

THE NECESSITY OF AN EXCLUSIVIST GOSPEL

When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved, they told him that he must believe in the Lord Jesus (Acts 16:31). They did not give the jailer a list of options, but one command to follow. Since then church history has borne witness to myriad opinions on what it takes to obtain salvation, so much so that it could be argued that the majority of those who consider themselves Christian today do not consider faith in Jesus Christ to be the exclusive means of salvation. As a result, to some the gospel as recorded in Scripture is just one of many choices to get to heaven, akin to any number of value meals at a fast food restaurant that can satisfy one's hunger. There are others who believe that God will save everybody, and still others who believe God deals with people, not on the basis of whether or not they believe in Christ, but based on how they respond to whatever revelation they have.

The seriousness of this problem cannot be understated in light of what the apostle Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia: "If any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you have received, he is to be accursed!" (Gal 1:9).¹ The warning is firm and frightful. Anyone preaching a gospel that does not line up with that delivered by the apostles is "accursed," or "anathema" in other translations. The word literally refers to that which is set aside to God's wrath for divine judgment. Later in church history it became customary to use the word "anathema" to refer to heretics who were expelled from the congregation, yet in its purest sense the word "means nothing less than eternal retribution and judgment of God."² Yet, ever since the second-century apologists many concessions have been made in the name of tolerance, even though it is the task of Christian apologetics "to defend the claim that Christ is the one, only, and

¹All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update.

²Timothy George, *Galatians*, New American Commentary, vol. 30 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 98-99.

exclusive Savior of the world.³ Thus, it is the duty of the believer, especially pastors, to hold firm to sound doctrine and refute those who contradict (Tit 1:9).

Universalism

Many who believe that God will ultimately save every person often appeal to verses that describe God as boundless in His love, one of “unlimited patience, infinite love, and eternal faithfulness.”⁴ However, this perspective cannot hold up under the weight of Scripture.

Proponents of this view have a tendency to take promises God made to specific groups and apply them to all mankind. For instance, God declared to Jeremiah that He will make a new covenant with the “house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31). Then, three verses later He said, “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them” (Jer 31:34).

Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland assert that these verses prove that every person will know God because He will forgive every person’s wickedness and remember their sins no more.⁵

Gulley and Mulholland are guilty, however, of some serious hermeneutical gymnastics. The text of Jeremiah 31:31-34 clearly defines a speaker, God, and those who He is talking about, the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It logically follows that the personal pronouns used in the next several verses then apply to those specific groups. There is nothing in this text to indicate that God is shifting His focus to any other group of people, much less all of mankind. He does not say that He will write His law on the hearts of all men, but *them*. He will be their God, and *they* shall be His people. Such a misappropriation of God’s promises shows the shaky exegesis that shapes this entire view.

Furthermore, it makes no sense that God would delineate between peoples at all if He

³Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 795.

⁴Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), 12.

⁵*Ibid.*, 20.

was planning to save every single person. Why else would the apostle Paul pen Romans 9? God told Moses that He would have mercy on whom He would have mercy, clearly implying that there was a group in humanity that would not receive the benefits of such mercy (Rom 9:15). Indeed, it would be pointless for Paul to even bring up vessels of wrath prepared for destruction if God's plan all along was to save all. The universalist might bring up verses like John 12:32, in which Jesus states, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."⁶ However, such verses cannot be interpreted in a vacuum, but must be taught in their context and in comparison with the rest of Scripture. God will not be drawing all men to Himself if at the same time He is destroying vessels of wrath. Indeed, this cannot be used to support universalism. Rather, it is a promise that all types of people, regardless of origin, race, status, nationality, age, gender, or intelligence may come to Christ, even though not all of them will.⁷

French philosopher Alain Badiou claims Paul as the foundation of universalism, asserting that he did not attempt to delineate peoples in his writings by stigmatizing differences of opinions. Badiou takes Romans 14:1, in which Paul commands his reader not to pass judgment on the opinions of others, and claims it is the "fundamental maxim" of the faith.⁸ A statement about disagreements regarding what foods to eat and whether or not to observe the Sabbath is equated by Badiou with sectarianism. Instead, "the astonishing principle proposed by this 'moralist' can be formulated as: everything is permitted. . . . Yes, within the order of particularity, everything is permitted."⁹ According to this line of thinking, Paul was teaching others not to argue about beliefs, because in the end it does not matter. Everyone will be saved.

The author, however, fails to examine Romans 14:1 in its context. In the first eleven chapters of Romans the apostle clearly laid out the gospel, including the sinfulness of man,

⁶Ibid., 21.

⁷James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 955.

⁸Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 100.

⁹Ibid., 101.

man's utter inability to be righteous, the propitiation of the Father in the work of Jesus Christ, and the sovereign choice of God. It is in chapter twelve that the apostle begins laying out the ramifications of the gospel in the life of the believer. With regards to the verse Badiou cites, by this point Paul is done working out who comes to be saved and how that happens. In Romans 14:1, following a section on submitting to government authorities and making no provision for the flesh, Paul is showing how the believer is to be transformed by the renewing of his mind in the body of Christ (Rom 12:1-2). This is not a salvation passage, but rather a passage about one who has placed specific faith in a specific person, Jesus Christ (Rom 3:26). Paul can most definitely be shown not to be a universalist.

Normative Pluralism

One of the more intriguing soteriological views is that of normative pluralism, which puts forth the theory that all ethical religions lead to God. It begins with a view of man as good, manifesting itself in concern, kindness, honesty, compassion, love, and truthfulness. A majority of mainline theologians who hold this view see those different religions worshipping a distorted version of the real God, which is fully known in Christianity. However, other proponents such as John Hick see various facets, or personae, of God in various world religions such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism. For Hick, this affirmation is based on years of life experience with members of those religions who exhibit, in his mind, the same level of goodness. The teachings of Confucius regarding how to deal with one another are put on par, at the very least, with those of Jesus Christ in the Gospels.¹⁰

Salvation in this view is not seen in the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross. Instead, it is seen in terms of human change, from self-centeredness to exhibiting a kind of "fruit of the Spirit," which occurs in all of the world religions.¹¹ This

¹⁰John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 39.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 43.

transformation is defined differently in each of the religions. Christians use the term *salvation*. *Redemption* is common to both Christians and Jews. Muslims see salvation as *total submission to God*.¹² They all ultimately lead to the same thing even though they take on different forms and practices.

So what of Jesus Christ? According to Christianity He is a part of the Trinity, God in the form of man. He took on flesh and dwelt among men (John 1:14). But according to normative pluralism the Christian understanding of the incarnation cannot be accurate. Jesus is seen as a finite person who could not possess infinite attributes. Incarnation, then, is not to be taken literally, but metaphorically. Instead, it is seen whenever people act in love toward one another. Jesus was not really God made man, but a man who was open to divine inspiration, obedient to God's will, who made God real to the world and showed persons how to live as a part of His kingdom. So in the same way people might say that Hitler was evil incarnate, today it can be said that Jesus was God incarnate.¹³ However, He was not God.

Obviously, this theory strays far outside the realm of historical orthodoxy. More than that, it rips from God His ability to objectively communicate and reveal Himself to mankind. If normative pluralism is to be seen as true, the persona of God the Bible portrays is nothing like He really is. In the Old and New Testaments, God is the sovereign Creator of the heavens and earth. There never was a time when He was not and there will never be a time when He is not. The God of the Bible does as He pleases (Ps 115:3). The writer of Hebrews says that "in these last days [God] has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom He also made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power" (Heb 1:2-3). If this God is also a part of the god of normative pluralism, then He testifies against himself when He declares Jesus Christ objectively as Creator and God. Ultimately, any pluralism must answer the question Jesus

¹²Ibid., 43.

¹³Ibid., 57-59.

Himself posed to disciples at Caesarea Philippi: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15).

Pluralism’s answer is a bundle of contradictions and cannot possibly be lived out logically in the real world. Christianity is supposed to show a part of who God is, yet Christians cannot trust the basic tenets of the faith. Jesus is God incarnate, but incarnation is only the manifestation of the love of God, not the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in bodily form (Col 2:9). The answer to the question “Who do you say that I am?” is practically of no consequence, because no matter what religion you follow, pluralism says you are worshipping the real God. Truth is irrelevant. Jesus is irrelevant. The Scriptures that are used to make the case are badly interpreted, and in many cases, such as John 1:14, the plain meaning is abandoned is twisted to fit pluralistic theology. Yet the proponents of this view offer no objective proofs of their theory. This system’s existential epistemological framework does not stand up against reality, where every religion defines God with vast differences. The apostolic teaching is clear that man cannot be saved apart from Jesus Christ: “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” (Acts 4:12).

Inclusivism

Another view, inclusivism, grants that salvation is through Christ alone and that the gospel must be heard to be believed, but states that this can occur in other religions. Somehow, Christ is encountered in a saving way through faiths other than Christianity. Although it could be considered a cousin to pluralism, it is not the same, since that view purports that there are many ways to salvation, not necessarily through Christ.¹⁴ He can somehow lead people to salvation through religions such as Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism.

Many inclusivists grant that there are indisputable claims of exclusivity by Christ and in the Bible, though they find it possible for God to reveal Himself “incognito” in other faiths.¹⁵ Wrong beliefs do not grant once entrance into heaven, but real faith and good works can still

¹⁴Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, 791.

¹⁵Ibid., 792.

come out of persons in different belief systems. According to theologian and author Clark Pinnock, atheists can have faith even though they do not believe in God. In referring to Matthew 25:31-40, Pinnock writes, “Did Jesus not tell us that giving the thirsty a drink of cold water is an act of participation in the selfless love of God revealed in the gospel and makes one his sheep? . . . Created in God’s image, a person can decide to accept the mystery of one’s being, which is the goal of his or her life.”¹⁶ C.S. Lewis said,

“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. For example, a Buddhist of good will may be led to concentrate more and more on the Buddhist teaching about mercy and to leave in the background (though he might still say he believed) the Buddhist teaching on certain other points. Many of the good Pagans long before Christ’s birth may have been in this position.”¹⁷

The inclusivist, then, believes that earnest followers of other religions who exhibit behavior consistent with tenets of Christianity are somehow being led by God and are thus in salvation. Some would even call them *anonymous Christians*. Everyone goes through Jesus, but there are many paths.¹⁸

This view, like its pluralistic cousin, does great injustice to the biblical text. When the apostle Paul made his way to Athens it was a very religious city, with people zealously devoted to their gods and goddesses. Yet, their devotion was not the least bit assuring to Paul that these individuals were saved. Paul did not commend the Athenians and exhort them to stay with the positive aspects of their religion, that God might save them through Jesus Christ. Instead, he declared that God was calling on the Athenians to repent, having set a day for judgment through “a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31). Commenting on this passage, B.B. Warfield pointed out

¹⁶Clark Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 118-19.

¹⁷C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, HarperCollins ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 209.

¹⁸Pinnock, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 119.

that in religious Athens, when the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached, there were only meager results. Although a few were saved, the book of Acts does not record the establishment of a church in Athens at this time.¹⁹ It makes sense that if this religious city was full of people devoted, in one way or another, to the true God through their religious experience and practice, when they heard the gospel they would have responded. Their devotion to their gods was not misplaced devotion to the one true God. Inclusivism falls short biblically, in the failure of Paul to accept their devotion as true faith and instead call them to repentance, and experientially, in the failure of most of these devoted Athenians to respond positively to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Response to Available Revelation

There is still another view of salvation in which people are saved based upon how they respond amount of light they have been given. People do not necessarily have to hear and believe the gospel message. Just as Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6), Tony Evans states that these people are treated like Old Testament saints. They are not saved apart from the atoning work of Jesus Christ, but they are saved without knowing His name. People in the present age who trust in what God has revealed are dealt with based on the knowledge they have, and not on the information they never received. Evans terms this method *transdispensationalism*.²⁰

Evans states that persons sincerely seeking God and responding to whatever truth they have been given are judged on the basis of their response to that light. They are treated as Abraham and the finished work of Christ is applied to them.²¹ This is how John can write in Revelation 7:9 that there were people from every tribe, tongue, and nation before the throne, even though there are people groups who have not had the gospel preached to them yet. Evans

¹⁹B.B. Warfield, "False Religions and the True" in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1952), 519.

²⁰Tony Evans, *Totally Saved* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002), 360.

²¹*Ibid.*, 360-61.

points to the unwillingness of God for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9) as evidence that He is not “some monster in heaven tossing people gleefully into hell.”²²

Transdispensationalism, however, is fraught with problems when examined by Scripture. This view seems to ignore the depravity of man in its assertion that there are those apart from Christ who seek God. Paul, on the other hand, writes that in his unregenerate state no man seeks God (Rom 3:11). Furthermore, in the Scriptures people come into a right standing with God on the basis of faith (Rom 5:1), which comes from hearing the proclamation of the gospel (Rom 10:14-15). If the assertion that a man can be saved apart from hearing the gospel and without knowing the name of Jesus is true, then the apostle Paul, who says that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ,” a liar (Rom 10:17).

Lastly, Evans’s interpretation of 2 Peter 3:9 does not take the context, personal pronouns, or recipients of the book into account, and is instead a prime example of examining a verse in a vacuum. The topic of the surrounding verses in the chapter deal with the return of Jesus Christ. In the last days there will be mockers who question the validity of His promise to return, but Peter explains that He will return like a thief in the night, in His own time. Additionally, there is the issue of Peter writing to a specific group of people, “to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours” (2 Pet 1:1). In this first verse of the book Peter limits the scope of the remarks he will make to the saved.²³ In 2 Peter 3:1 he reveals that this is the second letter he is writing to this specific group, who are clearly believers (1 Pet 1:1-2). Thus, in 2 Peter 3:9, the message is that Christ is going to keep His promise to return, but God is being “patient toward [the ‘those’ of 2 Pet 1:1], not wishing for any to perish but for all [of ‘those’] to come to repentance.” This verse, therefore, cannot be used to prove that God will save those who never heard the gospel. Rather, the burden of proof is on Evans to prove God is a monster for punishing sinners who, according to the Scriptures, do not seek God. Evans seems to ignore to

²²Ibid., 361.

²³James White, *The Potter’s Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2001), 145-47.

inherent sinfulness of men and verses that describe all men in their unregenerate state as “children of wrath” by nature (Eph 2:3).

The Evangelistic Fallacy

What is the Christian to make of evangelistic commands if any of the previous theories regarding salvation are true? What motivation does anyone have to preach the gospel with others if the obedience of faith is not the exclusive means of salvation (Rom 1:5)? Evans, for example, gives lip service to the idea that believers are following the commands of Christ to share the gospel.²⁴ However, if God is in the business of saving people based on the revelation they have, sending missionaries to unreached people groups is the most cold-hearted things one can do. If they were to hear the gospel and reject it they would go to hell. But according to Evans, if they were to never hear the gospel, yet believe in whatever general revelation they understand, they would be saved. The logical conclusion of transdispensationalism is for the believer to never share the gospel, unless sure a particular person has heard the gospel before and rejected it. This eliminates most missionary endeavors and destroys the need to evangelize.

The same can be said for universalism, normative pluralism, and inclusivism as well. If God is going to save everybody sharing the gospel is absolutely pointless. If God saves through His different personae in all religions, then there is no motivation to convert the Buddhist, Jew, Hindu, or Muslim, since God is saving through other personae in those faiths. The same can be said if inclusivism’s Christ somehow saves devout followers of other religions. Paul’s missionary journeys did more harm than good if Jesus is not “*the way, the truth, and the life*” (John 14:6, emphasis mine). His message helped condemned unknown numbers of people who have been gone to heaven based on their faithfulness to their own religions, their personal response to general revelation. The same can be said of William Carey, Hudson Taylor, Adoniram Judson, and anyone else who shares the gospel. If the gospel is not the exclusive

²⁴Evans, *Totally Saved*, 361-62.

means of salvation it does more harm than good and damns more than it saves, and those the church views as heroes of the faith could be more appropriately viewed as villains.

Concluding Thoughts

Many attempts to widen the hope of those who do not believe the gospel are from noble-minded Christians who wish to not talk in terms of condemnation for others, especially those who never hear. Other attempts are based upon a view of Scripture that does not demand inerrancy, infallibility, divine inspiration, and sufficiency. This is where the critical error of other views lies, for it makes God out to be rather powerless deity who has refused to, or is incapable of, objectively speaking. Not only did God create the universe, but He also “made man to live in that universe, and He gives us the Bible, the verbalized, propositional, factual revelation, to tell us what we need know.”²⁵

In the Bible one reads that Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, took on flesh and lived a perfectly sinless life. Then, He went to the cross and bore the wrath of the Father toward sin for all who will ever believe (Rom 3:21-26). Jesus said that no man could come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Is Jesus to be believed? He instructed His followers to make disciples, baptize, and teach them all that He had commanded (Matt 28:19-20). The apostolic church was convinced of the exclusivity of Christ and the gospel (Acts 4:12) and the objective revelation from God found in the Scriptures (2 Pet 1:19-21). The real God, Maker of heaven and earth, has spoken to His creation and given them objective truth, the gospel, which is the only means of by which people come safely into His presence.

²⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, *He is There and He is Not Silent*, 30th anniv. ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2001), 60.

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