.

²⁸⁹ Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 93.

²⁹⁰ Universalism becomes very difficult to deny if one accepts penal substitution as the only proper atonement theory. Unless of course that same person subscribes to a limited atonement which would change the meaning of “all.” Not being an advocate of the penal substitution theory, I believe Christ could die *for* everyone without that automatically leading to a universal salvation. One thing that is important in any salvation discussion is to understand that the New Testament uses several metaphors to explain the work of Christ and the meaning of the cross.

is a good example which teaches God's desire to save all the world (verse 16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."), but also that not all will be saved (verse 18, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son").

Titus 2:11 also makes use of the word "all" (πᾶσιν) telling us that God's salvation is for every one. This verse should also be read closely with verses 13 and 14, "the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." As seen in verse 11, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men," God's grace is tied with Jesus' giving of himself. The grace of God and the work of Christ (regardless of one's atonement theory) are tied together in the Pastorals. I. Howard Marshall sees this connection also being tied to the love of God.

Thus the grace cannot be separated from the coming and the dying of Jesus. Hence it is difficult to see how one might say "God loves you" without at the same time being able to say "Christ died for you," unless the love is understood to be nonsaving kind of love. It is therefore possible and indeed necessary to affirm both of the two statements with full theological integrity.²⁹¹

Regardless of the difficulty the exclusivist separates God's love and God's salvation, but this will be addressed below. What is important here is that these verses clearly link Jesus' atoning death and the expression of God's grace to all persons.

The last Pastoral passage that will be discussed is perhaps the most powerful in supporting an inclusivist understanding of God's salvific will. 1 Timothy 4:10 characterizes God as "the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe." This is a curious statement, not only for its universal claim but also because it speaks of salvation having different depths. For someone like J.I. Packer²⁹² the meaning here is that salvation only becomes real for believers. The passage would read something like, "...we have put our hope in the living God, who is *potentially* the Savior of all men, *but only actually* of those who believe." Is this really the author's intent? John Sanders asserts that this passage means, "the living God saves all who

²⁹¹ Marshall, "Universal Grace," 64.

²⁹² J. I. Packer, "The Love of God: Particular and Universal," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspective on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 283.

believe in him and that the specific content of saving faith may vary so long as it is grounded in an essential trust in God.”²⁹³ Millard Erickson understands this verse to mean that “the Savior has done something for all persons, though it is less in degree than what he has done for those who believe.”²⁹⁴ The inclusivist understands this passage, however, to say that God’s salvation is for all but that the believer (Christian) experiences this salvation more fully. Jesus is the savior of all, even the unevangelized. The word that the author uses in this passage “especially” (μα+λιστα) is meant to denote a focus on an individual or group but not exclusion of another. “Especially” is found four times in the Pastorals (1 Timothy 5:8; 5:17; 2 Timothy 4:13; Titus 1:10) and in each case the subject of the “especially” is merely highlighted. In 1 Timothy 5:17 it says the church should honor elders, especially those who preach and teach. In no way can this use of “especially” denote that only elders who preach and teach should be honored but not all elders or only potential elders. In the same way 4:10 cannot be saying that God is only the savior of believers, but rather that he is the savior of all.

The Pastorals are representative of the gospel message Paul preached, regardless of their authorship issues. William Mounce boldly states, “There is no exclusivism in Paul’s gospel.”²⁹⁵ While this statement might be too sweeping it is certainly true of the gospel preached in the Pastorals. These epistles are only three within a collection that contains 27 books, but these are representative of the New Testament’s optimism for the unevangelized. They speak of God’s universal purposes, his desire to save all, the effectual work of Christ, and “especially” God being the savior of all. I. Howard Marshall, who investigated the pastorals in light of exclusivist claims that they actually taught a limited atonement and narrow salvation, concluded this:

We have found nothing in the Pastorals that requires that we assume the existence of a “hidden agenda,” a secret plan of God to save only the elect, in the light of which the statement of universal grace and unlimited atonement must be given something other than their obvious meaning. We have found that here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, there is a premundane gracious will of God directed to the salvation of a people who will inherit eternal life, and God wills the means to that end. But we are left in the dark as to how that will is worked out in the lives of individuals.²⁹⁶

²⁹³ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 217.

²⁹⁴ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 834.

²⁹⁵ William D. Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 46 Pastoral Epistles* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 2000), 256.

²⁹⁶ Marshall, “Universal Grace,” 69.

Scripture is filled with stories of God's forgiveness, patience, and mercy which are direct results of his love. The New Testament is generally thought of as the more "loving" testament, while the Old Testament contains stories of God's wrath executed upon Israel and neighboring countries. The Old Testament also has some remarkable pronouncements of God's care for those inside and outside the Mosaic covenant. The Old Testament tells us of "pagan saints" such as Job, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, and the Ninevites, all of whom found God's favor outside of a specific covenant.²⁹⁷ Psalm 22:27 anticipates a day when all nations will be worshiping the Lord at the close of history, saying, "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord and all the families of the nations will worship before thee." One of the most dramatic (and misquoted) teachings is the Isaiah passage which says, "His ways are not our ways" (Is. 55:8). This verse has unfortunately been used to answer questions of why God would allow or cause all sorts of mayhem, including the restricting of his love and salvation to a limited few, but in fact the context of this verse shows that it is meant to distinguish God's love and forgiveness from humanity's. Stated another way, "the context clearly indicates that what distinguishes God from humanity is God's willingness to forgive those who have seriously wronged him."²⁹⁸ Isaiah is explaining that God's ways of mercy and care are not our ways of prejudice and malice.

When God chose Israel to be a special people with a special purpose this in no way meant that God cut off his grace and care for other nations and peoples. Amos 9:7 illustrates this saying, "'Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?' declares the Lord. 'Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?'" God was a deliverer, a savior of these nations as well. The story of Naaman who was healed of leprosy (2 Kings 5) is also important for the inclusivist, not simply for the fact that God healed this Syrian, who eventually came to faith, but that his faith is theologically suspect. Naaman states his faith in God saying "there is no God in all the world except in Israel," but then he takes two mules worth of dirt with him back to Syria. It seems that Naaman remained a bit of an animist and that he was going to continue to worship in the temples of Syria (2 Kings 5:18)!²⁹⁹ It also seems that Naaman's faith was as real as any Israelite's despite his theological misgivings.

²⁹⁷ For more on these "pagan saints" see Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*.

²⁹⁸ John Sanders, "Inclusivism," in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, John Sanders ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 26.

²⁹⁹ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 220.

The teachings of Jesus are also filled with stories of love and forgiveness of a kind that would have caused bewilderment in Jesus' hearers. From Jesus eating with sinners, to parables like those of the prodigal son (Lk.15) and the King's Sons' Wedding (Matt. 22), Jesus turned upside down his hearers' concepts of God's wrath and judgment. God's anger was being measured out on the self-righteous, according to Jesus, and his favor on the marginalized. Some exclusivists use Luke 13 as support for their narrowness approach noting that when Jesus is asked point blank if only a few will be saved he speaks about the door being narrow and many trying to enter. If that was all Jesus had said then an exclusivist interpretation might be merited. Jesus did not only say only a few will be saved, rather, he spoke of what kind of person will be saved, those known by him. When those wanting to enter the feast are told to leave because the owner never knew them, they reply that the owner ate and drank with them and taught in their streets. Jesus' pronouncement that he never knew them is not to be understood to mean that he never called them, never loved them, or never wanted them. Jesus is responding to the pride of those who believed that simply because they knew *about* Jesus, Jesus should then know them. The inclusive nature and salvific optimism of the parable is revealed when Jesus says that "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God." Are we to conclude that the great feast will only have a few of the countless people from the four corners of the earth? That Jesus, speaking to those who believed that those from the east and west were outside God's grace by being gentiles, was only speaking about Jews in foreign lands? Jesus is teaching these students that being acquainted with Jesus (theologically?) is not the same as being known by Jesus, and Jesus knows his sheep.

The book of Acts also contains key passages which support a salvific optimism. The story of Cornelius (Acts 17) is a watershed moment for the new church. When Cornelius, a Gentile, receives the gift of the Holy Spirit it changes the whole theological paradigm of Christians up to that point. Where God's grace was once seen as only for those who had a particular bloodline or explicit covenant it was now being manifested in a Gentile Roman soldier. Such a change did not come easily for Peter and other Jewish Christians, it was a long process. Cornelius was not Hebrew, nor was he a proselyte; he was a God fearer, a seeker. Peter's change of heart, although frail, led him to declare, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (10: 34-35). Was this simply an isolated event? Was Cornelius the only God fearer who could

receive God's grace prior to a "saving knowledge"? Or could this story be given, as Norman Anderson suggests, to say that, "God sometimes so works in men's hearts by his grace that, instead of them 'holding down the truth,' he opens their hearts to it and enables them to embrace such of it as has been revealed to them?"³⁰⁰

"Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). These are the words of Paul, as recorded in Acts 17, when he stood before Stoics and Epicureans preaching to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul also told the Athenians that God had overlooked these ignorances in the past (17:30). Paul does not rebuke or chastise these "very religious" people for their idol worship, even though he was grieved by it. This was certainly not the ideal way in which to worship the "God who made the world and everything in it" for this God "does not live in temples built by hands" (17:34). Paul, certainly not known for mincing words, does not condemn these idol worshippers, but affirms and "praises the religious spirit of the Greeks."³⁰¹ Dupuis concludes from this passage, "the message surely seems to be that the religions of the nations are not bereft of value but find in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of their aspirations. In comparison with what is offered in Jesus Christ, they seem very spare, but this does not prevent them from being a positive preparation for Christian faith."³⁰²

Paul does an interesting thing after informing and affirming these Greeks. After declaring that God is not far from each one of us, he quotes their own poets saying "'for in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (17:28). Paul recognizes and uses the truth found in his listeners' own writings to proclaim the gospel. Paul's goal was to get the Athenians to believe in Jesus Christ, to know the wonders and power of the gospel, to recognize that they have had God with them all along in the worship. Were these Greeks Christians? Orthodox theologian, Georges Khodr, thinks so.

The view of the apostle as expressed in his Areopagus speech is that the Athenians worshipped the true God without recognizing Him as the Creator. His face had not been unveiled to them. In other words, they were Christians without knowing it. Paul gave their God a name. The Name, together with its attributes, is

³⁰⁰ J.N.D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 151.

³⁰¹ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 49.

³⁰² Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 49.

the revelation of God. We find here the germ of a positive attitude to paganism which goes hand in hand with its complete negation, inherited from Judaism.³⁰³

To claim that Paul saw these Athenians as “Christians” seems unjustified and misses what being a Christian means, but Khodr is right in that Paul believed these Greeks worshipped the true God, even though they did not know him by name. It appears that Paul is not the champion of salvific exclusivism as many have claimed, for as shown, there are many examples from both Acts and his letters to suggest otherwise.³⁰⁴

The proclamations and narratives found in the witness of scripture show a salvific trajectory that gets wider and wider as the story progresses. From the Prophets who spoke of Gentiles feasting at the Lord’s table (Is. 25:6) to Peter’s baptism of Cornelius to Paul’s Athenian sermon, the biblical story of God’s salvation and merciful love shatters our notions of justice and righteousness and reminds us that “God’s ways are not our ways.”

Theological Arguments

Particularity of Christ

The inclusivist model has two pillars: Jesus Christ is the final and decisive revelation of God, and God is a serious lover of humanity who extends his grace and an opportunity for salvation to all. While there is, by and large, agreement among inclusivists about the first pillar, there is still debate about the second regarding how God in fact extends his grace and in what way(s) God offers salvation.

As stated, the inclusivist maintains that Jesus is the unique, exclusive, particular, ultimate, and matchless revelation and effecter of salvation. Salvation is achieved solely in the work of Christ and the grace of the Father. In fact, it is the denial of this pillar of inclusivism that seats one squarely at the table of pluralism. For example, John Sanders writes:

Jesus is the goal or standard of what humanity is to be like. In him we find the fulfillment of our destiny, what it means to be a genuine human being. He is both the true image of God and the true image of humanness...the atonement of Jesus is absolutely essential for the salvation of any human being who has ever lived—

³⁰³ Georges Khodr, “The Economy of the Holy Spirit,” in *Faith Meets Faith*, Mission Trends, Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky eds. (Grand Rapid: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 5:38 quoted in Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 179.

³⁰⁴ It should be stated that this author understands the limitations of speaking about “Paul” in this general sense. It is widely argued that there are differences between the Lukan Paul of Acts and the Paul(s) of the epistles. Regardless, there is enough material from all the words and works attributed to this individual to raise serious questions about the salvific exclusivists’ claims that Paul was completely exclusivistic.

whether they were born two thousand years before Jesus or two thousand years after him.³⁰⁵

Likewise, Clark Pinnock writes:

According to the New Testament, God provided salvation for the world through the work of one mediator, Jesus Christ. This means that universality (salvation for the world) is reached by way of particularity (salvation through Jesus) in Christianity. Our proclamation is that God is healing the nations through the mediation of his Son, rather than in some other way. In his wisdom God is reconciling the world to himself, not through religious experience, not through natural revelation, not through the prophets alone, not through all the religions of the world, but through Jesus Christ.³⁰⁶

Terrance Tiessen, who advocates a form of inclusivism he calls “accessiblism” states: “Jesus Christ is the world’s only Savior. All who have ever been, are now or ever will be saved are reconciled to God because Jesus Christ lived, died and rose again for them. Salvation is a work of the triune God whom Christians worship.”³⁰⁷ Finally, Galvin D’Costa states that:

We cannot, as Christians, speak of the Father without the story of Jesus. The Father cannot be conjured up through speculation of abstractions, but is revealed in the particularities of history, in the story of the Son, understood and interpreted through the illumination of the Spirit. It is through constantly attending to the particularities of Jesus’ story that we come to know who God is... We cannot divorce our understanding of God from the story of Jesus and rend asunder the universal and particular.³⁰⁸

Christianity cannot be separated from the belief that God has acted in a unique way to reveal himself in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and remain faithful to the biblical witness and a two thousand year tradition.

According to the Christian, the search for salvation will always end in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the revelation of God who came to make known the mind of God. Christian inclusivists do not say they simply have one perspective of many but that they enjoy a point of view based on the self-revelation of God. It is a unique and particular expression, although admittedly not wholly free from historical and cultural influences. The person of Jesus, though, is not merely a means by which we learn something *about* God. That is “God does not disclose something about God,

³⁰⁵ Sanders, “Inclusivism,” 23.

³⁰⁶ Pinnock, *A Wideness*, 49.

³⁰⁷ Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 22.

but God.”³⁰⁹ Jesus is God and not merely a revealer of God.³¹⁰ It is not the intent of this thesis to explain why the inclusivist has sufficient reason to believe that Jesus is the unique revelation of God, for that study would require in-depth discussions of historicity, higher criticism, apologetics, and epistemology, as well as existential and subjective arguments. The point is that the inclusivist generally holds to an orthodox theology in these areas. The fact remains, the inclusivist does not regard the Christian faith as “equal but separate” in regard to theological truth, for to the inclusivist the Christian has a matchless, although not complete, understanding of the mind and purpose of God.

The inclusivist approach then has a high Christology, and while this can be a “stumbling block” for religious pluralism and modernist theologies it is nonetheless a cornerstone of Christian faith. Clark Pinnock, one of only a few Evangelical inclusivists, states that the uniqueness of Jesus is rooted in the uniqueness of God. “Uniqueness belongs first of all to the God of the Bible; and, if it should be said that Jesus is unique, it will only be because of the special relation to God he is thought to enjoy as God’s Son.”³¹¹ For Pinnock, Christology is pivotal to Christianity regardless of the theological variances in important doctrines. For example, Pinnock touches on the relationship of the incarnation and pluralism:

Getting rid of the Incarnation category, while shocking to church tradition, would not solve the problem that the uniqueness of Jesus poses to interreligious harmony as the pluralists see it....Jesus played a prophetic role for his followers, and the legitimacy of that role became a central issue in his career. Was he sent by God or not? By the end of his public ministry, Jesus had generated the conviction in his disciples that he occupied an honored place in the plan of God, as God’s agent in the end times. Whether this is true or not was the question which followed him into his death and beyond.³¹²

What Pinnock is trying to establish is that while Jesus is central to Christian theology and Christology, there is room for disagreement about exactly who (or what) Jesus claimed to be and

³⁰⁸ Galvin D’Costa, “Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Galvin D’Costa ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 18.

³⁰⁹ Christopher Schwöbel, “Particularity, Universality, and the Religions,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Galvin D’Costa ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 34.

³¹⁰ This statement does not negate the fact that there is much room for debate about how the theology of the incarnation can be understood.

³¹¹ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 53.

³¹² Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 59. Lesslie Newbigin, for one, would seem to disagree with Pinnock. In his book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, he says that the incarnation is the “real meaning and end of history.” Page 164.

in fact is. Pinnock, in response to both the pluralist and exclusivist, is saying that Christian uniqueness does not rest solely on a particular understanding of the incarnation but on the “claim that was tested by his death and vindicated by his resurrection” that he was the agent of God’s kingdom.³¹³ In the end, though, Pinnock holds a belief that most inclusivists share, “Jesus is Lord,” and that statement is:

metaphysically and not just existentially true. It is a claim about reality, and Jesus’ position within that reality. It says that Jesus stands with God at his right hand in his dealings with the human race. When we say that “Jesus is Lord,” we mean not only that the stories of Jesus communicate the power of new being, though they do so. We mean that it is propositionally the case that Jesus is definitively and unsurpassably the Lord of the universe.³¹⁴

While the doctrines that have risen throughout church history are important, they will not ultimately decide if Christianity has a unique perspective into the truth of God. The ontological status of Jesus is an issue Christians cannot set aside, for if Jesus is relegated to the status of one “wise sage” among others then the notion of “Christian” must be abandoned for he will have not been the Christ, Savior, or Lord but simply a sensible teacher.

Universality of Love

The second pillar of inclusivism is the universal love of God. It is not completely dissimilar from the first pillar however. The love of God and the uniqueness of Jesus form the two sides of the same coin. Christopher Schwöbel says that it must be emphasized that “this understanding of the universality of God’s presence to his creation and of the universality of God’s reconciling and saving love for his creation is for Christian theology never independent of God’s self-disclosure in the particularity of the Christ event as the particular Trinitarian God—Father, Son, and Spirit.”³¹⁵ We are not discussing two separate actions on the part of God. The radical love of God is seen throughout the teachings of the Bible and in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

³¹³ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 63.

³¹⁴ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, A curious term that is often used by the inclusivist is that Jesus is the “savior of humanity” or that God saves because of the “work” of Jesus Christ. Such language is odd because it seems to imply a rather limited perspective regarding the death of Jesus and the atonement. It is understood that these are biblical notions, but for this author they imply a substitutionary atonement. While that is not outright dismissed by all inclusivists, several seem to question the implications of Anselm’s theology. See Pinnock & Robert Brow *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

³¹⁵ Schwöbel, “Particularity, Universality, and the Religions,” 39.

Pinnock has proposed a theology infused with an “optimism of salvation” and a “hermeneutic of love.” Despite the fact that there are problematic verses to be found, the inclusivist maintains that the whole witness of scripture overwhelmingly points to a God who is seeking to save the lost everywhere, while respecting their right to refuse salvation. Pinnock sums up this theme found in Jesus’ teachings by saying:

What characterized Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom was not a pettiness on God’s part regarding his divine rights, an insecurity in reestablishing them or the need to save face. On the contrary, the hallmark of the kingdom was God’s boundless mercy to undeserving sinners. This is what distinguished Jesus’ message from what other groups in Judaism were saying at the time. God forgives the publican who simply asks for mercy (Lk.18:9-14).³¹⁶

God is portrayed in the New Testament as one who upsets the status quo, exalting the low and valuing the forgotten. Like the prophets of old, Jesus proclaims a justice which upsets our “common sense” and is overflowing with love, mercy, and grace. Yet exclusivists are unable to understand how this can be fair or right and so restrict it to a meager few. Despite the fact that inclusivists have many questions regarding how one might reconcile God’s tenderness and wrath, they do not believe the difficulties negate His love. If there is a need for a redefinition of words, it cannot be those of mercy and love for God *is* love. Past attempts to understand and redefine mercy and love in the light of judgment and wrath have resulted in love becoming less loving or “mysterious” while the notions of wrath and judgment are preserved and unquestioned. If God’s love is a mystery, it is not so because it is limited but because it is greater than thought possible. He cares for those which we often deem unlovable. “God’s ways are not our ways.”

The advent of Christ is the fundamental disclosure of God’s love for all humankind. There are many passages that express the indivisible union of God’s unique act in Jesus and his universal love for all humankind. The author of the gospel of John states that God’s love for the earth led him to give his son (John 3:16). The first epistle of John makes several unifying statements regarding Jesus and the universal love of God. “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him” (4:9). The author of this epistle demonstrates that God’s love for “us” means a love for the world that was demonstrated in the life and death of Christ. A few verses later the author confirms, “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (4:14).

³¹⁶ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 30-31.

These verses support the argument that the love of God and the particularity of the Christ event are not mutually exclusive. The advent of Christ is not about God's love for a few, the chosen, or the elect, but for the whole world. The historic act of God displayed through a particular event, in a particular time, in a particular place in no way equates to a particular love for only particular persons. Although this is what some exclusivists would claim, in fact this particular act of God in Christ has universal consequences.

In addressing the universality of God's love two propositions must be accepted unequivocally: God is a serious lover of all humanity and God's love is expressed in his desire for all of humanity to experience salvation. Love is the preeminent characteristic of God. It is the attribute that all other attributes support. Fritz Guy notes that, "One of the most serious ways in which the course of Christian theology has been misled by its classical and medieval heritage has been the assumption that the primary fact about God is omnipotent sovereignty."³¹⁷ The traditional emphasis on sovereignty creates a theological dissonance when it tries to reconcile a God who always gets what he wills (or he would not be sovereign, according to the argument), a God who will enact divine justice on those who fully reject his grace, and a God who is a real lover of humanity. For many, the only way to solve this dilemma is to claim that God's sovereignty controls all cosmic events and that those who are saved are saved solely by the will of God. Others will claim that while God does not unilaterally elect some to salvation and the rest to damnation, his sovereign justice must rule; therefore God will save those who have rightly called upon his name and the rest will be damned to realize God's righteous wrath. Both of these fatally render God's love to mere sentimentality. God's love is not the power unto salvation, but is depicted as an impotent quality in the presence of God's justice and power. The love of God, however, is the controlling attribute which makes God's justice virtuous and his power praiseworthy. It was God's love that sent Jesus. It was God's love that led Jesus to ask for the forgiveness of his executioners. It was God's love that restrained his power and wrath from destroying the earth in its rebellion. God's power and justice serve God's love, they guarantee that love will not fail, and it is love that guides God's justice and reminds us that "his ways are not our ways." Not all inclusivists understand the nature of God's love in this way, but all certainly see God's love as being universal and desirous of a wide-ranging salvation.

³¹⁷ Fritz Guy, "The Universality of God's Love," in *The Grace of God the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* Clark Pinnock ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1989), 33.

God's sovereign love is sometimes understood to entail more than a universal opportunity of salvation but a universal salvation. The argument is that God's desire that all be saved, coupled with God's absolute sovereignty, equates to a universal salvation. As William Dalton states, "The God of the New Testament is not half-saving, half-punishing: he is the God of salvation... If he can save all men, then he *will* save all men."³¹⁸ This is not the problem it appears to be if God's love is understood as vulnerable and risk taking and if God's sovereignty is not understood as raw, unilateral power, but as a shared and partnered power. God's love does not work against the will of those he loves. God does not force himself on humanity but woos them into a loving relationship by revealing his true nature. Secondly, God's omnipotence cannot be manifested in self-contradiction. Just as God cannot make "married bachelors" and "square circles," God cannot enact a "causally determined free action" which love must be if it is to, in fact be, love.³¹⁹ God's love is not simply about "saving" all, but respecting the freedom which God has granted to humans and in the end surrendering to their desires. This is an aspect of God's love.

Just as it is divine love that intends and wills and works for the salvation of as much of humanity as possible—ideally, all of it—so it is the divine love that respects human freedom, even to the extent of allowing humanity to be utterly irrational and perverse—that is, to reject the love that has created, sustained, and redeemed it. But if it happens, that rejection is recognized and respected by the very love that is rejected.³²⁰

A more crass, but legitimate, way of looking at this is that God's love is never rape. God never forces himself on those who do not want his love. "For this love loves so extravagantly that it is willing to risk eternal anguish rather than turn its beloved humanity into an object to be controlled by the will of another, even a divine Other."³²¹

One objection to this line of thinking would be that God's gracious love would not respect a freedom that ultimately leads one to an eternity in hell. While this is true the solution is not in rethinking, or adjusting, God's love, but in rethinking the ontological nature of hell. Annihilationism is not only a more loving and moral understanding of hell, but, according to some, a

³¹⁸ William Dalton, *Salvation and Damnation* (Butler, WI: Clergy Books Service, 1977), 81 quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 89.

³¹⁹ Guy, "The Universality of God's Love," 40. Guy also suggests that "irresistible grace" is not a paradox but a genuine oxymoron.

³²⁰ Guy, "The Universality of God's Love," 45.

³²¹ Guy, "The Universality of God's Love," 45.

more biblically sound one as well. While space does not permit a thoroughgoing of the doctrine of hell it is important to note that God's love and the reality of a hell, if properly understood, are not contradictory. They are in fact complementary, for God will not force himself on any who do not desire his full and loving presence, but neither will God torture those who reject him and his love.³²² Just as God is not a rapist in forcing his love upon those who do not wish to share in his plan for humanity, God is also not a stalker who seeks to torment and punish those who spurn his love.

What this all adds up to, regarding salvific optimism, is that it is natural to think that if God is ontologically love and desirous of the salvation of all then God will make a way that all who desire to follow him will be saved. God is also a respecter of free choice and will not force himself on those who wish to follow their own path.³²³

The Faith Principle

The presumption of the inclusivist is that God's love is not impotent when it comes to loving those without explicit knowledge of him. It would appear to be nonsense to say that God deeply loves all humanity in ways beyond comprehension and yet suggest that his love is powerless to impart salvation to those who do not fully comprehend the work and person of Christ.

The faith principle is a key element for the inclusivist for it is faith by which salvation is imparted. The emphasis is on faith *through* Jesus, but how this salvation is accomplished through Jesus is not always agreed upon by inclusivists. Some argue for a more orthodox understanding of the death of Jesus as a propitiation for the sins of humankind, while others offer alternative views which mark the death of Jesus as a demonstration of God's love or an example

³²² For more on the doctrine of hell as annihilation see: Philip E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989); John W. Wenham, "The Case for Conditional Immortality," in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* Nigel M. de S. Cameron ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992); Edward Fudge as *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (London: Paternoster Press, 1994); Clark Pinnock, "Conditionalism" in *Four Views on Hell* William Crockett ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992).

³²³ It has been suggested that no one would ever reject God if they rightly understood either God's love or God's punishment. If the only option was between dutifully, although regrettably, obeying God out of a fear of hell then this would make sense, but it would certainly not equate to a genuine love of God. It also seems to be a misnomer that if everyone really knew God they would automatically love him. This notion forgets the power of human pride. It also begs the question why would someone who does not want a limited encounter with God for this limited time (earth) want limitless company with God for an unlimited time (heaven).

of the sacrificial life that all are invited to follow. Just as there is variety in atonement theologies there is variety in inclusivist thoughts on the faith principle.

The faith principle involves the notion that God saves based on one's faith, not on what one knows. For quite some time, philosophers have shown us that the concept of knowledge is a tenuous one since the ability to know anything as it might actually be is always limited by a variety of factors. Yet, in spite of this, the exclusivist still maintains that one must have right knowledge in order to be saved. This emphasis on knowledge seems dangerously close to a modernist form of gnosticism. As John Sanders says "Such a view of faith implies that our predicament is ignorance and is solved when we learn certain truths—salvation by knowledge."³²⁴ The faith principle does not exclude those who, by no fault of their own, were born into a situation in which the message of Christ was unavailable (chronologically or geographically) or those who do not comprehend the message because of cultural or personal blinders. While explicit knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth is quite limited, faith in God as conditioned by one's situation is not. The unevangelized can be reconciled to God through his grace even though they are ignorant of Jesus' message and work. The faith principle is less concerned about the *content* of faith (theology) and is more concerned about a *living* faith. This argument is built from biblical examples including Noah and Melchizedek, but most notably Abraham who is seen as the father of faith. These men were without a particular understanding of God and his mission and they lacked knowledge of Jesus Christ, yet New Testament writers praise these believers for their faith. The Gospels also give stories of Jesus praising the faith of those who do not express a complete understanding of him and his mission. These examples have led theologians like Sanders and Pinnock to conclude that God rewards those who seek him in faith for it is faith that pleases God (Heb.11:6). Pinnock sums up this exaltation of faith and uses the example of Buddhism:

Buddhism as an objective world religion has a worldview and an approach to life which is not the same as the Christian approach. The Buddhist and Christian paths are different paths. But this does not tell us whether or not there is the fear of God in the context of Buddhism. We must not conclude, just because we know a person to be Buddhist, that his or her heart is not seeking God. What God really cares about is faith and not theology, trust and not orthodoxy.³²⁵

³²⁴ Sanders, "Inclusivism," 37.

³²⁵ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 112.

What is the least amount of faith necessary for God to grant salvation? How much knowledge must a person have to be considered a believer? Is there more knowledge necessary to be considered a Christian? Are there specific theological doctrines that must be known and properly understood before God will impart the gift of salvation? The Athanasian creed attempts to answer these questions stating:

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly... Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting Salvation, that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man.³²⁶

Does this mean that salvation is dependent upon a right theological understanding of the Trinity and Incarnation? Russell Aldwinckle, in addressing such assertions says, “We sometimes hear such phrases as *saving knowledge* and *saving belief*. What do knowledge and belief involve when such language is used? Does it mean that salvation not only implies but requires certain specific theological affirmations, or the making of a choice between different world-views?”³²⁷ The fact is we do not know what amount of knowledge is necessary for salvation nor do we know how much ignorance is too much for God to excuse. As J.N.D. Anderson rhetorically asks, “Does ignorance disqualify for grace? If so, where in Scripture do we have the exact amount of knowledge required set out? For *assurance*, no doubt knowledge is required, but for grace it is not so much knowledge as a right attitude towards God that matters.”³²⁸

Many are mistrustful of linking salvation to a certain set of theological beliefs or assertions. For instance some have reacted to such language by switching focus from what knowledge is necessary for salvation to discussing unbelief, defining it as “the act or state in which a person in the totality of his or her being turns way from God.”³²⁹ Aldwinckle says that if these beliefs “are taken to mean the giving of some kind of intellectual or mental assent to Christian truths, divorced from personal commitment and practical obedience to the will of God,

³²⁶ Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02033b.htm> accessed on Aug. 5, 2004.

³²⁷ Russell F. Aldwinckle, *Jesus—A Savior or the Savior: Religious Pluralism in Christian Perspective* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982), 15.

³²⁸ Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, 99 quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 225.

³²⁹ Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 67 quoted in Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 125.

then such an assent is not salvation.”³³⁰ The concern with linking salvation to right theological assent is twofold: it will exclude the vast majority of the earth’s historic population and it will reduce Christian belief to modernistic propositional truth statements which in the end do not require one to live his or her life in a particular way.³³¹

The amount of faith one needs to be accepted into the presence of God must be minuscule if a faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains or uproot trees (Matt 17:20, Luke 17:6). In Matthew 8 we are given the story of the centurion with the ill servant. The centurion humbles himself before Jesus, saying, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof” (8:8) but more importantly, he believes that Jesus can heal his servant without physically being in his presence. It is this faith that leads Jesus, in astonishment, to say, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith (8:10),” but what was the content of the centurion’s faith? Was it a Trinitarian understanding of Jesus? Of course not! And neither was it a right doctrine of the incarnation. In fact, according to the text his faith was fixed upon what Jesus could do and not specifically who he was; “Jesus said to the centurion, ‘Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.’ And his servant was healed at that very hour (8:13).” The centurion’s belief that Jesus was a healer of great power and his humility also prompted Jesus to make an affirmative statement regarding the future hope of those beyond the Mosaic covenant, “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (8:11).”³³²

A similar story takes place in Matthew 9, in which Jesus marvels at the faith of those who bring a paralytic man, lying on a pallet, to him for healing. “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven’” (9:2). What we do not know from the text is whether “their faith” included the paralytic or was simply the faith of those who brought him (such was the case with the centurion whose faith it was that led to the healing of his servant). Regardless, it was merely a belief that Jesus could heal this man’s physical condition that led Jesus to proclaim that his sins were forgiven. The specific content of these men’s faith is

³³⁰ Aldwinckle, *Jesus*, 4.

³³¹ For an insightful exploration into this subject from the stance of postmodernism see Philip D. Kenneson, “There’s No Such Thing as Objective Truth, And It’s a Good Thing Too,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* eds. Timothy R. Phillips & Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 155-170.

³³² It is interesting that the parallel in Luke chapter 7 does not include Jesus’ statement of the great banquet. I am also surprised at how little this passage is used in defense of inclusivism.

yet unknown. What these two stories illustrate is that God's grace, healing, and forgiveness are only dependent upon the smallest amount of faith and a theology that consisted of no more than the truth that Jesus could and would heal. Faith in each of these is a trust that moved them to act.

Conversely, in regard to a saving faith being linked to a right theological dogma, it is made clear that to simply have a right theology or properly understand the person and work of Jesus does not guarantee salvation. James warns that a right theology does not constitute a living faith; "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder" (2:19). In fact, in the gospels we see the demons being more theologically astute than any! They knew Jesus was the Son of God (Matt 8:29) and the Christ (Luke 4:41). Are we to suppose that these beings are saved for having proper beliefs and theological assertions? Of course not. We are also informed of those who not only had right knowledge of Jesus but also did great things in his name.

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matt 7:21-23).

Jesus' instruction to his disciples is to watch out for those who do not bear good fruit which is love, even though they may bear good theology.

While scripture teaches what should be believed and practiced by all Christians it does not give a specific list of beliefs that must be known in order to be accepted into the graces of God. What we do see is how even the smallest exercises of faith astonished Jesus and how accepting Jesus was not only a part of those with little faith but with few morals as well. It must be made clear that in this argument there is no declaration of a dismissal of any Christian doctrines other than exclusivism. Biblical teachings and church doctrines aid the Christian in "working out their salvation," but, they neither grant it nor guarantee it. There needs to be a clear distinction between the "tree of faith" and the "water of doctrine."

The *Faith Principle* makes a distinction between "believers" and "Christians." While Christians are always believers, believers need not be Christians. The logical question should then be, "What is the content of their belief?" "What is it that they believe that is acceptable to God?" The typical answer is that they have faith in God but that it is an underdeveloped faith. The argument is that God reveals himself in various ways: concretely in Jesus Christ,

insubstantially in general revelation, and somewhere in between in such instances as God's revelation to the patriarchs. In each of these circumstances God has revealed enough of himself to give each person an opportunity to enter a saving faith.

Some exclusivists maintain that the patriarchs, in order to be saved, had to have a faith in Christ. "Abraham saw Christ's day (John 8:56); Moses wrote about Christ (John 5:46), and the Old Testament prophets sensed they were speaking about the salvation to come through the work of Christ (1 Pet. 1:10)."³³³ Modern dispensationalists take exception to the idea that those who lived before Christ needed an explicit faith in Christ for salvation. Charles Ryrie writes, "the *basis* of salvation in every era is the death of Christ; the *requirement* for salvation in every age is faith; the *object* of faith in every age is God; the *content* of faith changes in the various dispensations."³³⁴ James Borland who agrees with Ryrie's basic stance adds an exclusivist footnote, "Since Calvary, the unchanging required content of one's faith is the gospel. Nothing else saves, while all else damns."³³⁵ While the dispensationalist is right in asserting that God found these acts of faith before Christ acceptable they pervert the gospel by insisting that with the coming of Jesus God changed what was acceptable to him. To say that God was pleased with, and counted as righteousness, acts of faith like Abraham's, but since the sacrifice on Calvary, God will not find such acts acceptable maligns Jesus' title as "savior." It is bad news that Jesus came if this theology stands! While Abraham could believe that God would give him a son, even in his advanced age, and God would count this as a saving faith (Gen. 15:6; Gal. 3:7), today, after the coming of Christ, that same faith would render him guilty before God and damned for all eternity. Is this what Paul believed when he wrote that God shows no favoritism (Rom. 2:11)? Would this not be favoritism based, not on ethnicity or gender, but historicity? As Pinnock asks in reference to another patriarch, Job, "Why would it make any difference if Job were born in A.D. 1900 in outer Mongolia? Why would God not deal with him the same way he dealt with him in the Old Testament?"³³⁶ Some have suggested that God's dispensational boundaries are not cut along historical lines but revelational. God would have a simultaneous dispensation dealing fairly with those who have had different encounters and exposures to

³³³ Roger Nicole, "One Door and Only One?" *Wherever* 4 (1979): 3 quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 43.

³³⁴ Charles Ryrie *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 123 quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 44.

³³⁵ Borland, "A Theologian Looks," 9.

³³⁶ Pinnock, *A Wideness*, 161.

varying forms of revelation. Those who have not had an opportunity to hear the gospel would be “chronologically A.D. and informationally B.C.”³³⁷

While the *faith principle* makes sense regarding the patriarchs what about those who had no exposure to YHWH? Those who have lived or currently live outside the Mosaic covenant and have not been given the specific revelation of Jesus Christ, it is argued, can find salvation by responding to God’s general revelation.³³⁸ The inclusivist argues that God has never left himself without a witness and that general revelation is a means of such witness. The exclusivist, on the other hand, states that general revelation only imparts enough information to justify God’s judgment upon all persons, but not enough to gain access to God’s grace. Arguments for and against salvation via general revelation usually center on Romans 1:18-23. David Clark suggests that this passage is “consistent with the claim that natural revelation fails to bring salvation to those who are rebellious and wicked, but potentially leads to salvation for those who respond to it.”³³⁹ General revelation is certainly a strong argument for the inclusivist but it does raise a problem for the faith principle. If it is asserted that God saves by faith and not by knowledge and yet the doctrine of general revelation suggests that a saving knowledge of God is possible universally then we are back to a gnostic salvation. It does not matter whether it is a religious knowledge or a moral knowledge that might provide the basis for God’s salvation in nature it is still a knowledge.³⁴⁰ Perhaps there is a better approach to the issues of general revelation and faith.

Must it be that general revelation wholly consists of a particular brand of knowledge? Could it be that God’s “general” revelation is found not so much in the natural order but in the psyche of each individual? In the *imago Dei*? Could we contend that faith is not found, nor is it dependent, upon one’s knowledge of a particular object of faith, such as Christ (although it may,

³³⁷ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 253. For a response to both Kraft and Pinnock see Ramesh P. Richard, “Soteriological Inclusivism and Dispensationalism” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (Jan-Mar 1994): 85-108.

³³⁸ John G. Stackhouse, in setting up the topic of evangelical approaches to theology of religion, asks several necessary questions regarding general revelation which include *What is it? How general is it? and What is the point of it?* See “Afterword: An Agenda for an Evangelical Theology of Religions,” in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelical and the Challenge of World Religions* John G. Stackhouse Jr., ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 189-190.

³³⁹ David K. Clark, “Is Special Revelation Necessary for Salvation?” in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 40-41 quoted in Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 142.

³⁴⁰ Obviously this is not a problem for inclusivists who do not subscribe to a faith principle.

and in fact should, be a part of it), but in one's "religious consciousness."³⁴¹ Some see this as a manifestation of the Law being written on the hearts and minds (Rom. 2:15; Heb. 8:10) and others see this manifested in non-Christian religions that profess teachings similar to Christianity. Religious consciousness, however, is more than moral or intellectual faculties and it is deeper than shared traditions. It is a deep sense of humility. Humility is a positive response to the revelation God has given to all as his children. As said by E.J. Carnell, "God only asks humility, and humility is within the reach of one who feels even the faintest stirring of guilt in his heart."³⁴² The prophet Micah taught that what God desires and considers good is justice, mercy and humility before him (Mic.6:8). In Luke 18, Jesus teaches that God desires humility. It was the tax collector, who prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" that God justified that day. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). Sanders says that:

God is looking for the kind of confession found in the Babylonian text "Prayer to Any God," in which the supplicant says, "the sin I have sinned—turn thou to good; the transgression I have committed—may the wind carry away! My iniquities (which are) many—like a garment strip off. My god—the transgressions seven times seven, my transgressions, forgive."³⁴³

Religious consciousness as made possible by *imago Dei* is not simply a belief that all humans have some theistic property within them and this accounts for such a consciousness. It is argued that since we are the image of God, a religious consciousness is possible, but religious consciousness is only possible by God's universal Spirit. Jesus Christ is the particular event in which God acted in history to reveal himself and his plan but it is the Spirit through the Word that continues to act universally. Simply because God acted particularly in Jesus Christ does not mean that was the only time and place God has acted to enable his salvation. As Galvin D'Costa writes:

There are no good theological reasons to suggest that God's activity has stopped. But rather, given the universal salvific will of the Father revealed in Christ, we can have every expectation that God's activity in history is ongoing and certainly

³⁴¹ Some would still consider this religious consciousness as a type of knowledge. See Evert D. Osburn, "Those Who Have Never Heard: Have They No Hope?" *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 32/2 (Sept. 1989) 367-372.

³⁴² E.J. Carnell, *Christian Commitment: An Apologetic* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 238 quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 229.

³⁴³ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 229. The quote is from "Prayer to Any God," *Documents from Old Testament Times*, D. Winston Thomas ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 114.

not historically limited to Christianity... *All* history, both past and to come, is potentially a particularity by which God's self-revelation is mediated. Chronologically and geographically there can be no preset limitations to the: "The Spirit blows where it will."³⁴⁴

Just as the Spirit hovered over the waters of creation like a mother hen watching over her chicks the Spirit watches over the continuing creation making sure her children are provided for. Our consciousness of God is not based on our ability or nature but on God's constant and universal presence manifested in the Spirit.

Clark Pinnock adds to this discussion of the Spirit and her universal grace writing:

Grace is extant not only in Christian contexts but in every place where the Spirit is. There is grace in general revelation and special revelation, and both are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. God reaches out to sinners in a multiplicity of ways, thanks to the prevenience of the Spirit. God loves sinners, and the Spirit works in them that they may ultimately become obedient to Jesus Christ... instead of saying there is no salvation outside the church, let us simply say there is no salvation outside grace, or only finally outside Christ.³⁴⁵

Pinnock and D'Costa put to rest much of the tension between the particularity of the Son with the universality of the Spirit. All can respond to God in the light they have.

This Trinitarian approach to salvific optimism is not altogether different than the Logos theology of the early church fathers. Just as Justin Martyr believed *logos emphytos* (word implanted) and the *logoi spermatikoi* (seeds of the word) provided for the intellectual wisdom of the Greek philosopher we can accept that the *pneuma spermatikoi* has taken root in those who do justly and love mercy because they walk humbly with God, even if they know God by another name or understand him to be ontologically different than we might.

Before leaving the subject of general revelation it should be noted that general revelation is in no way believed to be a substitute for the special revelation of Jesus Christ. Although milk can be a substitute for meat in the preservation of life, milk will never be able to bring the health and nutrition that meat can. In the same way, general revelation and the faith principle may provide what is necessary to give life, but it is certainly deficient in the abundance of life and health the gospel brings.

³⁴⁴ D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality," 19.

³⁴⁵ Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 195.

In the end, the content of one's faith is a sign of development and maturity, but not salvation. Those who are fortunate enough to have been given access to the teachings of Christianity and possess a knowledge of the works and person of Christ, or those who have shed their negative presuppositions concerning religion in general and Christianity in particular, will be blessed by the hope they find in their faith and will have a new purpose for life. Right knowledge about God brings responsibility and mission, "everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48), but it is faith and grace that brings salvation.

Other Religions

The focus of this work is to lay out an argument for a realistic optimism concerning the salvation of those who have not heard or have not understood the gospel message. A theology of religions is an important task in rounding out this essay, although a comprehensive exploration is neither possible nor necessary. A Christian theology of religion should investigate many important subjects ranging from a full definition of "religion" to ideas concerning God's possible activity within the world religions.³⁴⁶ Religions may be misguided human creations in which persons seek to justify themselves or they may be points of light in which the Word is present directing all adherents to a more Spirit-led existence. Religions may also be many shades in between. These are important and will be touched on, but an inclusivist approach can be held anywhere within the continuum bracketed by these two points.³⁴⁷ If God's salvation is not conferred based on right knowledge but on faith expressed in one's image-bearing self, then religion may aid or hinder one's development but it is not an agency of salvation. This is not limited to the world religions but applies to Christianity as well. In short, God's eschatological saving grace is not dependent upon religion. However, God's revealing light can shine brighter or dimmer depending upon the religious reflection present.

³⁴⁶ Paul Knitter uses the terms "Partial Replacement" model and "Fulfillment" model in his book *Introducing Theologies of Religions*. He places Evangelicals like Clark Pinnock and John Sanders under the "Partial Replacement" model and Vatican II Catholics like Karl Rahner, Galvin D'Costa, and Jacques Dupuis under the "Fulfillment" model. Knitter seems to suggest that the difference between the two is that the Partial Replacement model does not affirm salvation in other religions while the Fulfillment model believes that God does effect salvation in the non-Christian faiths. I think Knitter is accurate in his depiction of the Fulfillment model, but I believe his assessment of the Partial Replacement model is inaccurate in relation to Evangelicals such as Pinnock and Sanders who do believe that God uses the world religions as instruments of light.

³⁴⁷ To venture too far to the right or left of these would entail treading into the territories of either exclusivism or pluralism.

Inclusivism maintains that the uniqueness of the Christian witness of God is essential. To whitewash what is unique in Christianity (or any religion for that matter) is to miss the insight that “religion only exists in specific religions.”³⁴⁸ The reductionistic approach of many pluralists seems to gut all religions of what is distinctive and downgrades their differences to little more than semantics or linguistic expressions. Religious expression should be understood as more than symbolic or mythological expressions and reinterpretations.³⁴⁹ Paul Tillich, in defending his view that Christianity was the “final revelation,” thought pluralistic relativism was just another form of “hidden absolutism” and held that each religion is distinct while at the same time a subjective expression of “ultimate concern.”³⁵⁰ To dismiss the distinctiveness of each religion is to proclaim a new kind of absolutism: to replace one exclusivity with another. If Christianity is *the* true faith, are not other religions places of darkness and treachery? Should Christians echo Luther’s words, “All worship and religions outside Christ are the worship of idols”?³⁵¹ While there is no consensus among inclusivists regarding non-Christian religions, thoughts like Luther’s are typically not espoused.³⁵²

The question surrounding the fate of those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ (or properly understood its value) is an important one for the inclusivist. It is also important to note that the inclusivist does not merely affirm that God can and perhaps does save those outside the boundaries of Christianity (this is the neutral position which states that “it is in God’s hands”), but that he is active in non-Christian religions and that these world religions play a role in his salvific work.³⁵³ Lesslie Newbigin, while not totally rejecting this notion, cautiously

³⁴⁸ Schwöbel, “Particularity, Universality, and the Religions,” 37. At this point I am not trying to offer a specialized definition of the word “religion” but that would be a necessary task if this topic was to be discussed at great length. For more information on the understanding of “religion” see Peterson, *Reason & Religious Belief*, John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), John F. Wilson and W. Royce Clark, *Religion: A Preface*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989).

³⁴⁹ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies*, 211.

³⁵⁰ Clifford Green, “Paul Tillich: The Relative and the Ultimate in the Encounter of Religions,” in *Critical Issues in Modern Religion*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 378-80. I am not suggesting that Tillich was an inclusivist but simply that he believed all religions are unique.

³⁵¹ Martin Luther, *Collected Works* (Weimar), 40, 2, 111 quoted in Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 81.

³⁵² We must also be clear that when the inclusivist speaks of salvation for those “outside” the church they do not limit that salvation to those in other religions. Lesslie Newbigin’s book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, addresses the matter that while “religion” might be the primary place where the divine is encountered this does not limit secular experiences. He states “we must ask about the relation of the gospel to all who live by other commitments, whether they are called religious or secular.” Page 173.

³⁵³ Newbigin believes that the question, “What happens to the non-Christian after death?” is the wrong place to begin and leads to all sorts of problems. He states that the question should be “How shall God be glorified?”

approaches God's activity in non-Christian religions. He seems to fear that if one accepts, a priori, the belief that non-Christian religions are paths to salvation we come dangerously close to replacing orthodoxy with orthopraxis making it increasingly more difficult to compose and discuss truth claims and not simply call for "good" behavior.³⁵⁴ But Newbigin is certainly open to world religions being a place to find God's light. He says Christians should "expect, look for, and welcome all the signs of the grace of God at work in the lives of those who do not know Jesus as Lord," for this is not only what Jesus demonstrated but is a better path to dialogue than that of the exclusivist.³⁵⁵

While Newbigin appears guarded at times other inclusivists celebrate the salvific role of non-Christian religions. Galvin D'Costa holds a high view of non-Christian religions and how God makes himself known in them. D'Costa explains that "Christocentric Trinitarianism" facilitates an openness to the world religions, "for the activity of the Spirit cannot be confined to Christianity."³⁵⁶ D'Costa continues saying that while the person of Jesus may be confined to the limits and restrictions of history, the other two members of the trinity are actively making God the Father known.³⁵⁷ With this, D'Costa reminds his readers that while Jesus was wholly God he was not the whole of God (*totus Deus*, never *totum Dei*), and "although we know the Father through Jesus, we cannot turn Jesus into an idol and claim that the Father is exclusively known through him."³⁵⁸ He states that if we accept the notion that the Spirit and the Word are present and active in the religions of the world (D'Costa calls this a "Trinitarian Ecclesiology") then this "allows Christians to be aware of God's self-disclosure within the world's religions, and through this process of learning, enrich its own self-understanding."³⁵⁹ For D'Costa then, an interfaith dialogue is a means of acknowledging God's presence in other religions and an opportunity for Christians to learn and grow in their own understanding of God. In the end, D'Costa hopes his "Trinitarian Christology" takes Christians from making ad hoc judgments, negative or positive, and opens them up to the task of dialogue in the hope that we all might hear "the voice of God,

In other words, how is God known and celebrated in the world religions and even secular commitments? See Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 177-183.

³⁵⁴ Newbigin, "Religion for the Marketplace," 146.

³⁵⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 180.

³⁵⁶ D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality," 17.

³⁵⁷ While this sounds a bit strange, I believe he was actually making a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, the particular and the universal.

³⁵⁸ D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality," 18.

³⁵⁹ D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality," 23.

through the Spirit, in the testimonies of peoples from other religions.”³⁶⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg concurs with D’Costa’s sentiments. “In dialogue with people from other religious traditions (world religions) as well as in his or her own theology the Christian may recognize the face of Christ in some of the persons who follow other ways of religion. The Christian may also recognize the work of God’s providence in their lives and in the development of their own traditions.”³⁶¹ The attitude among these thinkers is that, not only is God present and at work among the world religions but that we can learn about God (more specifically, Christ) by being in dialogue with these non-Christian believers.

Building upon the thoughts of these writers and others a few points can be made regarding the relationship between Christianity and the world religions. First, Christianity and Israel have a history of utilizing concepts, and learning from, neighboring religions. The various names for God found in the Bible have often been adapted from outside cultures and faiths. One Old Testament name for God, *El*, was the name used by the Canaanites for their god. Adrio König, in discussing the comparableness (in incomparableness) between the God of Israel and the other Semitic gods, writes:

when the people of Israel came into Canaan and established themselves there, the Lord appropriated some of the functions of the Canaanite gods and in this way revealed his own being and qualities more clearly to Israel...the Lord took over names and attributes not only of El (in relation to whom there is little mention of antithesis or polemics), but also of Baal and other gods, against whom there were strong antithetical (hostile) attitudes.³⁶²

The story of Melchizedek can also be held up as an example of God’s presence in the Canaanite religion. Melchizedek, a priest of the “God Most High” (El Elyon), is understood as a worshipper of YHWH even though he is not a Hebrew and does not appear to have received any

³⁶⁰ D’Costa, “Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality,” 27.

³⁶¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Galvin D’Costa ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 103.

³⁶² Adrio König, *Here Am I: A Believer’s Reflection on God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 16-17.

revelation.³⁶³ There are certainly other examples of comparison and influence between the God of Israel and the local deities and their sacred writings.³⁶⁴

The New Testament also contains examples of non-Christian and non-Hebraic teachings being influential upon the Christian religion as well as “pagans” being heralded as persons of great faith. For example *Theos*, *Logos*, *Christ*, and *Lord*, all Greek terms, which had religious and philosophical connotations, were adapted by New Testament writers to refer to Jesus and YHWH. These writers used the names and titles of the locals and adapted them into the Christian faith (a practice that has continued even today). Paul, when in Lystra, told the people there that God did not leave himself without a witness and therefore he had revealed himself to their forefathers (Acts 14:17). When in Athens Paul asserted that the god the Athenians worshipped in ignorance was really the God of Christians and claimed the “heathen altar as the property of the God he preached and enforced his doctrine not by miracles but by argument founded on the words of pagan poets.”³⁶⁵ The Gospels also reveal points of contact between God and persons of other religions. In Matthew we learn of the magicians from the East who sought to adore the baby Jesus (Matt 2). Jesus often praised and was even amazed by the faith of “pagans” including the centurion (Luke 7), and championed the Samaritan whose actions were of good ethical standard in his parable (Luke 10). Acts, as well, relates stories of great faith among “pagans,” including Cornelius (Acts 10).

Exclusivists and conservative theologians often miss these borrowings from other religions, but they demonstrate that God has been willing to reveal himself in ways that make use of ideas found in competing faiths. Gerald McDermott argues that the Christian religion is the most syncretistic religion in the world. “[T]he Christian God has chosen to unfold his truth gradually through time rather than in one blinding and all-encompassing flash of revelation and...he has used other religions and philosophical systems to help unfold and interpret reality.”³⁶⁶ He continued by stating, “God redeems not only individuals and nations but the

³⁶³ Gerald R. McDermott, “What If Paul Had Been from China?” in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions* ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 18-19.

³⁶⁴ For example the creation epic is a retelling of the Gilgamesh epic, and some of the Psalms and Proverbs were influenced by Egyptian writings. It is also understood by this author that the Old Testament contains some stern warnings for the Israelites about neighboring nations and their gods and idols and that it also contains several narratives in which God’s wrath is poured out on those people.

³⁶⁵ McDermott, “What If Paul Had Been from China?” 21.

³⁶⁶ McDermott, “What If Paul Had Been from China?” 21.

wisdom of the nations. Christianity has always borrowed from other faith traditions and baptized these borrowings into Christ by relating them to, and reconfiguring them in, the larger vision of God's revelation in Christ."³⁶⁷ If God has made use of these faiths for the Christian it is not difficult to take the next step and see God working to bring salvation through these world religions.

The temptation for Christians is to believe that God's hand has only been present in, or restricted to, the Christian faith (or for pluralists that God's hand is equally present or absent in the world religions), but it need not be this way. If God the Spirit is found wherever there is a breath of life and if all truth is God's truth, then it should not be a surprise to any that God would make himself known in the religions of the world. It is in these religions and faiths that countless humans seek most diligently for truth and meaning. Clark Pinnock suggests that we be alert and watch for the Spirit in these world faiths. "Because of the Spirit's ubiquitous inspiration, we do well to be open to people of other faiths. We should watch for whatever the Spirit may be teaching and doing among them. This posture creates the possibility of a dialogical relationship. We can enter into the faith of others and acknowledge truths and values found there."³⁶⁸ A salvific optimism fosters such an openness and watchfulness in regard to the world religions. We need not take a defensive stance against any and all lies, but can humbly proclaim our story of God's grace made known in Christ Jesus while being genuinely open to the religious narratives of other religions. Can this openness really take place if Christianity is a missionary faith?

Missions

Exclusivists claim that inclusivism not only denies "the necessity of evangelizing those who have not heard the gospel, but also holds out the possibility that many who have actually rejected the gospel after hearing it may still end up being saved."³⁶⁹ Pluralists argue that the inclusivist stance that Jesus is the unique expression of God's truth "is an a priori dogma that does not do justice to the actual religious life of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists now, in

³⁶⁷ McDermott, "What If Paul Had Been from China?" 22. McDermott also suggested that God has types that are present in these non-Christian religions. Just as God revealed Christ in the Jewish types of the Old Covenant (although obscurely) God reveals himself in types found in world religions, philosophies, and even myths. See pages 27-32.

³⁶⁸ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 205.

³⁶⁹ Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior*, 169.

this life.”³⁷⁰ The exclusivist also believes that the inclusivist has lost the drive to share God’s message, to effect and change the world for Christ and the pluralist believes that such a message is not of God and is disparaging to non-Christian religions. The inclusivist, however, does take a strong stance on Christian missions, but the apology for this stance pleases neither the exclusivist nor the pluralist. Inclusivists maintain that missions is more than simply keeping the unevangelized from experiencing hell, for salvation is a much richer concept than that.³⁷¹ Both exclusivists and pluralists tend to see salvation as one dimensional: escape from hell or liberation from the self, but while each of these is important the depth of salvation cannot be limited to just one notion.

Regarding the exclusivist tendency to focus upon salvation as escape from judgment and hell, Sanders says that this is one part of missions, but missions is not a one legged table.³⁷² Sanders summarizes four reasons why missions can and must be more than preaching against hell:

First, and foremost, Jesus commands us to go (Mt. 28:18-20). Second, we who have experienced the love of God in the Son through the Spirit should desire to share the blessing of the Christian life with those ignorant of it. Third, there are, of course, people who are not believers in God, and they need to hear of Christ so that they may come to know the love of God. Finally, even though unevangelized believers will be given eternal life on the basis of Christ’s work, God wants them to experience the fullness of life that came at Pentecost.³⁷³

Sanders is arguing that even though God will perhaps save those who have no knowledge of him it is still imperative that the love of God be shared with those who do not know it to the fullest. It is obvious that the difference here rests on the term “salvation,” so this term must be unpacked.

What is the goal of missions? Is it a means of escape from God’s wrath and judgment in hell where all unbelievers are tortured day and night both body and soul? Is it the unearned reward of heaven with its streets of gold and unending milk and honey? Even the simplest of readings will show those who study the Bible there is not one unequivocal use or meaning of

³⁷⁰ John Hick, “Response to Clark H. Pinnock,” in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 126-127.

³⁷¹ The notion of hell is also one that all inclusivists do not agree upon. There is much discussion about hell beyond the traditional view, including hell as conditional, metaphorical, and temporary. For more information see *Four Views of Hell*, William Crockett ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).

³⁷² Sanders, “Inclusivism,” 53-54.

³⁷³ Sanders, “Inclusivism,” 54. Sanders makes a nice illustration with pure drinking water noting that many might have poor water that keeps them alive but also gives them all kinds of illnesses. The caring person would not stand idle if they could give them pure water that would give life and take away the illnesses.

“salvation.” The biggest difference between Jews and Christians is their understanding of Jesus. Christians hold that he is both God and savior while Jews see him as either a great teacher and brother³⁷⁴ or as a heretic who led many Jews astray.³⁷⁵ These differences between Jews and Christians are understandable given the sharp change in the meaning and understanding of “salvation” from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The Old Testament understandings of salvation included themes of holiness, righteousness, grace, and the kingdom of God, but most importantly, national redemption. Salvation was not an individualistic saving of one Jew, while another might not be saved, but the saving and restoration of the whole Jewish nation. Russell Aldwinckle summarizes the thoughts of Martin Buber on the difference between Jewish and Christian understandings of salvation saying that “the basic difference between Jewish messianic hope and the Christian faith is that the former still knows the world to be unredeemed, while the latter speaks as if the world has already been redeemed.”³⁷⁶ The meaning and scope of salvation changed between the two covenant periods. Hebrew righteousness was manifested in obedience to the Law, but God was also righteous and this would be manifested in both judgment and deliverance. Israel’s hope was not simply the forgiveness of sins or transgressions, but forgiveness as a means to an end. God would forgive so he could raise up Israel to prominence once again. Israel’s understanding of salvation, especially in the first century, was a deliverance of the nation of Israel from oppressive political powers and a return to autonomy.

Deliverance is the primary salvific theme in the Old Testament. Over and over again God delivered Israel from her captors (Egypt and Babylon) and physical threats (war, famine, natural disaster). In later Jewish writings the conception of God’s deliverance changed and eschatological themes began to arise in the prophets (Isaiah, Joel, Jonah) and in apocalyptic literature such as Daniel. In these works the theme of deliverance began to include a saving from death itself and generally had a universalistic scope. For example Deutero-Isaiah speaks of the creation of a new heaven and a new earth (65:17; 66:22), which will bring about a new day in which “all flesh” will be worshipping before the Lord (66:23).³⁷⁷ These eschatological themes

³⁷⁴ Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 12, as noted in Aldwinckle, *Jesus*, 39.

³⁷⁵ See F.F. Bruce *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 101.

³⁷⁶ Aldwinckle, *Jesus*, 39.

³⁷⁷ Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 80.

were dwarfed by worldly understandings of salvation. “Normally in the OT and in other Jewish writings as well what salvation amounts to is the this-worldly events of rescue. Deliverance from enemies, being kept safe, being kept well or being healed, and perhaps occasionally resurrection of the dead could be seen as a means of preserving someone and her or his family (cf. 1 Kings 17:17-24).”³⁷⁸

A New Testament understanding of salvation also eschews any unequivocal meaning. Jesus, a Jew who preached to Jews, operated under a Jewish notion of salvation: this-worldly deliverance. Jesus expanded the traditional Jewish understanding in his preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand. The kingdom of God was not far off or merely at the “end of history,” but was imminent. Jesus’ teaching that the kingdom of God was at hand meant that later Old Testament themes of eschatological deliverance needed to be reinterpreted as well as understandings of history. As S. Mark Heim notes, New Testament motifs of salvation extended or added to those found in the Old Testament.

There is increased emphasis on the cosmic setting of salvation, freedom from satanic powers, and the restoration of the entire created order... There is the extension of the communal aspect of salvation to include gentiles, in a ‘kingdom of God’ which is corporate but universal. There is ‘new birth,’ that is, entry into a new level of existence through baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit, which leads to fruits of the Spirit. There is union with Christ and the reconstitution of the image of God in humanity. There is forgiveness of sins. There is promise of resurrection and eternal life for the individual. There is expectation of an actual, proportionate participation in God’s own life.³⁷⁹

Ben Witherington III also explains that salvation, as understood in the first century, was multifaceted. “It is striking that if one analyzes the salvation language of Luke-Acts carefully, one finds the more mundane sense of rescue, heal, deliver, and keep safe much more frequently in the Gospel... than in Acts... and on the other hand one finds the more specifically Christian use of the salvation language more often in Acts than in the Gospel.”³⁸⁰

What does all of this mean? In short it means that salvation as spoken of in scripture is multifaceted. It cannot be reduced or limited to any single experience. In fact it may be better to speak of Christian understandings of salvations. Any time we attempt to define salvation we

³⁷⁸ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 842.

³⁷⁹ S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 50-51.

³⁸⁰ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 842.

must ask ourselves, as Russell Aldwinckle asks, “Does our definition of salvation in the Christian sense arbitrarily exclude millions of people from the possibility of salvation?”³⁸¹ The Christian understanding of salvation must be rich and intense, deep and profound, and as this work has argued, wide and far-reaching in scope. Salvation is about the truth of the Christian message, about giving all people an opportunity to be blessed and enriched by a saving knowledge of Christ. In short, to be a disciple. At the end of Matthew’s gospel Jesus gives his great commission to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Is it possible that Jesus’ commission to the apostles was not about “saving souls” but about making disciples? That it was not a mission to “save from hell” but a mission to heal and build?

The gospel is a message much bigger than deliverance from hell. “To be ‘in Christ’ is to be saved at the deepest levels of human existence in such a way that an unshakable bond has been established between God and the believer.”³⁸² Jesus certainly is the “Way” but as Mark Heim so beautifully puts it, “Christ is also the life and the truth in whom we rest and grow while on the way and at the end of the way.”³⁸³ An inclusivist mission is not about providing a secret knowledge that will be the key that unlocks the door of heaven. Knowledge and truth are part of the mission, perhaps the bulk of the mission, but it is not a knowledge of the truth that saves. God wants communion with all humans. Not just later but here and now. This is the truth we make known; this is the truth that God has revealed in Jesus Christ. This is the essence of missions Newbigin understands when he says:

the true meaning of the human story has been disclosed. Because it is the truth, it must be shared universally. It cannot be a private option. When we share it with all peoples, we give them the opportunity to know the truth about themselves, to know who they are because they can know the true story of which their lives are a part. Wherever the gospel is preached the question of the meaning of the human story—the universal and the personal story of each human being—is posed.³⁸⁴

Christian missions is to share the truly good news that God desires to commune with all, both now and later, and has made the first move in reaching out to the world through Jesus.

³⁸¹ Aldwinckle, *Jesus*, 123.

³⁸² Aldwinckle, *Jesus*, 123.

³⁸³ Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 53.

³⁸⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 127.

Many inclusivists believe that ecclesiocentrism is a problematic motivation for missions. As noted above, the giving of God's truth and sharing of his love should be what motivates Christians to "go into all the world." The belief that God cannot or will not save those outside the church or without a right knowledge of Jesus and thus we must take salvation to all the peoples diminishes God's role in the saving act and even undermines the meaning of God as Savior. Newbigin rightly pointed out that if Peter had not heeded the call to go then Cornelius would not have had occasion to experience the blessings of becoming a Christian. God goes ahead of the missionary preparing the hearts of the hearers, according to Newbigin, so the church should follow God's lead bringing those outside the church into confession.³⁸⁵ Newbigin never said that salvation could only be imparted if the missionary heeds the call. God is working through the church but, as David Bosch said, "it is a perversion to suggest if God is the primary 'agent' of mission, people are inactive, or vice versa... the more we recognize mission as God's work, the more we ourselves become involved in it."³⁸⁶ Mission should be seen as a blessing for in it we partner with God in effecting his whole will, eschatological salvation and this-worldly salvation.

While there is urgency in the New Testament regarding missions it is very different from the urgency espoused by the exclusivists of today. Paul certainly had great missionary zeal but nowhere does he speak about, for instance, "how people in Spain are dying and going to hell."³⁸⁷ George Lindbeck makes the observation that Christians of the first few centuries have a tension between urgency and relaxation regarding unbelievers. Lindbeck says the early Christians, "do not seem to have worried about the ultimate fate of the overwhelming majority of non-Christians among whom they lived... Christians did not seem to have viewed themselves as watchmen who would be held guilty of the blood of the pagan they failed to warn."³⁸⁸ In contrast to many modern calls for missions, Newbigin notes that Paul's zeal for missions does not include great worry about all those he did not reach. According to Newbigin, a modern reader might be shocked to find that Paul does not "agonize about the multitudes in those regions who have not

³⁸⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 168.

³⁸⁶ David J. Bosch, "Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission," in *Towards the Twenty-First Century in Christian Mission: Essays in Honor of Gerald H. Anderson*, James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993) 184 quoted in Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 271.

³⁸⁷ Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 275.

³⁸⁸ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 58.

yet heard the gospel or who have not accepted it. He does indeed, in the same letter, agonize over the fact that the Jews, to whom the gospel primarily belongs, have rejected it. He is certain that in the end ‘the fullness of the Gentiles will be gathered in’ and ‘all Israel will be saved’ (Rom. 11:25-26).³⁸⁹ And even though Paul is not agonizing over the multitudes, he can “tell the Christians in Rome,” according to Newbigin:

that he has completed his work in the whole vast region from Jerusalem to the Adriatic and has “no longer any room for work in these regions” (Rom. 15:23). What exactly has he done? Certainly not convert all the populations of these regions. Certainly not solved their social and economic problems. He has, in his own words, “fully preached the gospel” and left behind communities of men and women who believe the gospel and live by it. So his work as a missionary is done.³⁹⁰

Why did Paul live and eventually die for the gospel? Terrance Tiessen summarizes it nicely, saying that any inventory that might be constructed which lists factors that stirred Paul to live a life of evangelism will be missing:

any hint of ecclesiocentrism, any sense that Paul was stirred to evangelism by a conviction that the unevangelized would certainly all be eternally lost. Paul felt compelled by the love of Christ to proclaim the good news wherever he could because he knew that the gospel ‘is the power of God for salvation’ to both the Jew and Gentile and that God had ‘decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe’ (Rom 1:16-17; 1 Cor 1:12).³⁹¹

A zeal for missions then does not live or die on the exclusivist presupposition that all who die without affirming the truth of the gospel die in their sins. Missions is born out of a love for God, and a desire to obey him as Lord and Savior. It is also born out of a genuine love for those who do not have the gospel. Missions are an invitation to the truly human life which begins (but does not reach its end) with a knowledge of Jesus Christ. It is God’s desire that all people have this message and know he is God. We do not know whose hearts might be changed with an exposure to the gospel or whose will might be broken by a confrontation with the spoken word of the Lord. The inclusivist’s belief that God is gracious and that his mercy exceeds that of any human can never be used as an excuse not to take this good news to the very ends of the earth. For everyone deserves to know that the creator of the universe loves them and desires their best spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

³⁸⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 121.

³⁹⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 121.

Despite what many exclusivists charge the inclusivist maintains a high view of missions. However, the approach or method of missions cannot be “business as usual” in regard to how the good news is preached. The days of colonialism and imperialism have left poor relations between Christianity and the world religions. In today’s world the method must avoid any sense of superiority and chauvinism and instead embrace, encourage, and even learn from the noble features of other religions. Missions in the 21st century is a great conversation, not a debate to be won or lost. The Christian missionary is to offer the love of God as she understands it and has experienced it. Not in a way that denounces the faith of others in the name of Christ, but in a manner that respects their beliefs, traditions, culture, and personal dignity.

Christianity has a rather dubious history regarding its ability to dialogue with advocates of differing ideas, concepts, or beliefs. The church has marginalized, arrested, and even killed her critics, competitors, and at times even her greatest advocates who proposed new ideas regarding philosophy, science, and theology. If we cannot dialogue within our own house what makes some think we can dialogue with our neighbors? For most inclusivists the answer is that we simply must dialogue, we have to learn for we have no other options. The global community is getting smaller and smaller and tight quarters, physical or intellectual, give birth to conflict. We can no longer simply hurl verbal barbs at our religious competitors and then take refuge in our safe religious communities. We live on a planet that requires the disciples of the world religions to dialogue, that is unless we want to retreat into religious ghettos or, even worse, all become fearful or prideful martyrs for our faiths. Issues of freedom, justice, and flourishing depend on a genuine religious dialogue. But these are practical reasons for dialogue and unfortunately the pragmatic is not always useful. The issue that needs to be addressed is the theological and reasonable call for dialogue.

Dialogue is not merely the act of conversing with advocates of other faiths. It is not simply chatting about Christian beliefs and sitting quietly as those of other faiths chat about their beliefs. This is certainly polite, but it is not purposeful. Despite the pluralist schema, dialogue must have a goal other than dialogue, an open and honest goal, not a subversive agenda in which the advocates of each religion feign interest and listen only because doing so will permit him or her a time to speak. This is not dialogue. Christian theological communities have focused on a response to the challenge of particular religions and in recent years the challenge of pluralism

³⁹¹ Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 277.

itself. These responses have often come in the form of answers that will seemingly correct the erroneous beliefs of these misguided faiths. If the responses are given in culturally polite ways then the advocates deem this dialogue, but this, too, is not dialogue. At its heart dialogue is about the open and honest exchange of ideas in which all parties work to hear as well as be heard. It is not superficial but focuses on our values and beliefs. A genuine dialogue seeks truth, assuming it can be found in the agents of the dialogue. It is not, as many pluralists assume, the sharing of religious cultural myths. Dialogue is a matter of trust, trust that all truth is God's truth and that the universal Spirit of God will guide us into all truth (John 16:13). There can be no fear of dialogue if we have faith that the Spirit will lead us into all truth. Galvin D'Costa makes this same assessment building from a Trinitarian model of the church. "The significance of this Trinitarian ecclesiology is that if we have good reasons to believe that the Spirit and Word are present and active in the religions of the world (in ways that cannot, a priori, be specified), then it is intrinsic to the vocation of the church to be attentive to world religions."³⁹²

Dialogue requires that we believe that God has, or at least could have, revealed himself in the persons and teachings of the world religions. To be active in mission dialogues "requires an attentiveness to God through an attentiveness to our neighbor."³⁹³ We are listening for God as we proclaim God. Christopher Schwöbel explains that there are two "fundamental requirements for a fruitful dialogue": independence and interdependence.³⁹⁴ Independence requires each dialogue partner to acknowledge the "genuine and distinctive particularity and individuality of their respective positions."³⁹⁵ This is what has been lost in many of the pluralist notions of dialogue. In the pluralist model each partner was required to put aside what was unique about their faith and tradition for the sake of unity and tolerance. This is not dialogue, this is an attempt to create a monologue out of different traditions. Schwöbel is calling for pupils of Christianity, as well as pupils of other faiths, to bring what is distinctive and particular to the table. In the dialogue we all share what is fundamental, basic, and true about our faiths.

The second requirement for Schwöbel is interdependence of the dialogue partners. As Christians we have to recognize that all persons of all faiths are equally dependent upon God for

³⁹² D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality," 23.

³⁹³ D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality," 24.

³⁹⁴ Dr. Schwöbel's Lutheran approach is similar to the Catholic approach found in the document "Dialogue and Proclamation" which seeks a balance of evangelism through proclamation but also a willingness to respect, question, and be questioned.

³⁹⁵ Schwöbel, "Particularity, Universality, and the Religions," 43.

their existence, for God is the “unconditional ground of all being and meaning” and this makes it necessary for Christians to understand that all religions, even the Christian one’s, are “human responses to the universal creative and redeeming agency of God.”³⁹⁶ From a Christian perspective the common ground all religions share is not each one’s response to God as they understand him, but God himself. What unifies the Christian and Buddhist, from a Christian inclusivist model, is not similar doctrine or a feeling of alienation, but God as the ground of all being. It is this recognition that would enable all Christians to dialogue, not merely debate, with the many faiths of the world.

Wolfhart Pannenberg is theologically a bit more cautious but still firmly in support of an inclusivist model of dialogue. He reminds us that even though we may “recognize the face of Christ in some of the persons who follow other ways of religions... This does not necessarily involve that those other persons be able to recognize that in their turn. If they did they might become baptized.”³⁹⁷ We have to realize that not all dialogue partners will be ready or willing to dialogue, and that if they are willing to dialogue, this does not mean they are in agreement with our proclamations. Pannenberg also asks a very telling question, “Is it nevertheless the same God?” Are we sure the God we are proclaiming is the same God they are proclaiming but just in a different narrative? Pannenberg says that this is a question “to be decided by God, not us.”³⁹⁸ The warning is fair. The Christian’s job in the dialogue is not to decipher who is a Christian and who is not, but who is Christ. The job of the Christian inclusivist is not to announce all other faiths are damned (exclusivism), or that all other faiths are true (pluralism), but to share the love of God that is rich in mercy and patience.

It should be noted that a mission minded dialogue is not limited to religious tradition alone. A dialogue model must take place between faiths and ideologies as well. The Christian and the Marxist, Secular Humanist, or Scientific Naturalist can dialogue if the parties are willing. While there is no guarantee that advocates from these worldviews will be willing to dialogue there is nothing that should keep a Christian from entering that situation. As D’Costa reminds us, “Listening for God’s revealing is, of course, related to the non-theistic traditions as well, for

³⁹⁶ Schwöbel, “Particularity, Universality, and the Religions,” 43.

³⁹⁷ Pannenberg, “Religious Pluralism,” 103.

³⁹⁸ Pannenberg, “Religious Pluralism,” 103.

there is no a priori reason to exclude the work of the Spirit from any tradition.”³⁹⁹ Perhaps we could even add an atheistic tradition.

Even though the inclusivist is suggesting a dialogue model and is willing to actively listen for God in the non-Christian traditions, faiths, and ideologies, this does not mean that inclusivists blindly accept any and all parts of other traditions. All religions have points of darkness with false teachings, fanaticism, and bigotry which produce gross injustices. These injustices cannot be ignored, whether secular, non-Christian, or Christian, for the tolerance of lies and injustices will never help us achieve our end of fruitful dialogue and the eventual kingdom of God.⁴⁰⁰ Inclusivist Clark Pinnock is careful to consider the dark aspects of religions, especially noting some biblical examples. Pinnock uses the Canaanites as an example of the false and sinister aspects religion can have and God’s stern judgment upon them. “We would not be shocked by these judgments if we experienced the sort of thing the Old Testament is referring to: the world of idolatry, child sacrifice, fertility cults, sacred prostitution, blood-soaked rhetoric, snake worship, demons, necromancy, gods without moral character, magic, divination and the like.”⁴⁰¹ Whether we would be shocked or not is another issue, but Pinnock is right to point out the perversion and injustice that is, at times, accepted and even praised in ancient religions. Dialogue cannot ignore such issues and the Christian witness must expose these dark practices to the light of God. The Church must be ready to see these dark practices she has turned a blind eye to and even condoned herself. That is the nature of dialogue.

The exclusivist claim that all outside a proper knowledge of God are without hope and forever damned need not be the motivation for missions. This did not appear to be the motivation of Paul and has not been the motivation for countless missionaries since Paul. The goal of missions is dialogue for dialogue’s sake, but also much more than that. Repentance and acceptance is our hope and goal as we proclaim. While many in the postmodern world see conversion as an unethical objective there is no reason for such an attitude. Conversion has been the way of many of the world religions and if not for conversion there would be no Buddhism,

³⁹⁹ D’Costa, “Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality,” 25.

⁴⁰⁰ From a Christian perspective dialogue should also include justice. Dialogue *about* justice with those in unjust situations never lives up to God’s demands. Humanitarian efforts and political liberation will always be used by some as a test of dialogue and the Christian needs to address such elements of dialogue.

⁴⁰¹ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 87.

Christianity, or Islam.⁴⁰² There is no reason to share one's faith or understanding of truth if it is not in a belief that others might benefit from believing and knowing things the same way. That is what conversion is, to see things the way others do, to understand and use the language of a new community, to see the universe in a new way.

From a Christian perspective the most important motivation for missions and dialogue is love. John Stackhouse makes this same appeal and seems to be offering the "greatest commandments" of religious dialogue, saying, "Any evangelical—indeed, any orthodox Christian—theology or mission that does not name Jesus as Lord is unworthy of the name 'Christian.' Any theology or mission that does not 'love your neighbor as you love yourself' is offering a truncated and therefore heretical gospel. Upon these two convictions hang all theology and mission."⁴⁰³

Evaluation

The inclusivist walks the hostile path between two warring factions, exclusivism and pluralism. The exclusivists condemn inclusivism as a sentimental romanticism that has allowed many Christians to ignore the urgency of getting the gospel to the unevangelized. The exclusivist also holds that in letting their feelings get the best of them, the inclusivists have downplayed God's role as judge and have forgotten His wrath. On the other hand, the pluralist finds issue with the inclusivist, suggesting that his or her view is only semantically different from that of the exclusivist and that in the end, although inclusivism is a more palatable form of imperialism, it is prejudiced and patronizing nonetheless. It will be interesting to see how the inclusivist position fares in this new century that is already showing signs of polarization.

Inclusivism maintains a tension between God's desiring all to come to salvation and the teaching that Jesus is the only means to said salvation. Tension has defined Christian theology since the first century. Tension exists between the immanence and transcendence of God, the humanity and divinity of Christ, the oneness and threeness of God, and the church universal and the church local. The tension that might exist between God wanting all to be saved (universal), and yet effecting salvation in the historical work and person of Jesus (particular), seems to be a pattern of a long-debated Christian theological understanding of God. There is the tension of the

⁴⁰² Gerald J. Pillay, "No God's-Eye View: Tradition, Christian Hermeneutics, and Other Faiths," in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelical and the Challenge of World Religions* ed. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 123.

believer and Christian that allows the inclusivist to maintain the church as God's body while also extending salvation beyond its walls.⁴⁰⁴ These tensions allow Christians to maintain the necessary truths of their faith without denying the uniqueness of Christ or the authentic love of God.

The inclusivist model, which understands the universality of the Spirit, allows for a tension to exist between the proclamation of the message of Christ and a genuine and open dialogue. If all truth is God's truth, and if Christianity does not have every last answer or perspective, then it is worthwhile to listen as well as speak. An inclusivist approach can respect the message and partner of dialogue. Finally, an inclusivist respects the tension in the call to missions. We are to move the gospel into all parts of the world sharing the good news of Christ while resting on the truth that it is God who brings eschatological salvation and not his workers: they share the beauty of the loving truth of God. In short, inclusivism is the model that best fits the tension between exclusivism and pluralism.

⁴⁰³ Stackhouse, Jr., "Afterword," 201.

⁴⁰⁴ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 264.

CONCLUSION

After surveying these three approaches it seems clear that both exclusivism and pluralism have much to offer but in the end fail to adequately resolve the issues of God's salvific desires and the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. Exclusivism falls short on many fronts. Primarily, exclusivism presents God as a tribal deity of an imperialistic Western Christianity.⁴⁰⁵ The message of an "all-encompassing, creative, reconciling, and redeeming love" is missing even if the exclusivist maintains a strong missionary faith.⁴⁰⁶ Its profession of a "God of love" is found to be ridiculous among its theological positions of narrowness and judgment over mercy. While exclusivism may have once made sense in the small world of Christendom, that time has passed. To continue to promote a Christianity infused with imperialism and narrowness is to be willfully ignorant of God's grace and mercy to all human beings, and to maintain such an attitude is, in Newbigin's words, "not merely inexcusable but positively dangerous."⁴⁰⁷ Exclusivism attempts to maintain and exhibit power over those within and without Christianity claiming that if you wish to know God and see his mercies, you must think and act as exclusivists do. If exclusivism is to win the day, it will have to show not only that it is congruent with the biblical witness, but that it will not lead to an "unrivaled brutality" that has historically accompanied exclusivistic theologies, be they Christian or not.

All pluralists see themselves as joining together in "crossing the Rubicon" from exclusivism and inclusivism.⁴⁰⁸ However, it seems as if the land they have crossed into has no place to stand from which to survey the situation. As Brian Gaybba notes, "pluralism violates its own aims by creating for itself a framework beyond all religions, out of which it presumes to judge all religions."⁴⁰⁹ In trying to wash away all particular truth claims, pluralists have created for themselves a mire in which there is no firm place to stand, and thus they sink under the weight of their own arguments. The pluralist shift from the Christocentric, to the theocentric, and now to the soteriocentric has produced a religion born out of consumerism in which one gets to purchase and try all the different brands of products offered, or simply stick with one's

⁴⁰⁵ Schwöbel, "Particularity, Universality, and the Religions," 31.

⁴⁰⁶ Schwöbel, "Particularity, Universality, and the Religions," 31.

⁴⁰⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 155.

⁴⁰⁸ Heim, *Salvations*, 15.

favorite.⁴¹⁰ In the end it does not matter as long as one has chosen to purchase and consume... something. “Christian pluralism,” just like its ancestor, deism, is an isthmus between two continents: Christianity and Pluralism.⁴¹¹ “Christian pluralists” will eventually have to choose which land they claim as their own. Pluralism *and* Christianity, by their very natures, make exclusive truth claims that are incongruent. To use the title “Christian pluralist” is to essentially choose one word to represent a realist approach and the other, a merely nominalist approach. Among the Christian pluralists surveyed in this work it is the word “Christian” that is used in name only.

Brian Gaybba summarizes the approaches of pluralism and exclusivism, saying that, “it is immediately evident that exclusivism and pluralism have about them a simplicity that spares their adherents any mental gymnastics or hard thinking, whichever way you wish to view it.”⁴¹² There is an expression that states, “If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.” Each of these approaches gives its adherents what they want without any of the nasty business of worrying about those outside my particular understanding, for it is either God’s mystery or the world’s myth. In the end, one gets what one wants.

The inclusivism offered in this work is slightly different from some of those offered in the past. Rahner’s “anonymous Christians” and Pinnock’s “pagan saints” were vast improvements on the exclusivism of old, but still fall short on two important fronts. First, they retain a note of the kind of religious superiority that deeply angered Jesus. Christians must be able to speak of, and to, adherents of other faiths in terms that are neither pejorative nor condescending. We need to be respectful and listen as God speaks to and through these non-Christian faiths. As Christians, we need not claim that Jesus is the *only* revelation, but rather that he is the *full* revelation. Kosuke Koyama states the issue in this way, “‘Fullness (pleroma) of grace and truth’ does not mean ‘absoluteness of grace and truth.’ ‘Fullness’ is a hot biblical concept while ‘absoluteness’ is a cold philosophical concept.”⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁹ Brian Gaybba, “Christology and Religious Pluralism: The Search for a Route Between Inclusivism and Pluralism” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* No. 87 (June 1994), 4.

⁴¹⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 168.

⁴¹¹ The metaphor was borrowed from James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue* 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 53.

⁴¹² Gaybba, “Christology and Religious Pluralism,” 4.

⁴¹³ Koyama, “A Theological Reflection,” 164.

The other problem is that Rahner's and Pinnock's approach distorts what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. To be a Christian or a Saint is to deny one's self, pick up your cross, and follow the way of Jesus. The inclusivist must make a distinction between "being saved" and "being a Christian." Being a Christian is often seen as being a means to salvation, but I would charge that it is just the opposite--one is saved so one can begin the process of becoming a Christian, Christ-like, and fully human. Jesus came so all could begin to see the full revelation of God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. The promise and hope of an eschatological salvation is just the beginning of becoming a new creation in Christ.

Inclusivism is a more difficult theology, but simplicity is not necessarily the hallmark of truth. It is difficult because it is an attempt to reconcile the apparent theological contradictions existing in the notions of (1) a God full of grace and mercy (2) who desires the salvation of the whole world and who (3) has seemingly fully revealed himself in a particular person at a particular time. This is a God who demands faith while desiring to be known. As Gaybba says, maybe this is mental gymnastics, but then again maybe it is by mental gymnastics that we keep from becoming theologically lazy.

As a Christian inclusivist, my purpose is twofold: to *live* as if Christ lives in me and to *proclaim* that Jesus is the full revelation of God, and that those who believe shall live abundantly.

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