



A synopsis by David Matthew of

No Other Name:

An investigation into the destiny of the unevangelized

By John Sanders, Eerdmans, 1992

[This book looks at three approaches to the issue. At one extreme is **restrictivism**, the approach that says unless a person has actively put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour for the forgiveness of their sins, they are damned. At the other extreme, **universalism** says that every human being will eventually be eternally saved.

Inclusivism, or the 'wider hope', is an intermediate position that believes God wishes to save all and has made salvation available to all, whether or not they have heard the gospel of Christ. The author of the book holds to this latter view, but he assesses the other views with total fairness.]

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Foreword, by Clark Pinnock

Preface

Can we believe that God is just and loving if he fails to provide billions of people (including infants who die) with any opportunity to participate in salvation through Jesus Christ? Why did God create so many people if he knew that the vast majority of them would have no chance of ultimate salvation? On the other hand, if the unevangelized do have an opportunity for salvation, how is it made available to them? (p xvii)

Introduction

Many evangelicals take the view that if there is hope for the unevangelised, missions are a waste of time. It is an unwarranted assumption.

Not until the Renaissance period did Christians become aware of the magnitude of the world and the numbers of unevangelised people. Before that, they believed that virtually everybody had heard the gospel.

Reacting to the teaching that the unevangelised are totally lost, some have embraced universalism. But there are several approaches to a *third way between these extremes* that are more attractive.

If it is true that God automatically damns all the unevangelized to hell, then perhaps the arguments against the goodness and justice of God have some merit. (p6)

PART ONE: FORMULATING THE ISSUE

1. The Issue in Context

The Question

If Jesus is the only way of salvation, what about those who lived *before* Jesus? The problem concerns them as much as those who lived *after* him but have never heard the gospel.

Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.

Should an Answer Be Attempted?

Some (including Jim Packer) say we have no business asking such questions and that we should rest in Gen 18:25...

Genesis 18: Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

But unless we grapple with such issues we cannot formulate theology. The doctrines of the Trinity and the hypostatic union came about only through such grappling. Consensus on this issue has not emerged at any point in the church's history so far. In modern times it is chiefly Roman Catholic theologians who have addressed the issue.

Statistical estimates on world population:

AD 100	181 million people	1 million Christians	60,000 unreached people-groups
AD 1000	270 million people	50 million Christians	50,000 unreached people-groups
AD 1989	5.2 billion people	1.7 billion Christians	12,000 unreached people-groups

It seems safe to conclude that the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived never heard the good news of grace regarding the God of Israel and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In terms of sheer numbers, then, an inquiry into the salvability of the unevangelized is of immense interest and importance. (p16)

The Topic within Evangelicalism

Though it was widely discussed in the 19th c, evangelicals today seem wary of addressing this topic, chiefly out of fear for the future of missions. But many, when pressed, admit to believing that people can be saved without expressly knowing about Jesus.

Two Essential Truths

There are two theological axioms from which the problem of the unevangelized arises. The first is **God's universal salvific will** suggested in passages such as 1 Timothy 2:3-4 ("God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"). The second is **the particularity and finality of salvation only in Jesus** evidenced in texts such as Acts 4:12 ("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"). The attempt to hold both axioms together creates the problem of how God can genuinely desire all human beings to partake of salvation and yet claim that salvation is exclusively offered only in the person of Jesus Christ, of whom most of the human race has been ignorant. (p25)

Both axioms are indeed taught in Scripture:

Hebrews 1:3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

John 14:9 Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Mark 2:5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

John 14:6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father **except through me**."

Colossians 1:13-14 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Hebrews 1:3 After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

1 John 2:2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for **the sins of the whole world**.

Matthew 11:28 Come to me, **all** you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

John 12:32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw **all people** to myself.

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is...patient with you, **not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance**.

Romans 5:18 Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in **condemnation for all people**, so also one righteous act resulted in **justification and life for all**.

2 Corinthians 5:15 And he **died for all**, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

1 Timothy 2:3-4 ...God our Savior, ⁴who **wants all people to be saved** and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 4:10 ...the living God, who is the **Savior of all people**, and especially of those who believe.

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared that **offers salvation to all people**.

Also there are texts pointing to *exclusiveness*, while others point to *inclusiveness*:

Mark 16:16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be **saved**, but whoever does not believe will be **condemned**.

John 3:18 Whoever believes in him is **not condemned**, but whoever does not believe stands **condemned already** because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

John 14:6 No one comes to the Father **except through me**.

Ephesians 2:12 Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, **without hope and without God** in the world.

Ephesians 2:3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were **by nature deserving of wrath**.

Acts 10:34–35 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵but **accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right**.

Acts 17:30 In the past God **overlooked such ignorance**...

John 1:9 The true light that **gives light to everyone** was coming into the world.

Romans 2:7 To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

Romans 2:14–15 Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Modern pluralists so emphasize the universalistic texts and play down the particularistic texts that they end up with a God who saves everyone by any (religious) means available to the person. Most evangelicals do the opposite, subordinating the universal/inclusive texts to the particular/exclusive texts to the extent that they end up with a God who does not seem serious about trying to save all people. (p29)

We must look for an approach that does justice to both groups of texts. Reformed believers, of course, do not hold to the idea of God's universal salvific will; election and salvation are limited – by God's own will. For them, the verses declaring his universal salvific will refer only to the elect.

Orthodox Christianity uniformly affirms the ontological necessity of Jesus Christ for salvation: if it were not for his atonement, we would all be left in our sins without any hope of reconciliation. But the matter of epistemological necessity – the question of whether a person must know about Jesus in order to benefit from the salvation he provided – is something else altogether. (p30)

Control Beliefs

These are our beliefs on key aspects of the Christian faith; they inevitably govern the way we look at secondary issues like the destiny of the unevangelised. For us they will be: *Christ alone; grace alone; faith alone; Scripture alone*. But Scripture needs to be interpreted, and we must do this through honest debate.

PART TWO: THE TWO EXTREMES: RESTRICTIVISM AND UNIVERSALISM

2. Restrictivism: All the Unevangelized Are Damned

Key Biblical Texts on Restrictivism

Supporting texts come in *four categories*:

Those that affirm the particularity and exclusiveness of salvation in Jesus Christ:

Acts 4:12 Salvation is **found in no one else**, for there is **no other name** given under heaven by which we must be saved.

1 Corinthians 3:11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

John 14:6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father **except through me**.

John 17:3 Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

1 John 5:11–12 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son **has life**; whoever does not have the Son of God **does not have life**.

- a. Those that point to the sinfulness of humanity and the hopelessness of life without Jesus—apart from special revelation there is only sin and no salvation:

Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that **people are without excuse**. [*They have rejected general revelation*]

Romans 2:15 They show that the requirements of the law are **written on their hearts**, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them. [*They have rejected the light of conscience*]

Romans 2:23 You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? [*The Jews have rejected even special revelation. Consequently...*]

Romans 3:9 We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are **all under the power of sin**.

Romans 3:11 There is no one who understands; there is **no one who seeks God**.

Ephesians 2:12 Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, **without hope and without God** in the world.

Ephesians 4:18 They are darkened in their understanding and **separated from the life of God** because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

- b. Those that speak of the importance of hearing the gospel and repenting:

Mark 1:14–15 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. **Repent and believe** the good news!”

Mark 16:15–16 He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. ¹⁶Whoever believes and is baptized will be **saved**, but whoever does not believe will be **condemned**.”

John 3:36 Whoever believes in the Son **has eternal life**, but whoever rejects the Son **will not see life**, for God's wrath remains on them.

1 John 2:23 ²³No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Romans 10:9 If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Romans 10:14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And **how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?** And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

Romans 10:17 Consequently, **faith comes from hearing the message**, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

These texts are then used to interpret two events in Acts. [1] Cornelius, though a God-fearing Gentile, needed to hear about Jesus in order to be saved (Acts 10):

Acts 11:14 He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.⁷

[2] The same line is taken with Paul and the philosophers in Athens (Acts 17). They were interested in God but needed to learn about Christ in order to be saved.

- c. Those that speak of the narrowness of the path to God and the few who find it:

Matthew 7:13–14 Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and **only a few find it**.

Theological Considerations

Of the **six** following arguments, all restrictivists accept the first four; only some accept the other two. Together, these are their ‘control beliefs’.

1. The Particularity and Finality of the Revelation and Salvific Work of Jesus

Jesus is the only Saviour and there is no way to possess saving faith other than to know him. But *how much* does one need to know to take this step? What are the required propositions of the special revelation in Christ?

Opinions have varied. Melancthon saw the sacraments as vital. Others (like Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge) would not go as far but would say that the basic facts about Christ and his work need to be understood and responded to. Most would argue that OT people like Abraham believed on the Jesus to come:

John 8:56 Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing **my day; he saw it** and was glad.”

John 5:46 If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for **he wrote about me.**

1 Peter 1:10–12 Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. ¹²**It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you,** when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

Dispensationalists say that *faith* was the basic requirement, namely, faith in *God*. But the object of faith changed according to the different dispensations and the revelation God granted them. But that, they say, has no bearing on today's situation. Now, for salvation it is necessary to know about Christ and to actively believe in him.

2. *General Revelation Does Not Provide a Means to Salvation*

Special, not general, revelation is essential if people are to be saved. General revelation (the witness of the created order, conscience etc.) may point people towards God in a broad sense but it has no salvific role at all.

3. *Commitment to Christ Must Occur during One's Lifetime*

Restrictivists say the act of faith must occur before a person dies; there can be no evangelisation after death:

Hebrews 9:27 Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...

They find extra-canonical support for this position in 2 Esdras 9:10 (Apocrypha) and early Christian writings like 2 Clement 8:3. Death ends our period of probation and seals our destinies.

4. *The Unevangelized Deserve Condemnation*

R.C. Sproul: 'If a person in a remote area has never heard of Christ, he will not be punished for that. What he will be punished for is the rejection of the Father of whom he has heard and for the disobedience to the law that is written in his heart'.

As this is a tough stance, some restrictivists (like Loraine Boettner) say the punishment of such people will not be as severe as that of those who have the full light of Christ and reject him:

Luke 10:12–14 I tell you, it will be **more bearable** on that day for Sodom than for that town. ¹³“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. ¹⁴But it will be **more bearable** for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you.

Luke 12:47–48 “The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be **beaten with many blows**. ⁴⁸But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be **beaten with few blows**. From 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.

5. *The Implications of the Restrictivist Position for Missions*

Many say that, if the heathen are not lost, there is no motivation to engage in evangelistic mission. All of them are assuredly destined for hell. This view is shared by the Wheaton Declaration of 1966 and the Frankfurt Declaration of 1970.

6. *The Doctrine of Limited Atonement*

Many evangelicals argue that access to salvation cannot be universal on the basis of the doctrine of limited atonement. If Jesus did not die for every human being but only for those whom God, in his sovereign election, chose to redeem, then we do not have to worry at all about salvation being universally accessible. (p50)

Leading Defenders of Restrictivism

Augustine

He has influenced many. He rejected the 'wider hope' views of several prominent Christian writers before him, like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who believed there would be post-mortem opportunity to trust in Christ. He deals with the subject chiefly in a letter to Deogratius.

Christ, he said, knew that a majority of people would not believe in him, so he delayed the incarnation until there were more people around who would believe in him. But Augustine held that many in the pre-Christian era

believed in the Christ who was to come and so will be saved.

He explained 1 Peter 3:19 (Christ preaching to the spirits in prison) and 1 Peter 4:6 (the gospel preached to them that are dead) in a way that did not allow for post-mortem evangelisation.

Augustine believed that hearing the gospel of Christ was necessary for salvation, and he considered all those dying unevangelized to be damned to hell. Regarding the numbers of those in heaven and hell, he states 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.” (p55)

John Calvin

Calvin followed Augustine’s line and underscored it in his *Institutes*. The heathen reject even general revelation and are thus worthy of hell. People BC were saved only by believing in the mediator to come.

Today, people need to hear the gospel preached in order to be able to be saved, though in rare cases God can cause the spiritual eyes of the elect to be opened by more direct means. Turks and the unevangelised will be damned to hell; God has chosen to make them reprobates.

R. C. Sproul

Sproul’s students often ask about the fate of the innocent person who has never heard of Christ. He tells them that there *are* no innocent people. All choose deliberately to ignore the clear message of general revelation. They will be punished for that, not for failing to believe in Jesus.

Evaluation of Restrictivism

Restrictivism has strength in three areas:

1. It defends the specialness of Christ against all forms of latitudinarianism and relativism.
2. It emphasises the act of faith as necessary for salvation.
3. It provides a strong argument for the importance of missions.

Opponents of restrictivism, however, have put forward six criticisms of it:

1. The Accessibility of Salvation

Restrictivism does not adequately uphold the universal salvific will of God, suggesting that God doesn’t love everybody enough to desire that they be saved. If he in fact does wish all to be saved, we can legitimately look for ways in which he might fulfil his desire.

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? (p61)

2. The Role of Christ in Salvation

We all agree that the work of Christ is necessary for salvation, but is it also necessary for every individual to know about it in order to benefit from it?

Do texts such as Acts 4:12 (“there is no other name given among men”) and John 14:6 (“no man comes to the Father but by me”) actually imply that a person must know about Jesus in order to benefit from his work? Many assume they do, but many others would argue that the texts themselves do not say this. (p62)

Acts 4:12, in context, does not speak to the fate of the unevangelised as such; that topic is beyond its scope. The same is true of John 14:6 and Mark 16:16.

Would Cornelius have been saved if he had died before Peter arrived? Luther and Calvin both said yes, on the grounds that he was a ‘God-fearer’. He was, after all, worshipping the God who saves through Jesus Christ. Acts 10:4, 31 both show that God was pleased with his prayers and alms. If he would have been condemned to hell, what chance would there have been for OT God-fearers like Moses and David?

We also need to look carefully at our use of the term ‘saved’:

In general, the use of the term *saved* in the Evangelical subculture does not reflect its broader usage in the Bible. (p66)

There was nothing categorically wrong with Cornelius's faith; it simply lacked a complete knowledge of the full extent of God's saving love as manifested in Jesus of Nazareth – as was the case with all the Old Testament believers. Cornelius was a "saved" *believer* before Peter arrived, but he became a *Christian* and received the fuller blessings of life in Christ only after Peter came. (p66)

Romans 10:9 If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be **saved**.

Romans 10:9 must not be made to say something it does not:

Paul does not say anything about what will happen to those who do not confess Christ because they have never heard of Christ. The text is logically similar to the conditional statement, "If it rains, then the sidewalk will be wet." If the condition is fulfilled (if it rains), then the consequent will follow (the sidewalk will be wet). But we cannot with certainty say, "If it is not raining, the sidewalk will not be wet?" Someone may turn on a sprinkler, or there may be a pile of melting snow nearby... (p67)

It is sometimes argued that since all those who accept Christ are saved, it must follow that only those who know about and accept Christ are saved. But this is like arguing that since all Collies are dogs, all dogs must be Collies. (p67)

Romans 10:18 But I ask: **Did they not hear? Of course they did:** "Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."

Here, quoting Psalm 19, Paul states that the gospel has gone out into the whole world through the creation revelation. Could it not be, therefore, that all who call out to God on the basis of this revelation, limited though it is, will be saved by Jesus Christ, since to call on God is in fact to call on him?

3. *The Character of General Revelation*

The third major criticism of restrictivism concerns the claim that general revelation is sufficient for condemnation but insufficient for salvation. This sort of assertion prompts many to ask, "What kind of God is he who gives man enough knowledge to damn him but not enough to save him?" (p68)

Some restrictivists go so far as to say that even if the unevangelised did fully accept general revelation it would not be enough to save them! They can't win.

Many restrictivists, however, believe that *infants* will all be saved, so:

If infants can be saved through the work of Christ even though they never hear about Christ, why can unevangelized adults not be saved in the same manner? (p70)

If the fault lies with the church and its failure to evangelise thoroughly, is it fair to condemn the world for the church's failure? Hardly.

Some restrictivists, including Calvin and Hodge, hold that no-one is saved unless they *know* they are saved – assurance is essential for salvation. But this is probably a minority view among restrictivists.

4. *The Boundary of Death*

Is a person's destiny indeed sealed at the moment of death? If people are condemned to hell only for explicit rejection of Jesus as Lord, it follows that everyone must at some stage be presented with his claims. And if this is not before death, it must be after it (this is the line taken by Bloesch).

5. *The Question of Missions*

Many reject the restrictivist view that unless all the unevangelised are damned, missions are meaningless.

6. *Limited Atonement*

Limited atonement, which says that God has no redeeming love for the damned, raises at least two major problems.

[1] If God can show irresistible grace to all without harming his omnipotence and goodness, why doesn't he do it?

[2] Augustine and Calvin speak of the *massa damnata*, arguing that people mean nothing to God in the sense that he doesn't need them. If millions go to hell he suffers no loss. But is this the God portrayed as the father running to

welcome the prodigal son? No. If we hold this view we have God showing less love towards the damned than we are instructed to show towards the world.

Historical Bibliography

A summary of the main positions on the subject through church history.

3. Universalism: All the Unevangelized Are Saved

'Classical' universalism affirms the necessity of salvation in Jesus Christ (in terms of both particularity and finality) but nonetheless maintains that all human beings will ultimately be reconciled to God; none will be eternally damned.

This view was well-known in the early church through the writings of Origen. It fell into disfavour in the Middle Ages but saw something of a revival after the Reformation.

Since 1800 there has been a tremendous reversal in both Protestant and Roman Catholic circles away from expressions of belief in an eternal conscious punishment of sinners towards expressions endorsing universalism. Outside of evangelicalism, universalism is a very popular theological position. (p82)

Some universalists are determinists: God's omnipotent will overrides human freedom to bring people to salvation (Schleiermacher). But the majority believe all will ultimately accept God's offer of their own free will.

Some universalists hold that unbelievers will go to hell but will be given an opportunity to leave - *restorationists*. This is the dominant view today. Others hold that all will be saved without suffering any kind of hell - *ultra-universalists*.

Key Biblical Texts on Universalism

These fall into five categories:

1. Those affirming God's desire to save all people:

1 Timothy 2:3-4 ...God our Savior, ⁴who **wants all people to be saved** and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 4:10 ...the living God, who is the **Savior of all people**, and especially of those who believe.

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is...patient with you, **not wanting anyone to perish**, but **everyone to come to repentance**.

2. Those proclaiming the unlimited atonement of Christ:

1 John 2:2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the **sins of the whole world**.

Hebrews 2:9 But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might **taste death for everyone**.

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared that **offers salvation to all people**.

2 Corinthians 5:19 ...that God was **reconciling the world to himself** in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Both these categories were looked at earlier.

3. Those articulating the implications of the atoning work of Jesus:

John 12:32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will **draw all people to myself**."

Colossians 1:16, 20 For in him **all things** were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; **all things** have been created through him and for him... ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Romans 5:12-19 Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way **death came to all people**, because all sinned— ¹³To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law. ¹⁴Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come. ¹⁵But the gift is not like the trespass. For if **the many died by the trespass of the one man**, how much more did God's **grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!** ¹⁶Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. ¹⁷For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! ¹⁸Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in **condemnation for all people**, so also one righteous act resulted in

justification and life for all. ¹⁹For 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**.

All universalists argue that universalism is the logical implication of unlimited atonement. *Determinists* say that just as we had no choice about being constituted sinners through Adam, we will have no choice about being reconciled through Christ. *Free-will universalists* say all chose to turn away from God (Rom 1-2), and in the same way all will eventually choose to participate in Christ's righteousness that brings life. Either way:

Romans 11:32 For God has bound **everyone** over to disobedience so that he may have **mercy on them all**.

4. Those referring to the consummation in which all are finally redeemed:

Acts 3:19–21 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, ²⁰and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. ²¹Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to **restore everything**, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.

Philippians 2:9–11 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus **every knee** should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and **every tongue** acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Confessing Christ as Lord, universalists maintain, entails salvation.

1 Corinthians 15:22–28 For as in Adam **all die**, so in Christ **all will be made alive**. ²³But in this order: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. ²⁸When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that **God may be all in all**.

Universalists say this may take longer for some than for others, but eventually all will come into Christ's kingdom. Then he will have achieved his goal and God will be 'all in all'.

5. Verses speaking of damnation and separation, which universalists interpret consistently with what they see as the NT's overriding theme of love and salvation, as brought out in the above passages (rather than vice versa):

Matthew 25:46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Mark 3:29 But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

2 Thessalonians 1:9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...

Universalists point out that texts referring to *eternal* damnation are in fact very few, while those referring to post-mortem rewards and punishments are quite general and don't specify eternal damnation. The ones that do, they say, need to be looked at in strict context. The NT writers divided humanity into saved and lost (e.g. 1 Cor 1:18) but, universalists say, this 'two-group' language is not ultimate – the consummation texts speak of one group only in the *eschaton*.

The imagery of God as *Judge* uses two groups (accepted, rejected); that of God as *King* uses one. Ultimately he is King, to whom all (one group) will *gladly* bow the knee – the idea of reluctant compulsion is incompatible with the God of the cross.

Theological Considerations adduced in support of universalism

These focus on the nature of God, notably his love, omnipotence, eternity and justice.

1. Sovereign Love

i.e. love and omnipotence considered together, as is the norm. If God *can't* save all he is not omnipotent, though the NT says he is (Mat 19:26). If he *doesn't want* to save all, the NT is wrong in saying that he does want all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).

But what of free will? The human will is no obstacle when the will of the Omnipotent desires to redeem all humanity. Determinists like Schleiermacher hold to a single predestination by which all will be saved through God's omnipotent grace. Others like Nels Ferré believe there is room for universalism and free-will to co-exist. God will labour patiently with each person until he wins them over. There may be problems in the logic of all this for some, but Ferré insists that God can operate on a different logic since he has no human limitations.

2. God's Eternal Persistence

Because God is eternal his love is eternal, so there will be countless aeons in the future in which he can finalise his plan of universal redemption:

Psalm 139:7–8 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? ⁸If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

Restorationists argue that the notion that human destinies are eternally fixed at death is a medieval accretion and not biblically supported. If it were the case, then God's love would be limited by time. But God is infinite, and so his redemptive love cannot be limited by our temporal rejections. (p94)

3. The Justice of God

Universalists contend that God's justice must be understood as an expression of his love. Love is the central attribute in the nature of God. It must not be subsumed or even placed alongside his justice as it has been in traditional theology. This view of the nature of God radically transforms the understanding of the nature and purposes of hell. (p94)

18th c New England theology, as typified by Jonathan Edwards, saw three main purposes for hell. [1] The idea that sin against an infinite God must be 'infinite sin' and so deserves infinite punishment in hell. [2] The idea that God damns most people to hell for his own glory. [3] Fear of such a hell keeps the masses from immorality.

New England universalists attacked all three. [1] Only an infinite being can sin infinitely, they insisted. [2] And what kind of God would delight to create people just to damn them to hell for his own glory? If he does, he is less loving than we are. [3] Hell is real, but the masses, seeing its limited duration, would also see the sense of partaking of life now rather than suffering for a period after death and partaking of life only then.

Restorationists view hell not just as a place for retribution but 'as a remedial and pedagogical place of transformation' (p96). They see life as a pilgrimage (Irenaeus) rather than as the context for a single decision of eternal consequence (Augustine). Their issue is not with hell but with an *eternal* hell. If it is eternal there would be an ultimate dualism in the universe and God would never be 'all in all'.

If the unevangelized will in fact receive their opportunity for salvation after this life, then why should anyone bother with missions now? Universalists respond that just because we can trust God to work things out in the future life does not mean we should shirk our responsibilities in this life to show others "a more excellent way." (p97)

So the key ideas behind universalism are (1) the unlimited atonement of Christ, (2) God's universal salvific will, and (3) the sovereign love of God.

Leading Defenders of Universalism

Origen (3rd c)

He expressed his universalist ideas cautiously and without dogmatism. They grew out of his view that God is supreme and that dualism is wrong – God and Satan can't reign eternally in their separate realms. God will use instruction and punishment after death to draw people to himself.

Charles Chauncy

An 18th c Boston clergyman who did much to foster universalist ideas in America. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 Jn 3:8). Was he not successful? In the end will it be evident that Adam did more hurt than Christ did good?

John A. T. Robinson

Puts a case for restorationist universalism in his book *In The End God*.

Robinson asserts that the notion that our destinies are sealed at death is a Hellenistic intrusion into theology and has no biblical warrant. (p105)

Evaluation of Universalism

When people are asked to choose between the extremes of the harsh, unloving God of restrictivism and the loving God of universalism, it is not difficult to understand why universalism seems so attractive. But this is a false

dilemma; we are not forced to choose between these extremes. The universalist claim that universalism is the only option that can harmonize God's universal salvific will and the plight of the unevangelized is easily rebutted. All that is required for harmonization is that salvation be universally accessible. (105)

Universalism vs. Universally Accessible Salvation

One problem with the universalist arguments lies in the fact that the passages so often cited in its support provide less evidence for universalism itself than for universally accessible salvation, the complete objective reconciliation of Christ, or the final supremacy of God's kingdom. Universalists typically do not distinguish between objective and subjective reconciliation. (p107)

Some of the texts that universalists quote to support their view do not in fact explicitly support it, but they do support universally accessible salvation.

The Reality of Hell

Though the verses are few, Jesus did speak of 'eternal punishment' (Mat 25:46). And other NT verses we have noted support this (2 Thes 1:8-9). The implication is that some people will fall into this category. [But 'eternal' does not necessarily indicate *duration*; it can equally indicate 'non-temporal', i.e. originating in God and his eternal attributes.]

Also the two-group and one-group language of God as Judge and King is flawed. 2 Thessalonians, for instance, uses two-group language in cosmic and eschatological terms.

Divine Love and Human Freedom

We must question Ferré's claim, in trying to avoid the logical problems of how divine love interacts with human free-will, that God works to a different logic. That breaks the rules of the theological game, which are inescapably human.

The major difficulty with the universalist, Calvinist, and atheist views is their concept of God. It is my contention that all three views build on an idea of God that is foreign to what we find in the Bible. The Bible presents us with a God who makes himself vulnerable by creating creatures who have the freedom to reject him. (p112)

God's will is not always fulfilled (Mat 7:21). He will not cease to be God if his desire to see all saved is not universally fulfilled.

Universalists also fail to reckon with the irrationality of sin. Even God, apparently, doesn't always understand it:

Jeremiah 3:7 I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it.

On this basis, by maintaining human freedom he may not be able to guarantee that everyone will finally accept his love.

The Purpose of Divine Judgment

The Bible seems to support the idea of divine retributive justice. But it is not entirely retributive; it is also redemptive – when God judges he is looking for repentance and reconciliation. A time will come, however, when he gives people the outcome they have insisted upon, and for some that will be alienation from his presence completely.

Some suggest that God may bring about the end of eternal rebellion not through eternal punishment but through an absolute cessation of existence. Proponents of this doctrine of annihilationism contend that it not only obviates the problems associated with the universalist response to the issue of perpetual human rebellion against God but also removes the objection that an eternal hell would imply an ultimate dualism. Evangelicals are increasingly coming out in favour of annihilationism. (p115 fn)

Excursus on Radical Pluralism

Pluralists believe that Christianity is not exclusive and that all religions may lead people to God. Many universalists have moved to this position. They dispute the centrality of *Christ* and argue for a *God*-focused religion. They also reject the authority of the Bible.

The Pitfalls of Radical Reinterpretation

Christianity has, in fact, no real parallels in other religions in respect of essentials like the incarnation. There is no common framework.

Who Is God? What Is Salvation?

It is vital for pluralists to define their terms. When they say that *God* will *save*, do they invest those terms with any vestige of Christian-type meaning? No. Eastern religions, for example, posit a non-personal god who doesn't 'do' anything.

How can one relegate Jesus to the margins and still keep the God he reveals in the center? [Clark Pinnock] (p120)

Some pluralists, realising the problem, have settled for a *soteriocentrism* instead (i.e. *salvation*, rather than Christ or God, at the centre), but this is no more convincing.

The Criteria for Truth

Knitter says our criterion for determining the truth of a proposition should be the degree it helps us to accept and relate to others. Why should we accept this? Because, he says, it helps us accept and relate to others!

Historical Bibliography

A survey of the main supporters of universalism down the centuries of the Christian era.

One group of twentieth-century theologians believes universalism is a genuine possibility that we ought not to deny even though we cannot affirm its truth dogmatically. They hope for the final salvation of all human beings but do not believe there is enough evidence to substantiate it as a theological dogma. (p127)

PART THREE: SALVATION AS UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE

4. The Wider Hope

This is a position between the extremes of restrictivism and universalism.

All of the positions discussed in Part 3 of the book affirm that God, in grace, grants every individual a genuine opportunity to participate in the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus, that no human being is excluded from the possibility of benefiting from salvific grace. (p131)

The Bible certainly encourages us to see God as concerned for all humanity, not just the Israelites. The creation mandate; the promise of the woman's seed (Gen 3:15) has cosmic implications; the promise to Noah is one of universal blessing (Gen 9:8-19; 9:19); the promises to Abraham:

The covenant with Abraham did not abrogate the older covenants; rather, it developed and articulated God's universal redemptive plans more fully. (p133)

Through Abraham God planned to bless '*all* the families of the earth'. The Israelites were there to channel his blessing to the Gentiles. Meanwhile, God showed himself keen to save even those opposed to him, like Pharaoh – the plagues were his way of showing Pharaoh the ineffectiveness of the Egyptian gods so that he might turn to the true God. Similarly, the book of Jonah shows God's desire to reach the cruel Assyrians. The father in the parable of the Prodigal Son shows God as willing to reach out even to those who had treated him abominably. And God consistently shows himself concerned for the weak, the underprivileged and the marginalised. So the major themes of Scripture point to the validity of the wider hope.

Historical Bibliography

Support for the wider hope down the centuries has been considerable. The exclusions in the Athanasian Creed were directed not at the unevangelised but at heretics and schismatics in Christendom. Luther's views, in context, are not as supportive of restrictivism as some have maintained.

The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 states that the normal means of salvation is through the preaching of the Word, but adds, 'We know...that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry.'

The Westminster Confession says: 'Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ, through

the Spirit, who worketh when, where and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.'

John Stott has embraced the wider hope but won't be pressed on how he sees it working out.

Extra ecclesiam nulla salus – no salvation outside the church – was addressed not to the unevangelised but to separatists from the mother church. After Constantine's conversion in 312 AD the unity of the official church was seen as vital for assuring the unity of the Roman Empire.

5. Universal Evangelization — before Death

This is the view that every individual person, *before they die*, gets an opportunity to respond to God. There are three variations on this approach. Their supporters share two control beliefs: [1] People must be evangelised and accept the gospel; [2] A person's destiny is sealed at death.

They also disagree on two points: [1] Some require *human* messengers of the gospel while others allow for the direct intervention of angels or other illumination. [2] Some say every individual is actually evangelised, while others are content with just the possibility of evangelisation.

a. God Will Send the Message

On this view, God sees to it that all unevangelised people who seek him will, some way, be exposed to the gospel so that they can make a decision.

Key Biblical Texts on Universal Evangelization Before Death

Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that **he rewards those who earnestly seek him.**

John 4:23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for **they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.**

- The Ethiopian eunuch was seeking God, so God sent Philip to him (Acts 8).
- Cornelius was seeking God, so God sent Peter to him (Acts 10).

Elsewhere God gave direct revelations to Abimelech (Gen 20), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2) and Ananias (Acts 9:10).

Theological Considerations

Four closely-related ideas support this position: [1] General revelation is not sufficient as a vehicle for salvation. [2] Explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation – normally, but not exclusively, through human messengers. [3] No-one seeks God apart from the influence of grace, and many supporters of this view argue that this grace influences everybody. [4] There is no opportunity for evangelisation after death.

A Leading Defender: Thomas Aquinas

Though he believed (wrongly, as we now know) that there were no more than a handful of unevangelised people in his day, he was clear in expressing his views about them – including his views of people who lived before Christ. He believed salvation was available to them all.

Historical Bibliography

Most theologians from the 12th to 15th c believed in the wider hope. The common view was that if an unevangelised person 'does what is within his power, the Lord will enlighten him with a secret inspiration, by means of an angel or a man' (Alexander of Hales, d.1245). Later, Arminius believed many were saved this way, both BC and AD.

b. Universal Opportunity at Death

Sometimes called the *final-option* theory. It is chiefly RCs who believe that the unevangelised will be given *at the moment of death* an opportunity to be saved. Note that this is *at* the moment of death, not *after* death.

Theological Considerations

Proponents of this view readily admit that it is not found in Scripture. They argue that it is a theological hypothesis that does the best job of accommodating a number of the Roman Catholic Church's traditional doctrines, including the following:

1. A person's destiny is sealed at death (following Tertullian and Cyprian), so there is no opportunity after death for conversion.
2. Jesus Christ is the only Savior, and there is no saving faith apart from knowledge of Jesus' life and work and the Trinity.
3. Salvation is defined as personal fellowship with Jesus Christ.
4. Jesus died for all people, and God desires the salvation of all people.
5. An act of faith is necessary for salvation. (p165)

This view provides for a truly universal evangelisation, and also offers a better answer than limbo for infants and mentally incompetent people who die.

Critics say wouldn't it be better, if this view is right, for people to wait until death to make a decision? Supporters say that attitudes in this life will have some bearing on the decision at death, so one needs to make the right decision now.

c. Middle Knowledge

The traditional view of God's omniscience holds that he knows everything that could happen and everything that will happen. Advocates of middle knowledge argue that God's omniscience also encompasses knowledge of everything that *would* happen if something were changed. (p168)

There are two schools of thought on the application of this to the unevangelised:

[1] God will save the ones who would have accepted Christ had they had the chance of hearing the gospel. [2] 'God will send the message' by a human messenger (see above) to all who are disposed to receive it. He is justified in not sending it to most of humanity because he knows they wouldn't have accepted Christ had they been evangelised.

So some use middle knowledge to allow for the salvation of the unevangelised, others use it to rule that out.

Evaluation

These three views stand between restrictivism and universalism. All affirm God's universal salvific will and the universal accessibility of salvation without asserting that all will be saved.

God Will Send the Message

This seems not to take enough account of the radicality of Christ's love for all and his desire that all should come to know him. Most supporters concede that the miraculous sending of a messenger (as to the Ethiopian eunuch and to Cornelius) rarely happens – there are *no* NT accounts of the gospel being delivered by non-human means – so most people end up being damned.

In practice, then, the results are similar to those envisaged by restrictivism.

Universal Opportunity at Death

This theory puts a lot of weight on what must transpire in a brief moment at death – the most momentous of snap decisions! And it holds that infants and the mentally incompetent become more competent at death than many 'normal' people have been in life.

It also potentially contradicts the RC belief that all baptised infants go to heaven, because some might use their 'at death' opportunity to reject Christ.

Middle Knowledge

People who are saved because God knows they would have believed in Christ had they had the chance to do so do not, in fact, make any personal act of faith at all, so everything is down to God's action. Are these people perhaps evangelised at death, giving them the opportunity to make a step of faith then?

There are philosophical questions as to whether God's omniscience entails middle knowledge at all. Some scriptures suggest it might do:

Matthew 11:21–23 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! **If** the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, **they would have** repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²²But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. ²³And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. **If** the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, **it would have** remained to this day.

But others suggest otherwise:

Jeremiah 3:7 I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it.

6. Eschatological Evangelization

That is, universal evangelisation *after* death, as distinct from *at* death. Also called ‘future probation’, ‘probation after death’ and ‘postmortem evangelism’.

This view was popularised by Clement of Alexandria and Origen. It was revitalised in the 19th c and is now becoming popular, especially among Lutheran theologians.

The key element of this view is well summarized by John Lange: “Jesus, as a spirit, appeared to fallen spirits, to some, as conqueror and judge, to others, who still stretched out to him the hand of faith, as a Savior. . . . The preaching of Christ begun in the realms of departed spirits is continued there . . . so that those who here on earth did not hear at all or not in the right way, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, shall hear it there.” (p177, referring to Lange’s commentary on 1 Peter)

This is primarily a Protestant view, since RCs believe one’s final destiny is sealed at death. It holds that, because God loves everyone, he would not allow any to be condemned to hell without knowing what response they would make to the grace of Jesus Christ.

Key Biblical Texts on Universal Evangelisation After Death

Three categories of texts are adduced in support:

[1] Those supporting the restrictivist view that explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary in order to be saved (see above).

[2] Those indicating that the only reason anyone is condemned to hell is for explicit rejection of that message – people go to hell not because of ignorance about Christ but for rejecting him:

Mark 16:15–16 He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. ¹⁶Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but **whoever does not believe will be condemned**.

Matthew 10:32–33 “Whoever publicly acknowledges me I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³But whoever **publicly disowns me** I will disown before my Father in heaven.

This rejection of Christ, as the Holy Spirit reveals him, is the unforgivable sin:

Matthew 12:31–32 And so I tell you, people will be forgiven every sin and blasphemy. But blasphemy against the Spirit **will not be forgiven**. ³²Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit **will not be forgiven**, either in this age or in the age to come.

Hebrews 6:4–6 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age ⁶and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

2 Thessalonians 1:8 He will punish those who do not know God and **do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus**.

John 3:18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already **because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son**.

John 3:36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever **rejects the Son** will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.

John 16:8–9 When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, **because people do not believe in me**;

John 15:22 If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin.

If one holds (1) that salvation is universally accessible, (2) that explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation, and (3) that the only reason anyone is condemned to hell is for rejection of Jesus Christ, then it is not unreasonable to conclude that the unevangelized must receive some kind of opportunity after death to respond to Christ. (p180)

[3] Those referring to Christ’s descent into hell and his preaching the gospel there.

Matthew 12:40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights **in the heart of the earth.**

John 5:25–29 Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when **the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God** and those who hear will live. ²⁶For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when **all who are in their graves will hear his voice** ²⁹and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.

Many see Hosea 13:14 as prophesying the release of souls from hell by Christ:

Hosea 13:14 “I will deliver them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?”

Acts 2:24, 27, 31 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him... ²⁷because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay.... ³¹Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay.

Romans 10:7 ...“or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

Ephesians 4:8–10 This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.” ⁹(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also **descended to the lower, earthly regions?** ¹⁰He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

Philippians 2:10 ...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and **under the earth**...

Revelation 5:13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and **under the earth** and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

Revelation 1:18 I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the **keys of death and Hades.**

In the NT era belief was common in an intermediate state and the release of souls from hell:

2 Maccabees 12:38–45 Then Judas assembled his army and went to the city of Adullam. As the seventh day was coming on, they purified themselves according to the custom, and kept the sabbath there. ³⁹On the next day, as had now become necessary, Judas and his men went to take up the bodies of the fallen and to bring them back to lie with their kindred in the sepulchres of their ancestors. ⁴⁰Then under the tunic of each one of the dead they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was the reason these men had fallen. ⁴¹So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; ⁴²and they turned to supplication, praying that the sin that had been committed might be wholly blotted out. The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had fallen. ⁴³He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. ⁴⁴For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. ⁴⁵But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he **made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.**

Many scholars believe that Onesiphorus, for whom Paul prayed, was in fact dead:

2 Timothy 1:16–18 ¹⁶May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain; ¹⁷when he arrived in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me ¹⁸—**may the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day!** And you know very well how much service he rendered in Ephesus.

Certainly prayers for the dead entered the Christian community at a very early stage. This practice was taken for granted by AD 150.

The doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell and the release of souls therefrom was well established by the end of the first century. The only question through this time involved *who* was released. (p184)

Some believed it was just the OT patriarchs and prophets. Others held that Christ released any who desired salvation, including Gentiles with no understanding of the Messiah.

By far the most important and controversial texts used in support of post-mortem evangelism are 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6...Commentators have been divided over the interpretation of this difficult text ever since it was written. (p185)

The various views on his are outlined on p185-188 (the texts are included above). Cranfield summarises the situation well:

It is a hint within the Canon of Scripture, puzzling indeed and obscure yet at the same time reassuringly restrained, that the mysterious interval between Good Friday afternoon and Easter morning was not empty of significance, but that in it too Jesus Christ was active as the Savior of the world. . . . It is a hint, too, surely, that those who in subsequent ages have died without ever having had a real chance to believe in Christ are not outside the scope of His mercy and will not perish eternally without being given in some way that is beyond our knowledge an opportunity to hear the gospel and accept Him as their Savior. (p188)

Theological Considerations on Post-mortem Evangelisation

1. *The Insufficiency of General Revelation for Salvation*

Advocates of post-mortem evangelisation agree with restrictivists that general revelation alone is not sufficient for salvation.

2. *Our Destinies Are Not Necessarily Determined at Death*

Proponents of the post-mortem evangelization position argue that our final destinies are not sealed at death but rather at the “day of Christ”... Hebrews 9:27 states that “it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment,” and this has traditionally been understood to indicate that death and judgment are coterminous. “We have neglected the eschatology of Scripture,” says Thomas Field, “and made death the judgment, and death the coming of Christ.” He contends that the judgment being spoken of in this text is not death but the final judgment, which will occur on the day of Christ. (p190)

This is important: our destiny is not sealed until *judgment day at Christ’s return*. Between death and then is for many a very long time – when they may be presented with the claims of Christ.

It is often presented in the NT as ‘the day’ or ‘that day’, which is clearly not our death:

Acts 17:31 ...because he has **fixed a day** on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed...

2 Timothy 1:12 I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard **until that day** what I have entrusted to him.

2 Timothy 4:8 From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me **on that day**, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Many evangelicals cite the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:23ff) as evidence that our destinies are fixed at death. But so literalistic an interpretation is by no means generally accepted in the scholarly community, especially in light of the fact that the point of all three parables in Luke 16 is to instruct us about the use of wealth, not about eschatology. (p191 fn)

3. *Implications of the Belief That Infants Who Die Are Saved*

Egbert Smyth noted in 1886 that the Reformed churches who had previously denied that infants who died were saved, now took the opposite view. He pointed out that since faith in Christ is necessary for salvation, these infants must be evangelised after death. And if this is the case, it makes sense to extend it to unevangelised adults.

4. *The Broad Implications of Universally Accessible Salvation*

Post-mortem evangelisation is not the same thing as a ‘second chance’; it represents the universality of a *first* chance and is not applicable to those who refused the gospel in this life.

But what constitutes a fair and adequate hearing of the gospel in this life? Being handed a tract? Watching a televangelist for a few minutes? We cannot say; only God knows, and will judge accordingly.

Leading Defenders of universally accessible salvation

Joseph Leckie

He believed in an intermediate state (not the same as RC purgatory) in addition to the perdition of the lost and the glory of the saints. It was common in both Judaism and the early church. Infants who die are allowed to mature in this state and are then given an opportunity to accept Christ, just as are unevangelised adults.

He also points to the long pedigree of prayers for the dead and notes that the NT does not rule out such a practice.

Gabriel Fackre

He calls his view 'universal particularity'. He maintains that the NT insists that Christ died for everyone; that special revelation is necessary for salvation; and that redemption means deliverance from all that makes for death and the release of all that makes for life. Where this present life provides no opportunity for a person to experience all three, the post-mortem state will provide it.

He says that his view helps explain some of the NT's enigmatic phrase, like 'other sheep, not of this fold' (Jn 10:16) and 'all Israel will be saved' (Rom 11:26).

George Lindbeck

He points out that the first generation of Christians, while urgent in their evangelism, seem to have expressed no concern about the great numbers around them who never got to hear the message. Perhaps this stemmed from the 'universalistic texts' and/or the passage about Christ preaching to the souls in prison.

Towards those of other religions today, he says, we ought not to boast about our relationship to God; we should remain trustful regarding their salvation; we should seek dialogue with other religions; and we must persevere in preaching the gospel, though always in a respectful way.

Evaluation of eschatological evangelisation

Proponents of this view have a strong case.

The concept of post-mortem evangelism also makes use of a point of faith affirmed by millions of Christians every Sunday: the descent of Christ into hell. Few doctrines are as familiar but as little discussed as this one. Connecting the descent of Christ with evangelization after death gives the position a tremendous foothold in church tradition as well as biblical warrant. (p206)

Restrictivists criticise this view in four ways:

1. They question whether in fact 1 Pet 3:19-4:6 teaches Christ's descent into hell and his preaching to sinners there. And, they ask, why be earnest about evangelism now if there is a chance later for people to secure a place in heaven? But this seriously downplays the *present* benefits of following Christ.
2. They oppose the view that the only reason anyone will be condemned to hell is for explicitly rejecting Jesus, holding that original sin is enough reason in itself for condemnation. But we could answer that, while we are judged for our Adamic nature in this life, the final judgment after death will be on the basis of our response to Christ. Or we could argue that at the cross Jesus dealt with the Adamic nature issue and removed judgment for it, so now our destiny is to do with our relationship to Christ.
3. They resist the idea that death is not the moment when our destiny is sealed. But as we have seen, the biblical evidence for their position is very weak indeed.
4. They claim that post-mortem evangelisation takes the wind out of the sails of mission. But again this betokens an extremely narrow view of salvation, seeing it almost exclusively as heaven, with no significant benefits here.

Historical Bibliography

A listing of supporters of this view throughout the centuries of the Christian era.

7. Inclusivism: Universally Accessible Salvation apart from Evangelization

The view that those who never hear the gospel before they die may nevertheless *attain salvation before they die* if they respond in faith to the revelation they do have. **This is the view espoused by the author of this book.**

Briefly, inclusivists affirm the particularity and finality of salvation only in Christ but deny that knowledge of his work is necessary for salvation. That is to say, they hold that the word of Jesus is ontologically necessary for salvation (no one would be saved without it) but not epistemologically necessary (one need not be aware of the work in order to benefit from it). Or in other words, people can receive the gift of salvation without knowing the giver or the precise nature of the gift. (p215)

They deny that there will be any opportunity to respond to God after death; it is in this life that the crucial faith is expressed. Today it is the dominant view among RC theologians and is growing strongly among evangelicals.

Key Biblical Texts on Universally Accessible Salvation Apart From Evangelisation

Inclusivists make much of the character and will of God and his dealings with Gentiles in supporting their case. He will extend his grace to all who believe in him, and in any case Jesus came to *save* sinners, not to condemn them:

1 Timothy 4:10 We have our hope set on the living God, who is the **Savior of all people**, especially of those who believe.

1 Timothy 1:15 The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world **to save sinners**—of whom I am the foremost.

John 3:16–17 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to **condemn** the world, but in order that the world might be **saved** through him.

John 1:9 The true light, which **enlightens everyone**, was coming into the world.

Jesus is seeking to draw *all people* to himself:

John 12:32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will **draw all people to myself.**”

He particularly reached out during his ministry to ‘sinners’, i.e. Jews who wilfully refused to follow the Mosaic law (e.g. the three parables in Luke 15) and whom the religious leaders considered worse than Gentiles. It is inconceivable that he would reach to those and yet ignore the far vaster numbers of the unevangelised:

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, **not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.**

Luke 23:34 Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

Inclusivists reject as inconceivable the assertion that the Son of God who forgave those who hated him and persecuted him to death would simply condemn with the wave of a hand all the unevangelized. They maintain that when all people stand before Christ in the eschaton, the question will not be “Do you know Jesus?” (as restrictivists believe) but rather “Does Jesus know you?” (Matt. 7:23). (p218)

Matthew 7:23 Then I will declare to them, ‘I never **knew** you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

The OT shows God relating to Gentiles outside the covenant with Israel. Indeed he did for some of them what he did for Israel, giving them land by driving out the existing inhabitants:

Deuteronomy 2:5, 9, 19, 21-22 ...not to engage in battle with them, for I will not give you even so much as a foot’s length of their land, since **I have given** Mount Seir to Esau as a possession... ⁹the Lord said to me: “Do not harass Moab or engage them in battle, for I will not give you any of its land as a possession, since **I have given** Ar as a possession to the descendants of Lot...” ¹⁹When you approach the frontier of the Ammonites, do not harass them or engage them in battle, for I will not give the land of the Ammonites to you as a possession, because **I have given it** to the descendants of Lot...” ²¹a strong and numerous people, as tall as the Anakim. But the Lord destroyed them from before the Ammonites so that they could dispossess them and settle in their place. ²²He did the same for the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir, by destroying the Horim before them so that they could dispossess them and settle in their place even to this day.

Amos said that God had done for other nations things similar to the exodus:

Amos 9:7 Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?

The first covenant mentioned in the Bible was with the *human race*, not with Israel (Gen 1:26-28). Later God promised a ‘seed’ who would deliver from the curse (Gen 3:15). The Noahic covenant, too, was made with all humanity (Gen 9:8-19). Even the covenant with Abraham had the blessing of ‘all the families of the earth’ in mind (Gen 12:3). All later covenants were planned to bring this universal blessing into being.

During the OT era God reached out with favour to pagan Gentiles before the covenant with Abraham: Abel, Enoch, Lot, Job, Balaam, the Queen of Sheba, Ruth, Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab, Naaman. The latter is clear evidence that, in spite of the severe limitations of his understanding and his continued involvement in pagan religion, Naaman found God’s favour and blessing. Will God not do the same for many pagans today?

Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar knew something of God’s favour, as did the pagan sailors in the boat with Jonah. And when God judged nations it was for their moral rather than religious failures, as in Amos 1:1-2:8 and (in their contexts)...

Obadiah 15 For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.

Nahum 1:2 A jealous and avenging God is the Lord, the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies.

Zechariah 9:1 The word of the Lord is against the land of Hadrach and will rest upon Damascus. For to the Lord belongs the capital of Aram, as do all the tribes of Israel;

Inclusivists find similar evidence in the NT, e.g. the magi are key figures. Also:

Romans 3:29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,

Matthew 15:21–28 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 8:10 [Re the Roman centurion] When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.

Cornelius in Acts 10 is also a key figure. Though a Gentile with limited understanding and limited faith he was spoken well of by God himself. God had a tough time convincing Peter of this and breaking through his nationalistic views:

Acts 10:34–35 Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but **in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.**

Acts 10:36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of **all.**

Acts 10:38 ...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing **all** who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

Acts 10:43 All the prophets testify about him that **everyone** who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Inclusivists do not claim that people are saved by their righteousness; they contend that people like Cornelius are saved because they have the “habit of faith” which involves penitence. But inclusivists do claim that it is not necessary to understand the work of Christ in order to be saved. (p223)

[Quoting E.H. Plumptre on Acts 10] “The truth which St. Peter thus set forth proclaims at once the equity and the love of the Father, and sweeps away the narrowing dreams which confine the hope of salvation to the circumcised, as did the theology of the Rabbis; or to those who have received the outward ordinance of baptism, as did the theology of Augustine and the medieval church; or, as do some forms of Protestant dogmatism, to those who have heard and believed the story of the Cross of Christ.” (p224)

Theological Considerations

Believers vs. Christians

Inclusivists hold that, while all Christians are believers, not all believers are Christians. The OT believers did not have the knowledge of Christ and his work that we now have, but were ‘saved’ believers nonetheless – on the grounds of Christ’s work, yes, though ignorant of it at the time:

Genesis 4:26 At that time people began to **call on the name of the Lord.**

1 Corinthians 10:4 ...they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

Romans 4 shows how this worked with Abraham.

Many commentators interpret Romans 4:24 as specifying that we must believe in the resurrection of Jesus in order to be saved, but, as Godet correctly pointed out, Paul did not say “When we believe in the resurrection of Jesus” but “when we believe in *God who raised Jesus.*” Paul definitely says we must believe in the same God as Abraham for salvation, but he does not say we must know about the resurrection in order to be saved. (p227)

Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Such people may be limited in their knowledge, but what counts is their response to what they do know; in the

end they are responding to God positively. Some knowledge is necessary, but Scripture nowhere specifies what the extent of it is that a person requires for salvation. The important thing is that a person be moving in the right direction: towards God insofar as he knows him. They may be saved without explicit knowledge of Christ, just as dying infants are.

By arguing that believers are saved without knowledge of Christ, inclusivists imply that the unevangelized “may receive a gift without knowing from whom it comes or how much it has cost.” [Strong: *Systematic Theology*] Children who believe they are receiving gifts from Santa Claus can enjoy them even though ignorant of the true giver. And, just as we hope they grow up to know the real giver, inclusivists express the hope that believers will come to know the source of their salvation – Jesus Christ. (p232)

The Role of General Revelation

Inclusivists say that *all* revelation, because it comes from God, is potentially saving knowledge:

Neither special nor general revelation save or condemn: it is *God* who saves or condemns. But can God save through general revelation? According to Dale Moody, “it is possible to say that this general revelation of God has only a negative function that leaves man without excuse. . . . But what kind of God is he who gives man enough knowledge to damn him but not enough to save him? The perception of God in creation has both negative and positive possibilities.” People can be saved or lost depending on their response to the general revelation. (p233)

Acts 14:17 Yet he has **not left himself without testimony**: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”

Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world **God’s invisible qualities**—his eternal power and divine nature—**have been clearly seen**, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

Psalm 19:1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Romans 10:18 But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: “Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

- Inclusivists are not seeking to demean the value of the biblical revelation.
- They point out that knowledge of God through general revelation is not attained just by human reasoning but by God’s instruction (Romans 19:1).
- They say none are saved through their own moral efforts but through responding to God (Romans 2:14-16).
- They are not denying the universal sinfulness of humanity, but hold that judgment is not God’s last word.

In Romans 5 Paul says Jesus died for all the sinners who are under the judgment spoken of in chapter 3. God wishes to ‘show mercy to *all*’ (Rom 11:32).

The Work of God in Effecting Salvation

The triune God works for our salvation: the Father loves all and desires their salvation; the Son makes it possible through his redemptive work; the Holy Spirit reaches out to all lost and sinful humanity.

The work of the Spirit is not limited in any way. The church certainly cannot contain that work. People unreached by human messengers of the gospel may be reached directly by the Holy Spirit.

The Cosmic Work of Jesus Christ

Inclusivists believe Jesus was actively enlightening people prior to his incarnation (John 1:9).

Historically this idea finds its root in the “logos christology” of several early Church Fathers. Logos christology is, in many way, the forerunner of inclusivism. The attitude of the early church toward pagan learning and belief was mixed. While some rejected all of paganism, most Christians viewed what was “best” and “true” in paganism as having been revealed by God. Many early Christians thought that the Son of God was actively involved in revealing truth and goodness outside the covenant with Israel and that any could be saved if they availed themselves of that revelation. (p239)

Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus held this view very firmly. Christ, the eternal Logos, they held, is inherent in the minds of all. The god the pagans worship is the one true God, though the early Fathers were rightly quick to criticise their worship practices.

The Implications of the Presence of Other Religions

All people are basically religious, and God is at work redemptively in the lives of them all.

- Although God is best defined by the historical revelation in Jesus Christ, he is not confined to it. The Hebrews even took the name of God, *EI*, from other religions, while the NT made use of the Greek term *theos*. Bible translators today use for 'god' whatever is the usual word used by the people for whom they are translating.

The Old Testament writers learned certain things about the true God from other religions without falling prey to syncretism. Many biblical writers were able to appreciate the revelation of God outside Israel.

In the great Hymn to God the Creator in Psalm 104 there are many parallels to the Egyptian "Hymn to Aton" which dates from the time of Akhenaton (1380-1362 B.C.). The Psalmist seems to accept this monotheism as revelation of *Yahweh* under the name of *Aton*, just as *Yahweh* was identified with *EI Elyon*, a Canaanite concept, in the story of Melchizedek... The most obvious conclusion is that the true God revealed himself indirectly in the monotheism of Akhenaton. Why not, if his mighty deeds were done outside Israel in Cyrus the Great? (Isa. 44:28; 45:1-25). [quoting Dale Moody] (p242)

- The biblical writers used indigenous names for God and made use of ideas, values and practices compatible with the worship of the true God.

In his speech to the Athenians, Paul brings out the fact that his audience has experienced to some degree God's revelation and grace. Most of those listening to him were interested in the religious philosophies of Stoicism and Epicureanism (Acts 17:18). It is customary for commentators to observe that Paul quotes a Greek poet in verse 28. It is less frequently noted that the whole body of his message reflects the teaching of the Stoics. (p245)

In calling the Athenians 'religious' Paul is not using a derogatory term. The word *daimon* has in this context no relation to the spirits cast out in the Gospels; in fact the Athenians said that Paul himself was proclaiming strange 'demons', i.e. gods.

- In some clearly imperfect but nonetheless genuine sense, the Athenians did worship the true God. Paul said, 'What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you' (Acts 17:23).

Inclusivists also adduce anthropological arguments. Many religions contain beliefs with amazing parallels to biblical truth, e.g. the traditional religion of the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Don Richardson's book *Eternity In Their Hearts* develops the idea of 'redemptive analogies' in other religions, seeing them as evidences of God's gracious activity among the unevangelised.

Leading Defenders of Inclusivism

John Wesley

He maintained that no-one has any right 'to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation'. These were not to be blamed for not accepting Christ, since they had never heard of him. In a sermon on 'Faith' he said:

"Inasmuch as to them little is given, of them little will be required. . . . No more therefore will be expected of them, than the living up to the light they had. But many of them . . . we have great 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." (p250)

Those saved thus outside the Christian community were, he held, *servants* of God but not yet *sons*.

C. S. Lewis

Lewis affirms both the finality of salvation only in Jesus Christ and the universality of salvation wrought by Christ. Many will be saved through him who have not had the chance to hear of him.

He affirms that people everywhere are saved by faith in God because God is seeking all who worship him in spirit and truth, even though many of these are ignorant of the Saviour. His inclusivist convictions are expressed widely throughout his many writings.

He holds that there is a universal revelation that all great religions have in common, with three elements. [1] The experience of the numinous – awe and dread of something beyond the natural world; [2] A consequent awareness of 'oughtness' or moral law; [3] The existence of a supernatural authority that holds all human beings accountable. He is

critical of other religions but, at the same time, believes that 'honest rejection of Christ, however mistaken, will be forgiven and healed' on the basis of Matt 12:32a.

Those who sought God in this life will, after death, have an encounter with Christ in order to meet the one who saved them. There will be a post-mortem opportunity for the unevangelised, but this will be offered only to those who in this life responded positively to God's universal revelation.

Lewis's ideas are graphically summed up in the salvation of the pagan Emeth in *The Last Battle*.

Clark Pinnock

He is a 20th c. evangelical proponent of inclusivism, on the basis of two axioms, which must be held in tension: [1] Salvation only in Christ; [2] God's universal will to save. He leans on texts like:

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to **all people**.

1 Timothy 2:3-4 ...God our Savior, ⁴who wants **all people** to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

People are saved on the basis of 'the faith principle' when they fulfil the conditions of Heb 11:6...

Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Biblically Pinnock draws upon four types of texts. The first category includes verses such as Hebrews 11:6 and related examples from the Old Testament: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Job, Melchizedek, Jethro, Abimelech, and Naaman. Such "holy pagans" are cited by the author of Hebrews as examples of faith we should emulate. These people sought after God, and Paul declares that all who do likewise will receive eternal life, because God shows no partiality (Rom. 2:6-8). These God-seekers were saved as part of God's universal covenant with humanity. Just as they were saved by faith without any knowledge of Christ, says Pinnock, so "in the same way today, people who are spiritually 'Before Christ' even though they are chronologically 'Anno Domini' can trust in God on the basis of the light they have." (p259)

Second, he points to the salvation of pre-messianic Jews like Abraham. Third, he uses Jesus' teaching about the separation of sheep and goats (Matt 25:31-40). The believing unevangelised will be saved by Christ even though they are *unaware of having served him*. Fourth, he points to Luke's remarkable openness to people of other faiths in Acts, like Cornelius:

Acts 10:35 ...but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

Acts 14:17 Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."

Acts 17:27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

Theologically, he holds that God uses general revelation to reach the unevangelised. He also develops the idea of the salvation of those dying in infancy and the mentally incompetent, then extends this to the unevangelised. He believes firmly in post-mortem evangelism, but only for those who never heard the gospel during their lives, or who have heard it inadequately, or who have had difficulty separating the name of Jesus from Zionism (e.g. Muslims) or Auschwitz (i.e. Jews).

He rejects the idea that inclusivism puts a damper on missions: 'Neither the Reformers nor the post-Reformation orthodox people are known for their missionary zeal. Apparently they believe the heathen are perishing and still do not lift a finger to help them.' The real motivation for missions is to announce the *gospel of the kingdom of God*, with all that this biblically entails. Consequently...

"We do not need to think of the church as the ark of salvation, leaving everyone else in hell; we can rather think of it as the chosen witness to fullness of salvation which has come into the world through Jesus" (p263)

Evaluation of Inclusivism

This approach does the best job of balancing the two theological axioms of salvation only through Christ and God's universal salvific will.

- Inclusivists distinguish between 'believers' and Christians.
- They emphasise the universal outreach of all three persons of the Trinity.

- They point to the broad historical-social settings in which God works redemptively.
- They offer a framework for understanding the continuity of salvation between OT and NT and thus between believers and Christians.
- To use medieval theological terminology, they see Jesus as the ‘final cause’ of salvation whereas restrictivists see him as the ‘efficient cause’.

Historical Bibliography

An outline of support or otherwise for inclusivism down the centuries. Supporters include several church fathers, Abelard (12th c), Zwingli, Erasmus, John Milton, Matthew Henry, William Cowper, John Wesley – with a huge burgeoning of support among 20th c. mainstream protestants, including many evangelicals. RCs and Orthodox in general also embrace it.

Conclusion

The author states:

I have given reasons why I prefer the wider-hope views to either restrictivism or universalism – chiefly because they do a better job of upholding my two preeminent theological axioms of salvation only in Christ and God’s universal salvific will. I consider the wider-hope views superior to restrictivism especially because they better represent the loving, saving God we find in Scripture – the God who was crucified for all sinners. (p281)

He summarises the whole ‘wider-hope’ range of views as follows:

Although the wider-hope theories all affirm that God makes salvation universally accessible, they differ regarding three crucial claims: (1) that a person must have explicit knowledge of Christ in order to be saved, (2) that it is necessary to learn about the work of Christ from human agents, and (3) that our final destiny is sealed at death. One group affirms all three claims, asserting that God will send the message to any person who seeks him out. They maintain that only those who hear about and accept Christ from a human agent before death will be saved. Of all the wider-hope positions, this one is closest to restrictivism. A second group affirms the first and third claims but rejects the second; they maintain that all people have an encounter with Jesus at the moment of death. Others believe that God knows who would have followed Christ had they been evangelized and that he will save such people on the basis of his “middle knowledge”; they say that our destiny is decided at death but that evangelism is not necessary for salvation. Proponents of eschatological evangelism maintain that death is not final and that the unevangelized encounter Christ after death. This group also denies the necessity of the involvement of human agents for salvation but does maintain that no one can be saved apart from knowledge of Jesus Christ. Inclusivists take just the opposite route, affirming the finality of death but denying that explicit knowledge of Jesus is necessary for salvation. Inclusivists contend that a person can be ignorant of the work of Christ and still benefit from the redemption he provides. (p282)

The proper response to those who claim that these approaches make missions weak or unnecessary is:

- We evangelise because Jesus commanded us to do so.
- We evangelise because we want to share what has become so precious to us.
- We evangelise because we believe God wants people to know the fulness of salvation *now*:

All peoples *deserve* to have the good news preached to them because it is good news, not only for the life beyond this one, but for the life we live now. Just as Lydia, who was already worshiping God, came to a fuller experience of divine grace through Jesus Christ (Acts 16:14), the unevangelized whom God has already accepted will enjoy a richer spiritual life if they receive the gospel. By bringing the gospel to them, we will stimulate them in their walk with God and strengthen them in their spiritual commitment. (p285)

- We evangelise because the spiritual warfare that the prophets, apostles and our Lord engaged in is not finished. We owe it to the unevangelised to give them the gospel that will deliver them from a life of rebellion against God.

God is actively searching for those who will worship him in spirit and in truth. All such people will be invited to the marriage of the Lamb. It is God who makes the guest list for this event, and he is inviting people from every tongue and nation. Proponents of universally accessible salvation rejoice at the thought that God will save many. We have no right to consign anyone to hell. The church rightfully has a long list of saints, but it has

no right to publish a list of the damned. God may save whom he will, and I believe that he has made acceptance into the eternal city available to every person who has ever lived. With the apostle John, I look forward to seeing in that city a multitude that no human can number. (p285)

Appendix: Infant Salvation and Damnation

It is estimated that half of the human race has died in infancy, so this is a huge issue. Can they be saved? Four broad answers have been offered:

1. Only some are saved – the *baptised* (some RCs, some Lutherans, Anglicans) or the *elect* (some Calvinists).
2. No answer can be given to this question (a traditional Lutheran position).
3. Infants mature after death and, when mature, are evangelised; but they will not all necessarily accept Christ.
4. All are saved – as are the mentally incompetent (the most widely held view today).

Arguments in favour of the latter view are theological rather than biblical, though some quote:

2 Samuel 12:23 [Re David's son by Bathsheba] But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

Mark 10:14–15 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

The relevance of both passages to this issue, however, is open to question on exegetical and contextual grounds.

1. Only Baptized or Elect Children Are Saved

Through Baptism

The early fathers of the church believed in baptismal regeneration, so the unbaptised, including infants, were damned. Later, this view was modified to that of limbo. Augustine, however, taught that grace comes only through the sacraments, and every unbaptised person is automatically damned, though he held that their sufferings would not be as severe as those of a mature person. Others developed this approach. Limbo never became an official teaching of the RC Church but it is nevertheless widely held among Catholics.

Others held to a 'baptism of desire', which in the case of infants would be that of the child's parents for it to be baptised. If, circumstantially, baptism could not be administered before death, the child would still be saved.

Through Election

Calvin made election, not baptism, the criterion, so infants can be saved whether baptised or not. Election is known only to God in the case of infants, though the infants of godly parents were the more likely to be elect. By the 19th c a consensus had emerged among Reformed theologians that all infants who die are in fact elect.

2. The Destiny of Infants Who Die Is a Mystery

Some say we must leave this whole matter in God's hands; we just can't know. Most Lutherans take this view. They would generally hold to the 'baptism of desire' idea.

3. Evangelization in or after Death

It has been a minority view that infants are allowed to mature after death before being evangelised. It seems to date back to Gregory of Nyssa (4th c.). Some RCs and a few protestants have held that this maturation is instant after death.

These positions affirm God's desire for all to be saved by making salvation universally accessible, and do so without going all the way to universalism.

4. All Young Children Who Die Are Saved

Since the 17th c this view has come to be embraced by the majority of Christians of all persuasions.

The Arminian Argument

Arminius distinguished between *original* sin and *actual* sin. Infants are guilty by the first criterion but not by the second, and the atonement of Christ overcomes original sin. Thus all infants who die are saved.

This tends to conflict, however, with Arminian control beliefs (1) that an act of faith is necessary for salvation, and (2) that humans have free will, including in the choice of salvation.

The Reformed Argument

Zwingli went further than Calvin by arguing that all children of Christian parents who die are elect, and that probably God's election extends to *all* infants who die. One could even say, he suggested, that death in infancy may be a sign of election. Most Reformed confessions favour Zwingli's position.

But if God elects *all* infants who die, why does he not do the same with all adults instead of just with some? Calvinists say it is because adults have committed *actual* sins as well as being guilty of original sin. But this is irrelevant because Reformed people believe salvation is by divine election *alone*, and not on the basis of any human behaviour.

Conclusion

All the positions on death in infancy have problems to contend with, and the biblical material is sparse. The view we take will be determined largely by our theological control beliefs.

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Summary by David Matthew 2010