

What's the Truth About Jesus?

A Reply to Pluralism and Inclusivism

Must all people, regardless of their geographical isolation, believe in Jesus Christ in order to be saved?

Exclusivists answer, "Yes." While typically making allowance for infants and others who die before reaching a level of mental competency (i.e., accountability), exclusivists maintain that all persons must actually hear the gospel and respond to Christ in faith in order to receive salvation.

Universalists answer, "No." They believe that all persons are saved regardless of their response to Christ.

Pluralists also answer, "No." While they differ from universalists in that they do not typically believe that all persons actually will be saved, pluralists believe that there are many potential ways of salvation.

Inclusivists answer the question "Yes and No." They differ from pluralists by saying that nobody is ever saved apart from Christ, but they differ from exclusivists by saying that the individual being saved may or may not have a knowledge of the gospel message. One must simply trust in the mercy of God, and that is ultimately counted as faith in Christ, whether or not one has heard of Christ.

Universalism

Any of the biblical statements about eternal punishment (e.g., Matt. 25:41; John 5:29; 2 Pet. 3:7; Rev. 20:12–15) stand against universalism, but universalists may not take those passages very seriously. Critiques that they might regard as more relevant would include:

1. If all persons are saved regardless of their continuing rebellion against God, injustice is never overcome. Indeed, a judge who simply released guilty persons would himself be unjust.
2. If all persons receive salvation whether they want it or not, there is no place for free refusal, thus no meaningful free will.
3. Universalism is often characterized by a naïve optimism about human nature. As we see individuals perpetrate radical evil in the world, our hearts rightly cry out for justice.

Pluralism

Pluralism is represented by contemporary theologians such as John Hick, Raimundo Panikkar, and Paul Knitter. Knitter's book, *No Other Name?*, provides an excellent summary of various pluralist positions.

Pluralism has become popular in part because of increased awareness of the world and its peoples within the last several decades. As Charles Davis notes, "Increasingly it is difficult to raise any religious question among young people without discussing it against a background of all the World Religions . . . students want religious questions not only within the framework of Christian ideas. . . . Religious pluralism has undoubtedly entered into the consciousness of the younger generation."¹

At the same time, pluralism seems to be a reaction against the missiological efforts of evangelicals and the theological writings of Karl Barth. Earlier in this century Barth led a neo-orthodox attack against the legitimacy of "natural revelation" enabling individuals to come to a knowledge of God. That approach seems absurd to pluralists like Knitter, whose response typifies the openness of his system:

The only thing Christians could tell the other religions would be that 'the sun of God's grace fell on us, not you. Even though there may be no evident differences between our religion and yours, we have the truth and you do not.' No wonder interreligious dialogue never got off the ground during the decades of neoorthodox dominance over Protestant thought. No wonder Christians were considered by adherents of other religions as the most arrogant of humans.²

Knitter argues that the reality of natural revelation demands that we acknowledge the presence of God in world religions. There are two important components to this argument. First, Knitter argues that natural revelation must be salvific. Second, he argues that we recognize God's presence through the attitudes and actions of people – if they are living lives of love and justice, then they are followers of the truth.

The first point, that natural revelation would have to be salvific in intent, is based on the time-honored concept that God, as a God of love, is consistently striving for the salvation and welfare of all persons. Knitter writes,

But what kind of a God is this who offers a revelation that can never lead to salvation, to an authentic experience of the divine? Is it not a rather capricious, teasing God, who offers just enough knowledge of divinity to frustrate persons, or to confirm them in their sinfulness? To keep the concept of general revelation locked within the confines of 'the law' and never to allow it to become 'the gospel' seems, therefore, seriously to jeopardize belief in a God of love, willing the welfare of all human beings.³

Stated simply, if God is a God of love, then He would try to save everyone equally. If He is trying to save everyone equally, then the revelation He has given them must be adequate.

Knitter's second point, that one can see the presence of God in actions of love and justice, is common to both his liberationist approach and the experientialism of many pluralists. The

¹Quoted by Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, 3.

²Knitter, 95.

³Ibid., 116.

emphasis on right behavior (in particular, loving and just behavior) may be seen throughout his work, but the following quotation is typical.

One must be careful . . . to avoid viewing the truth of a symbol or of a religion *only* in its ability to stir the heart and resonate in the psyche. True, unless one feels moved by a symbol, it is impossible to even begin to speak about its truth; yet merely to be moved is not enough. One can also be moved to an apparent wholeness that not only harms oneself but also others. The Marxist critique would apply. The criterion for truth of any symbol or religion must also be its ability to lead to redemptive or positive praxis [practice], to social betterment. To be true, religion must foster not only individual, but societal wholeness.⁴

This experiential standard is far more important to Knitter than the biblical text itself. In fact, it is used as the standard by which the biblical text is judged. He writes,

The conservative Evangelical declaration that there can be authentic, reliable revelation only in Christ simply does not hold up in light of the faith, dedication, love, and peace that Christians find in the teachings and especially in the followers of other religions. If, as many Evangelicals insist, the Bible tells us that such religious faith is only "groping" for God without any genuine "discovery," then many of our contemporaries will find themselves forced to abandon the Bible.⁵

Within this context, it is difficult for the Christian to assert the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Again, Knitter writes,

The stumbling block seems to be the central Christian belief in the uniqueness of Christ. The fundamental premise of unitive pluralism is that all religions are, or can be, equally valid. This means that their founders, the religious figures behind them, are or can be equally valid. But that would open up the possibility that Jesus Christ is "one among many" in the world of saviors and revealers. Such a recognition, for the Christian, is simply not allowed. Or is it?⁶

Knitter's thesis is that there is a way out of this dilemma. The Christian can argue that Jesus is unique while accepting the idea that others need not agree. You might talk about your spouse as the most wonderful and attractive person on the planet without expecting that I would agree with you, because you are speaking as one who is in love. Knitter suggests that the New Testament is doing that when it speaks of Jesus as the only way to God.

Barth's reading of the "classical texts" dealing with general revelation (Rom. 1:18ff.; Acts 14:15ff.; 17:22ff.) is open to serious criticism. He argued . . . that although these texts admit of God's revelation to the gentiles, they also affirm that this revelation never bears fruit and is always abused. But can Barth be so certain that Paul was so certain? Was Paul making absolute, ontological statements as to the human condition in general, or was he describing what was his experience of the gentile world at that time, in those places?

More importantly, how are we to understand, in its personal and sociological context, the nature of all the evident New Testament language about "only in Christ Jesus," "no other

⁴Ibid., 69-70.

⁵Ibid., 93.

⁶Ibid., 17.

name, "only begotten Son of God"? Is such language part of the *essential message* of the New Testament or does it belong to the *medium* used to get the message across? Further, is it *philosophical* language about the structures of the relationship between the infinite and the finite, meant to *negate* all relationships to the divine apart from Christ? Or is it *confessional* language, meant to *affirm* the importance of what God had done in Jesus?⁷

If Christians could reclarify and repossess the original and enduring intent of christological language – that is, if 'one and only' could mean 'I'm fully committed to you' rather than 'no one else is worthy of commitment' – then many Christians would feel more honest about their faith, and doors would be opened more widely to dialogue with other believers equally committed to their saviors.⁸

Consistent with this thesis, Knitter regards the accounts of the empty tomb to be illustrations or stories about the faith and hope of the disciples, and he argues that they do not need to be taken literally. He maintains that the disciples did not experience anything that could not be experienced afresh by believers throughout history who find themselves becoming acquainted with the power of God.⁹ Schubert Ogden, who shares Knitter's pluralism, is considerably more blunt. He argues that salvation depends on the choice of each individual and that the essential requirement is love. From that perspective, no external event is of any real significance, as Ogden states:

The mythology [traditional theology] supposes it must affirm is completely irrelevant to the real meaning of human existence. If the fulfillment of our lives as persons is dependent on our individual decisions concerning self-understanding, and so is something for which we ourselves are each responsible, then "events" like Jesus' virginal conception, his physical resurrection, his bodily ascension, and his visible coming again on the clouds of heaven are of no relevance whatever to such fulfillment. Or, to speak more accurately, they are no more relevant (or irrelevant) than any other event of the same basic type.

Thus, if, *per impossibile*, the corpse of a man was actually resuscitated, this would be just as relevant to my salvation as an existing self or person as that the carpenter next door just drove a nail in a two-by-four . . . ¹⁰

If we are all on utterly equal footing and we are responsible for ourselves, nothing else makes any difference, not even the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When responding to pluralists, keep in mind the fact that they do not take seriously the uniqueness of Christ. At some point you will need to explain the uniqueness of His person and the true nature of His cross and resurrection. However, you can see from the extensive quotations above that pluralists are aware of Christianity's claims but disagree with them in the interest of ecumenical dialogue, tolerance, love and justice. Appealing to those same motives, here are some "internal" criticisms of pluralism:

1. Pluralism consists of a Western, elitist rejection of world religions. Not only is pluralistic relativism deeply rooted in the evolution of Western philosophy, it essentially demands that every religion in the world surrender that which is most valuable to it – its

⁷Ibid., 92-93.

⁸Ibid., 186.

⁹Ibid., 199.

¹⁰Schubert Ogden, *Christ Without Myth* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1961), 136.

claim to truth. Pluralists fail to recognize that religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity really are NOT all saying the same thing, and they apparently expect everyone else to agree with pluralism at their core. That expectation is both naïve and elitist.

2. Pluralists typically call for universal benevolence (as demonstrated in love and justice), but they have no real justification for such moral absolutes.

3. Pluralism is not realistic about sin. As Reinhold Niebuhr so often emphasized, the lessons of the twentieth century should be sufficient to demonstrate that people and nations do not become more moral through a little more education or a few more sermons on love. Sinful self-interest is so pervasive both in individuals and in society that an appeal to love and justice, without genuine transformation of the heart, amounts to little more than a pipe dream.

Inclusivism

Inclusivism was popularized most prominently through the concept of the "anonymous Christian" in the writings of Karl Rahner.¹¹ Karl Rahner, a post-Vatican II Roman Catholic theologian, expands the traditional idea of baptism *in voto*, which maintains that the desire to receive a sacrament is, in certain cases, equivalent to actually receiving it. For Rahner, those who haven't heard the gospel, or even some Protestants, may demonstrate a desire to be a part of the Church, and that would be equivalent to actually joining it. Riesenhuber summarizes,

Thus we have discovered the end of God's salvific activity -- the salvation of all men through their belonging to the Church. But the conditions for membership in the Church and historical circumstances do not at present make it possible for all men to be members of the Church. Therefore God's salvific will demands that a way should exist of belonging to the church which does not entail full-fledged membership.¹²

Those who so "join" the Church are considered Christians, but they are "anonymous" because they are not visible in the Church. "The anonymous Christian is precisely the person who already shares Christ's salvation inwardly, without being as yet able to bring this sharing to its full categorical embodiment and development."¹³ Further,

When a person in his own self-realization welcomes and lives up to what is given to him by his nature and craves actualization; when, moreover, he does not know (or not know enough) of spoken revelation, and is thus deprived of a real access to the sacraments and to the official Church, the result is an anonymous Christian.¹⁴

This view clearly maintains the possibility that adults who have never heard the gospel (but have also never rejected God's revelation) may be saved.

¹¹Klaus Riesenhuber, "The Anonymous Christian According to Karl Rahner," in *The Anonymous Christian*, edited by Anita Roper, translated by Joseph Donceel, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966, 171. For Rahner's own comments, see his *Theological Investigations*, 1:45-47.

¹²Ibid., 150.

¹³Ibid., 161.

¹⁴Ibid.

A similar model was suggested two decades ago by a Reformed pastor, Neal Punt.¹⁵ He argued that all are saved except for those who explicitly reject Christ. In his view, "everyone to whom the gospel is presented must repent, believe, and begin to walk in accordance with God's will or they will not be saved," but those who have never heard the gospel are not bound by those conditions.¹⁶

These views are "inclusivist" in that those who haven't heard may be a part of the Christian church anonymously — Christ is the only way to salvation, but not all have to profess Christ to be saved by Him. C. S. Lewis advocated inclusivism in *Mere Christianity*, writing, "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."¹⁷

The most prominent inclusivists today include Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and Gregory Boyd. Pinnock writes,

God calls on all persons to seek him, whether they seek him from within religion or outside it. There is enough truth in most religions for people to take hold of and put their trust in God's mercy. The religion may help or hinder — but ultimately it is what the person decides that counts.¹⁸

Again, a full response to any position should take into consideration the values, concerns, and arguments of those who hold that position. Inclusivists' primary concerns include:

1. The universal salvific will of God
2. The uniqueness of Christ
3. Benevolence, fairness, and globalism
4. Human freedom and equal access to salvation

Reflecting these values, the major arguments for inclusivism include:

1. God desires for all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4)
2. The Spirit is active in both creation and salvation, and His universal presence in creation (Acts 17:25) brings the potential of salvation to all persons.
3. Old Testament believers did not know of Christ, yet they were saved by Him as they trusted God's mercy in what they did know.
4. The Bible offers examples of "pagan saints" who were rightly related to God but not a part of the covenant community (Job, Melchizedek, Abimelech, Jethro, Rahab, Cornelius, etc.).
5. There is evidence of the grace of God in contemporary cultures, both in the gracious behavior of individuals and in the presence of "redemptive analogies" in societies.

¹⁵Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

¹⁶Neal Punt, "All Are Saved Except," *Christianity Today* (March 20, 1987): 44.

¹⁷C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), 176, quoted by Clark Pinnock, "An Inclusivist View," in *More Than One Way?* edited by Okholm and Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 119.

¹⁸Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 111.

6. *Faith in God* brings salvation, not the possession of specific information.

7. "Ignorance of the law is no excuse" only when that ignorance is one's own fault.

In response to these arguments, we would suggest the following points (numbered in accordance with the list above):

1. Regarding God's stated desire for universal salvation, every non-universalist who believes in God's omnipotence has some difficulty with Scriptures like 1 Timothy 2:4. If *anyone* is ultimately lost, it appears as though God has instituted a plan of salvation that does not fulfill His stated desire. Further, since God has intervened to make particular individuals receptive to the gospel (Acts 16:14; 2 Cor. 4:6), but has not done that for all, it seems that salvation is more selective (i.e., elective) than the inclusivists are willing to acknowledge.

2. It is true that the Spirit sustains all persons in physical life, and it is also true that He brings regeneration (and ultimately resurrection) to believers, but His universal presence is never regarded biblically as a sign of universal saving activity. It is, however, the means of universal reproof according to John 16:8-11. Further, the life-giving work of the Spirit underscores God's absolute sovereignty, for when He chooses to withdraw His breath, all flesh must perish (Ps. 104:29, 30; Job 34:14, 15). That this concept is used to defend a viewpoint of radical human freedom seems utterly inappropriate.

3. People have always been accountable for special revelation as it has been progressively given. Even in the Old Testament, foreigners who were to be rightly related to God were expected to come into the covenant (Isa. 56:6). If ever there were individuals who would be "included" because of their faith (or their faithful service) within another system of belief, one would think it would be the Jews. However, Paul and his peers found themselves on the wrong side of God because of their estimation of Jesus (Rom. 10:1-2; Phil. 3:1-11). Likewise, Paul told a "religious" audience in Athens that these are no longer the times of ignorance, that "God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31).

4. The biblical examples of "pagan saints" consist either of people to whom God revealed Himself by special revelation or those whose encounter with God is not described. There are *no examples* of people being rightly related to God by virtue of natural revelation alone.

5. Regarding signs of grace in contemporary cultures, it should be noted that the Bible never regards the worship of other gods as a good sign. People are not naturally seeking God. They are naturally blind, foolish, and rebellious (Rom. 1-3; 2 Cor. 4:4). Further, love and devotion may be found in lesser, even counterfeited, forms throughout history, but true virtue and genuine love for God present a much higher standard. Inclusivists must also watch themselves lest they teach salvation by works (typically described in terms of love and justice). Pinnock has written, "One can make a faith response to God in the form of actions of love and justice." Really? Love *demonstrates* faith, but it does not *constitute* faith. In the same way, "redemptive analogies" may make it easier for us to communicate the gospel, but they do not substitute for the gospel.

6. Faith is irrelevant apart from a promise (Heb. 11:1, 13). As J. Gresham Machen put it, "The whole trouble is that faith is being considered merely as a beneficent quality of the soul without respect to the reality or unreality of its object; and the moment faith comes to be considered in that way, in that moment it is destroyed."

7. The argument about innocent ignorance assumes that some who haven't heard the gospel are basically good people who just didn't know. But there are no basically good people. Further, ignorance does not excuse sinful acts (Acts 3:17; 1 Cor. 2:8; 1 Tim. 1:13).

Those Who Haven't Heard vs. Those Who Can't Believe

Many exclusivists, who believe that salvation comes only by grace through explicit faith in Christ, also believe in the salvation of those who die without reaching a state of mental competence. How can one say that these who "can't believe" are likely saved while saying that those who "haven't heard" must believe in Jesus? The difference lies in the nature of the two groups.

Those who can believe have heard something, and they are accountable for that knowledge. Immediately after saying, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ," Paul wrote, "But I say, surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have" (Rom. 10:17-18). From Paul's perspective, there is no such group as "those who haven't heard." The fact that everybody has heard *something* makes them morally accountable to God. **They have no excuse** precisely for the reason that they have been exposed to God's revelation (Rom. 1:20).

At the same time, it may be that **those who die without ever being capable of belief have the excuse that the other group lacks. They have not heard anything**, even in natural revelation. If it is awareness of God's revelation (be it natural or special) that makes one accountable before Him, these persons are unaware, and therefore not accountable.

Those who would see the salvation of those who can't believe as a step on the slippery slope toward universalism must understand this vital distinction. There is no way in which this argument for infant salvation may be extended to cover those who are capable of responding to God's revelation, for it is based on lack of ability, not lack of access.

For Further Reading

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