

IS INCLUSIVISM BIBLICAL?

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What is the eternal fate of those who have not responded to the gospel? Are they destined for hell as orthodox Christianity has traditionally held? This is not only a theological question but also a deeply personal issue as none of my family members in Japan, including my late father, is a Christian. In this article we will investigate whether inclusivism can offer comfort and hope regarding the fate of those who have not responded to the gospel. As Nash notes, “if inclusivism is true, it eliminates a problem that troubles many Christians. What about those people who die without ever hearing the gospel? Think how many cares the adoption of inclusivism might eliminate from our lives. Think how many burdens about possibly unsaved loved ones we would be delivered from – how much easier we might sleep at night.”¹ We will see, however, that despite its obvious appeal, inclusivism is not a tenable option from a biblical perspective. In what follows, we will briefly survey the tenet of inclusivism. This is followed by its critique from a biblical standpoint. Finally, we will conclude this paper with an alternative hope we may have as biblical Christians.

INCLUSIVISM

Inclusivism is a soteriological position that states that “Christ is *ontologically* necessary for salvation but not *epistemologically* necessary.”² In other words, those who have not responded to Christ can be saved by him without knowing about him. This is in contrast to exclusivism, which argues that Christ is not only ontologically but also epistemologically necessary in order for us to receive salvation. According to Pinnock, the centerpiece of inclusivism is pneumatological in that “in the economy of God, the Spirit is under nobody’s control but free to grace any person or any sphere, however remote from the church’s present boundaries. The Spirit embodies the prevenient grace of God and puts into effect that universal drawing action of Jesus Christ. . . . The Spirit is ever working to realize the saving thrust of God’s promise for the world.”³ The Spirit may use religion to draw people to God when it is appropriate, for “positive values of non-Christian religions prepare

for and are perfected by the light and power of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.”⁴ Note, however, that religions themselves are not salvific; rather, it is faith that is significant:

If a non-Christian believes (as in Heb.11), it is faith and not membership (or non-membership) in a religious community that counts. By faith, one receives the prevenient grace of God on the basis of an honest search for God and obedience to God’s word as heard in the heart and conscience. A pre-messianic believer is, one might say, latently a member of Christ’s body and destined to receive the grace of conversion and explicit knowledge of Jesus Christ at a later date, whether in this life or after death.⁵

Melchizedek and Cornelius are representatives of pagan saints in the Bible among whom God worked.⁶ Inclusivists thus contend that “there is a chance for the non-Christian world to enjoy God’s blessings and God’s Being by coming into relation with God through the person of the universal Spirit. The Spirit profoundly extends the limits of the historically bounded salvation of the Son taking it beyond the multi-faceted human borders and making God’s presence actual in the whole world.”⁷

If the unevangelized can be saved by faith, does it affect the motivation for world mission? According to Pinnock, inclusivism can actually improve our motivation, for it is not driven by the feeling of panic. We can still call pre-messianic believers to “come higher up and deeper in, to know God better and love God more.”⁸ Note also that from the perspective of Christianity worldwide, inclusivism is a predominant view, for it has been the official position of the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican Council II in the 1960s.⁹

BIBLICAL STANDPOINT

Does the Scripture affirm the inclusivists’ stance that one can be saved by Christ without knowing about him as long as s/he has generic faith? Although it is an appealing position, upon close scrutiny we must say that inclusivism is not in line with what the Scripture

4. Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View,” 115.

5. Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View,” 117.

6. Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View,” 109.

7. Najeef George Awad, “Theology of Religions, Universal Salvation, and the Holy Spirit,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20 (2011): 270.

8. Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View,” 120.

9. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Theologies of Religions,” in *Witnessing to Christ in a Pluralistic World: Christian Mission among Other Faiths*, eds. Lalsangkima Pachuau and Knud Jørgensen (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2011), 112, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://scholar.csl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1024&context=edinburghcentenary>.

1. Ronald H. Nash, “Is Belief in Jesus Necessary? The Answer to Religious Inclusivism,” *Christian Research Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 2, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://thinkingmatters.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Is-Belief-in-Jesus-Necessary.pdf>.

2. Daniel Strange, “Exceptions to the Rule? The Salvation of Old Testament Believers and the Unevangelized,” *Ethics in Conversation* 5, no. 4 (July 2000): 1, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://kirbylaingcentre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/5.4WBStrange.pdf>.

3. Clark H. Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 104.

reveals. We will discuss four pieces of scriptural evidence against inclusivism. First, it is indisputable that the apostle Paul did not espouse inclusivism. Had he believed that one could be saved by generic faith alone, would he have risked his life to preach the gospel? Paul's life was replete with troubles precisely because he was driven to proclaim the gospel in diverse places (2 Cor. 1:8-9; 11:23-27; 2 Tim. 3:11). For the sake of the gospel Paul did everything he could in order to save some (1 Cor. 9:19-23). This is clearly distinct from the mindset of an inclusivist, who merely exhorts others to "come higher up and deeper in, to know God better and love God more." We thus concur with Nash, who states that "if inclusivism is true, then Saul the Pharisee was saved before he met Jesus. Paul the apostle, however, wrote that before his conversion, he had only a purely human righteousness that comes from the law (Phil. 3:9) — a false righteousness that does not save — instead of the true righteousness that comes from God through saving faith in Christ. Saul satisfied the inclusivist tests of salvation, but he was still a lost sinner (1 Tim. 1:15)."¹⁰

Second, recall that Pinnock contends that "the issue for God is not the content of theology but the reality of faith."¹¹ However, the Bible plainly teaches that the content of faith is utterly crucial for our salvation even though saving faith surpasses merely intellectual assent to some biblical knowledge. Thus, Paul declares that faith comes from hearing the message about Christ (Rom. 10:17). He also reminds believers in Corinth that "by this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the Word I preached to you" (1 Cor. 15:2) and expounds that the gospel he preached comprises Christ's death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Furthermore, with respect to the Jewish people Paul states that "they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Rom. 10:2). As Phillips and Geivett observe, "if the devotees of Judaism—arguably the most exemplary of non-Christian faiths—are consigned to darkness and are under the dominion of Satan, there is little chance that those of other faiths will fare much better apart from faith in Jesus Christ."¹²

Third, let us take a look at pagan saints such as Melchizedek and Cornelius. As for the former, Nash reminds us that "Melchizedek is identified as a priest of the Most High God, but nowhere does the text indicate that he was a *pagan*. Melchizedek worshiped and served Yahweh as certainly as Abram did. Melchizedek, therefore, fails as an example of genuine piety among pagans; indeed, the New Testament treats him as a symbol of Christ's high priestly work (Heb. 7)."¹³ What about Cornelius, whom

Pinnock regards as a "key symbol"?¹⁴ Interestingly, even though Cornelius was devout and God-fearing and his prayers had "come up as a memorial offering before God" (Acts 10:4), that was not enough. When an angel asked Cornelius to send men to fetch Peter, he told the reason in these terms: "He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved" (Acts 11:14). Cornelius is indeed a key symbol but not because of what inclusivists consider him to be. His life illustrates that even a devout, God-fearing person needs to hear the gospel in order to be saved.

Finally, let us consider pneumatological inclusivism from a biblical perspective. According to Awad, "the Spirit has a particular mission that is distinct from the one of the Son and not limited to it as if a copy or an automatic representation of what has been already done."¹⁵ Jesus, however, says with respect to the Spirit, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me" (John 15:26). Furthermore, Jesus declares, "He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you" (John 16:14). It seems evident from these words of Jesus that the Spirit does not have a particular mission apart from that of the Son. Miles concurs with us and states that "the Holy Spirit always seeks to glorify the Son. In denying this, pneumatological inclusivism and pluralism fails on Christological grounds and ultimately, ironically, distorts pneumatology."¹⁶

CONCLUSION

We have argued that pneumatological inclusivism – the claim that as the Spirit is omnipresent and at work among those who do not know about Christ, one can be saved as long as s/he has generic faith – is not tenable for the following four reasons: (1) the apostle Paul did not espouse inclusivism, (2) saving faith encompasses content, (3) devout, God-fearing people like Cornelius still need to hear the gospel to be saved, and (4) the Spirit does not have a particular mission apart from that of the Son. If inclusivism is not a viable option for biblical Christians, is there any hope for those who have not responded to the gospel in this life? Stott refuses to speculate on the eternal fate of such people because "God . . . 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."¹⁷ However, while wrestling with the loss of my father, I came to the following tentative

10. Nash, "Is Belief in Jesus Necessary?" 5.

11. Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 105.

12. W. Gary Phillips and R. Douglas Geivett, "Response to Clark H. Pinnock," in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 135.

13. Nash, "Is Belief in Jesus Necessary?" 6.

14. Pinnock, "An Inclusivist View," 109.

15. Awad, "Theology of Religions," 263.

16. Todd L. Miles, "He Will Glorify Me: Evaluating the Pneumatology of Inclusivists and Pluralists," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 16, no. 4 (2012): 90-91, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://sbts-wordpress-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/equip/uploads/2014/02/SBJT-16.4-Miles-p-74-95.pdf>.

17. David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 327.

conclusion. When my late father was dying, a number of people were praying for him. I also prayed that the Lord would somehow reveal Himself to my father – even in a dream just like the oft heard anecdote that Muslims have dreams of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ In this respect I concur with McGrath, who claims that “God’s saving work must never be exclusively restricted to human preaching, as if the Holy Spirit was silent or inactive in God’s world, or as if the actualization of God’s saving purposes depended totally on human agencies.”¹⁹ I hold on to this hope, for the Scripture says that “the righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them” (Ps. 34:17) and “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). When we get to the new heaven and the new earth, there will be no more mourning or crying or pain (Rev. 21:4). Thus, whatever happens to our loved ones, our biblical hope is that we won’t mourn or cry over them when we get to the new heaven and the new earth. At any rate, it is well to remember that “when speculating in areas where the Bible is not clear (i.e., the fate of the unevangelized), we ought not to allow our speculations to undermine where the Bible is clear (i.e., on the necessity of explicit faith in Christ).”²⁰

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