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**IS BELIEF IN JESUS NECESSARY?
THE ANSWER TO RELIGIOUS INCLUSIVISM
Part Two in a Three-Part Series
on the Place of Jesus in Salvation**

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SYNOPSIS

Proponents of a view known as *inclusivism* argue that while no one is saved apart from the redemptive work of Jesus, it is not necessary either to know about the gospel or to believe in Jesus for salvation. Inclusivism eliminates the problem that those who haven't heard the gospel will not be saved, but this feature does not mean that inclusivism is true or biblical. Paul, in fact, taught in Romans 1–3 that while general knowledge about a Creator is available to all through the light of creation, this knowledge does not bring about salvation. Only special revelation about God, sin, Jesus, and salvation that was given to the prophets and apostles and recorded in the Bible provides the information necessary for salvation. Inclusivists argue that the content of faith is not crucial and that the unevangelized may even be saved while practicing their non-Christian religions. Paul said in Romans 10:9–10, however, that knowledge of true information is part of saving faith. Paul also clearly said that neither he nor the unbelieving people to whom he preached were saved before believing in Jesus Christ.

Inclusivists argue that if God saves infants and the mentally incompetent, who die never having come to faith in Jesus, then He can save the unevangelized. This view, however, ignores the fact that the unevangelized are accountable for their sin while infants and the mentally incompetent are not. Inclusivists also point to Old Testament believers as an example of saved people who did not know about Jesus, but just because they did not have explicit knowledge of Jesus does not mean they had no special revelation at all such as the unevangelized.

The inclusivist view that those who have never heard the gospel will be saved has a serious, negative effect on Christian missions. In light of these and other problems, inclusivism should not be considered an acceptable option for Christians.

The vast majority of evangelical Christians hold the view that belief in Jesus is necessary for salvation. This view, known as *exclusivism*, can be summarized in four propositions: (1) Jesus is the only Savior; (2) in order to be saved, humans must know that they are sinners who need salvation and forgiveness; (3) in order to be saved, humans also need to know who Jesus is and that His death and resurrection provide the basis for that salvation; and (4) humans must place their faith and trust in Jesus as the one and only Savior. The following two texts typify the many passages in Scripture that indicate that knowledge of,

and faith in, Jesus are essential to salvation: (1) “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Rom. 10:9–10);¹ (2) “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:17–18). There is no other Savior than Jesus, and no other religion than biblical Christianity can bring human beings to the saving grace of God.

In part one of this series I noted that many people reject exclusivism in favor of a position called *pluralism*.² According to pluralism, Jesus is at best only one of many saviors; in other words, there are many paths to God and salvation. My task in part two is to explain and evaluate a position called *inclusivism*, which is somewhere between exclusivism and pluralism. Inclusivists do not like the exclusivist implication that millions of people who have never heard the gospel are lost. On the one hand, they agree with exclusivists that no one is saved apart from the redemptive work of Jesus. On the other hand, they agree with pluralists that it is not necessary for human beings either to know about Jesus or to believe in Him in order to be saved. In this article I will focus on the writings of two well-known inclusivists, namely, John Sanders, a professor at Huntington College in Huntington, Indiana, and Clark Pinnock, professor emeritus of McMaster Divinity School in Canada. Their writings have been major sources in the rise of inclusivism among American evangelicals.

If inclusivism is true, it eliminates a problem that troubles many Christians: What about those people who die without ever hearing the gospel? Think how many cares the adoption of inclusivism might eliminate from our lives. Think how many burdens about possibly unsaved loved ones we would be delivered from — how much easier we might sleep at night. As thinking Christians, however, we recognize that just because inclusivism makes life easier or eliminates a puzzling problem, that doesn’t make it true. We know, rather, that (1) a true belief system must agree with Scripture and (2) it must be coherent and logically consistent. Does inclusivism pass these two tests? Let’s begin our investigation by looking at what inclusivism has to say about knowledge.

IS KNOWLEDGE NECESSARY FOR SAVING FAITH?

Inclusivists tell us that millions of people will be saved without knowing anything about the Bible or Jesus. We might ask, then, do unevangelized people have to know *anything* in order to be saved? It would seem odd if inclusivists were to argue that the alternative to entering heaven by way of knowledge about Jesus is by way of knowledge about nothing in particular. Even John Sanders seems to recognize a role for knowledge when he affirms that “some degree of cognitive information is essential for saving faith.”³

When reading inclusivist authors, however, one must never accept their first word on a subject. They often give something with the right hand while taking it back with the left. In this instance Sanders mentions the importance of knowledge with respect to salvation, but elsewhere he denigrates the place of knowledge in religion. He opposes the belief that humans must possess certain kinds of objective knowledge as a necessary condition to entering into a trust relationship with God.⁴ He equates this belief with *Gnosticism*, an ancient enemy of Christianity that regarded possession of “secret knowledge” to be the key to salvation.⁵ Under Sanders’s unhistorical sense of the word “Gnosticism,” however, Paul (Rom. 10:9–10), John (John 20:30–31), and even Jesus (Matt. 16:13–17) would be guilty of teaching Gnosticism since all three regarded knowledge about Jesus as essential to salvation.

TWO SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

Let’s assume, as Sanders argued, that saving faith requires some measure of knowledge, even if inclusivists have no clue what the minimal content of that knowledge might be. This leads us to ask the question, What is the source of this knowledge?

Christian thinkers distinguish between two sources of knowledge called special and general revelation, each of which provides a particular kind of knowledge. The unique disclosures God made to such people

as Abraham, Moses, and Paul illustrates *special revelation*. This kind of revelation is “special” because God gave it to particular people at particular times and places. This revelation also has a special function, namely, to provide human beings with special knowledge — knowledge that is unobtainable by human reason alone — about the triune God that makes possible a saving relationship with Him. Special revelation has been recorded, preserved, and inscripturated in the Bible. *General revelation*, as its name implies, is revelation that God makes available to all human beings apart from special revelation. The last half of Romans 1 states that humans can come to know certain things about the Creator (God) based on knowledge of His creation. General revelation also gives humans general moral understanding so that even without the Bible certain kinds of conduct are understood to be wrong.

Inclusivists believe that general revelation is sufficient to bring people to salvation. They insist that salvation is accessible to all humans, including the millions who lack any contact with special revelation; therefore, the knowledge that mediates salvation to the unevangelized does not have to come from the Bible. Because the unevangelized by definition do not have special revelation, inclusivists are forced to find a role in salvation for a general revelation that is available to all humans and that all humans can understand.⁶ Sanders, for example, insists that the word *gospel* has a wider meaning than simply the good news about Jesus. The inclusivists’ gospel may also include light that is available to the unevangelized through general revelation. Obviously, this “light” contains no information about Jesus. In fact, it’s hard to discern what informational content might be contained in this light.

Here is the problem inclusivists have created for themselves: they need a source of knowledge unrelated to any information in Scripture, and the only source for that knowledge is general revelation; *however*, the most important passage in Scripture that is relevant to general revelation tells us clearly that general revelation cannot save! Paul began his letter to the Romans by explaining that one reason all humans are condemned is because they have resisted the message of general revelation (Rom. 1:18–19). He taught that even though God has made important information available to all humans through general revelation, that revelation has not brought about salvation. Paul wrote, “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10); “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Paul’s reasoning in Romans 1–3 clearly contradicts the inclusivist belief that people in non-Christian religions may be saved by responding to the content of general revelation. He made it plain that general revelation does not and cannot save.⁷ Paul’s teaching that no human being successfully lives up to the light of general revelation implies that special revelation is required for that result.⁸

Inclusivists have no clear, unambiguous biblical support for their view that general revelation is sufficient for salvation. They merely assume this view and then use it to compromise other important biblical teachings such as Paul’s identification of Christ’s death and resurrection as an essential component of the gospel (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:1–4).

THE OBJECT OF SAVING FAITH

Inclusivists believe an act of faith is necessary for salvation, but, as Sanders puts it, “Inclusivism denies that Jesus must be the object of saving faith.”⁹ Inclusivists believe the salvation of unevangelized people depends on how they respond to the light they have been given. In ways that inclusivists find difficult to explain, the light of general revelation brings many of the unevangelized to a trust in the true God¹⁰ — a trust that has nothing to do with Jesus Christ, of whom they know nothing. It is faith (trust) that saves, not knowledge. In order to be logically consistent inclusivists must teach that people are saved by their faith and not the content of their theology.¹¹ They must argue that the content or object of saving faith is irrelevant; and, since having the one and only true God as the object of saving faith is irrelevant and in many cases impossible, the key factor about saving faith must be its subjective aspect. What counts is feeling, not knowledge or objective truth. Consider these claims made by Pinnock: “Faith in God is what saves, not possessing certain minimum information”¹²; “A person is saved by faith, even if the content of faith is deficient....The Bible does not teach that one must confess the name of Jesus to be saved”¹³ (this claim clearly contradicts Rom. 10:9–10). It appears that Pinnock borrowed this strand of his theology from modern Protestant liberalism: “What you believe doesn’t matter, it’s your sincerity that counts.”¹⁴

Inclusivists, therefore, hold that faith can save people even though its theological content is deficient or even false. There is no place in Scripture, however, that asserts this; indeed, Scripture teaches the precise opposite. It is true that people are not saved simply by mentally agreeing with certain theological information; nevertheless, Scripture clearly says that saving faith has an awareness of true information as one of its necessary conditions (e.g., Rom. 10:9–10). It is reckless, dangerous, and unbiblical to lead people to think that the preaching of the gospel (which must contain specifics about the person and work of Christ) and personal faith in Jesus are not necessary for salvation.

If we cannot accept the view of contentless faith advanced by inclusivists, we cannot very well accept other points of the inclusivist system that stem from this view. Let's examine a few of these.

FAITH AND NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

In a variety of ways, inclusivists suggest that the unevangelized are saved through their own non-Christian religions. In comments about Acts 14:16–17, Pinnock claims that this verse indicates that God had a witness or testimony among people who had not heard the gospel. Apparently, Pinnock declares, “these people possessed truth from God in the context of their [pagan] religion and culture.”¹⁵

Pinnock's use of “religion” and “culture” is quite puzzling. Religion plays a central role in every human culture, and those cultures' religions are frequently non-Christian; therefore, it certainly looks as though Pinnock thinks God reaches out to the unevangelized through the medium of their non-Christian religions. This presents us then with a picture of the personal, sovereign, triune God of the Bible seeking to save the unevangelized through worldviews that are pantheistic, polytheistic, animistic, and even atheistic and that sometimes include idolatry and human sacrifice. Inclusivists such as Pinnock fail to see a problem with this unbiblical idea. It is difficult to know why inclusivists are often drawn to such dramatic departures from historic Christian teaching.

FAITH AND GOOD WORKS

Many observers of inclusivism are concerned that inclusivists teach a doctrine of salvation by good works. This is one of several issues where inclusivists appear to walk down both sides of the street at the same time. On the one hand, Sanders claims that no humans “are saved by their own moral efforts.”¹⁶ On the other hand, Sanders shares Pinnock's understanding of the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31–46. In this parable the sheep inherit the kingdom because they fed and clothed Christ's brothers and sisters. Sanders and Pinnock see this as an indication that serving the poor is an adequate substitute for faith and may count as one ground on which God saves the unevangelized.¹⁷ In *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, Pinnock talks about God's ethical criterion for salvation and then asks, “What if the person seems genuine according to the ethical criterion, but not a believer according to the cognitive one?”¹⁸

In other words, Pinnock suggests that a person who lacks New Testament faith but produces good works of a certain kind may still be saved on that basis. Pinnock goes so far as to speculate about God's saving “even the atheist who, though rejecting God (as he understands God), responds positively to him implicitly by acts of love shown to the neighbor.”¹⁹ What in the world is Pinnock thinking? What possible justification is there in Scripture for such claims? How did his theoretical thinking get so far off track?

Pelagianism, a serious heresy that invaded Christian thought in the early fifth-century AD, taught that humans could save themselves by their own good works. Pinnock suggests that not even faith is necessary for salvation and that perhaps certain kinds of decent human conduct will serve just as well. It would be good if Pinnock would explain why Pelagianism should be rejected but inclusivism should be accepted when they are clearly similar.

WHY BE A MISSIONARY?

Pluralist John Hick acknowledges that the major attraction to inclusivism “is that it negates the old missionary compulsion.”²⁰ Does inclusivism weaken missionary and evangelistic resolve? Does it not

appear incompatible with the Great Commission? After all, inclusivism explicitly declares that millions of people are already in heaven without knowing about or believing in Jesus. Why then should anyone give up home and kindred and even his or her life to carry God's special revelation to the unevangelized?

WAS PAUL AN INCLUSIVIST?

Numerous passages in the New Testament demonstrate that Paul was not an inclusivist. For example, when the Philippian jailer asked Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30), Paul replied with an exclusivist answer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). If Paul had been an inclusivist, he could have advised the jailer to calm down and realize that he might already be saved. Perhaps they could have examined the jailer's relationship to the saving content of general revelation and discovered that he was already one of several million non-Christian believers in the world.

If Paul had been an inclusivist, he never would have uttered the following words to an audience of Jews who had just rejected the gospel: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it *and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life*, we now turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46, emphasis added). In these words, Paul did not indicate that his audience's loss of eternal life had become effective at that moment, but that they were devoid of eternal life prior to hearing the gospel. Their names, as far as Paul could tell, were not written in the Book of Life (see Rev. 17:8).

Nor would an inclusivist have said, "Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:26–27). If Paul had not been faithful in proclaiming the gospel, he would have had blood on his hands. This is no way for an inclusivist to think. From an inclusivist perspective, even if Christians fail to carry the gospel to the unevangelized, there is little or no culpability regarding "the blood of men" because God saves unevangelized people all the time.

Consider what Jesus said to Paul when He called him into His service: "I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:17–18). In the Book of Acts, neither Paul nor Peter spoke or acted like an inclusivist, and, according to the passage above, neither does God.

Could Paul have been saved in the way taught by inclusivists before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus? After all, Saul of Tarsus (Paul's name before his conversion) met every test of inclusivist salvation. He not only believed that God exists but was also diligently seeking Him. Saul's religious zeal prior to his conversion is well attested: he was a Jew who sought Yahweh (God) with such diligence that he participated in the persecution and murder of Yahweh's supposed enemies — Christians who proclaimed that salvation depended on knowing about and believing in Jesus (Acts 22:20). Paul described his preconversion zeal for God and his religious good works in Acts 26:4–11 and Philippians 3:4–6. If inclusivism is true, then Saul the Pharisee was saved before he met Jesus. Paul the apostle, however, wrote that before his conversion, he had only a purely human righteousness that comes from the law (Phil. 3:9) — a false righteousness that does not save — instead of the true righteousness that comes from God through saving faith in Christ. Saul satisfied the inclusivist tests of salvation, but he was still a lost sinner (1 Tim. 1:15). Inclusivism contradicts the inspired testimony of Paul and is thus false.

INCLUSIVISM AND OLD TESTAMENT BELIEVERS

Inclusivists frequently argue that saved believers in the Old Testament did not have knowledge about Jesus as a necessary condition for their salvation; therefore, it is not necessary for the unevangelized today to know about Jesus in order for them to be saved. The assumption here is that Old Testament believers are in precisely the same spiritual situation as present-day non-Christians.

There are, however, significant differences between these two groups that break down the presumed analogy. The Bible teaches that Old and New Testament believers share a covenantal relationship to God that is grounded in special revelation. The New Testament refers repeatedly to the continuity between

Old and New Testament saints (Rom. 1:1–2; 11:11–24; Gal. 3:8; 6:16; Phil. 3:3, 7, 9; Heb. 11). The Old Testament sacrificial system foreshadowed the one, final sacrifice offered by Jesus Christ (Heb. 9–10). The New Testament reports that the Old Testament saints looked forward to a mediator who would die (John 5:46; 8:56; 1 Pet. 1:10–12) and that the gospel was preached to Abraham (Gal. 3:6). The fact is, Old Testament believers had a significant relationship to special revelation and had a faith tied to symbols and practices that looked forward to Christ; there simply is no warrant here for treating unevangelized moderns as saved believers.

HOLY PAGANS

Inclusivists argue that there is an important Old Testament tradition of “holy pagans,” namely, believing Gentiles who lived outside God’s covenant with Israel. They included Melchizedek, Job, the Midian priest Jethro, Naaman, the Roman centurion Cornelius, and presumably even the Magi who came seeking the Christ child. The person in this list who receives the most attention is Melchizedek, whom Pinnock describes as a “pagan” priest who blessed Abram (Gen. 14:19). According to Pinnock, Abram’s meeting with Melchizedek in Genesis 14 “makes the point that religious experience may be valid outside Judaism and Christianity.”²¹ Pinnock’s view, however, is not supported by the text. Melchizedek is identified as a priest of the most high God, but nowhere does the text indicate that he was a *pagan*. Melchizedek worshiped and served Yahweh as certainly as Abram did. Melchizedek, therefore, fails as an example of genuine piety among pagans; indeed, the New Testament treats him as a symbol of Christ’s high priestly work (Heb. 7). On careful analysis, every supposed example of a holy pagan that is vitally important to the inclusivist position fails. Either they are not pagans (Melchizedek) or they are not holy (Balaam).²²

WHAT ABOUT INFANTS WHO DIE?

Most Christian exclusivists believe that children who die in infancy, as well as the mentally incompetent, are included within the circle of God’s saving grace. Inclusivists charge that this belief creates a kind of slippery slope for exclusivists: if God’s saving will encompasses infants and the mentally incompetent who never come to explicit faith in Christ, why should God’s saving will not also include all people who have never heard of Christ?

There are so many problems with this line of thought that I wrote an entire book to deal with them.²³ One of the problems is that inclusivists ignore important differences between infants and the mentally incompetent on the one hand and unevangelized people on the other hand. The latter are mature enough to be held accountable for their resistance to the light of general revelation. There are, indeed, differences; therefore, God’s gracious act in the case of infants does not provide for similar action in the case of mature people who intentionally sin.

COMFORT VS. TRUTH

Inclusivism can have a strong emotional appeal for evangelical Christians. Many Christians could sleep better if there were less urgency or no urgency in getting the gospel to the unevangelized. Many of us have loved ones who died with their relationship to Christ uncertain or whose prospects for eternity appear bleak. Some comfort, however false it might prove to be, could be derived from various inclusivist theories criticized in my writings. Wise Christians, however, know better than to confuse the truth with the way we sometimes would like things to be. Whatever the appeal to our hearts, we must evaluate inclusivism with our minds. How inclusivism squares with Scripture is more important than how it makes us feel.

Theologian Roger Nicole has responded to Pinnock’s supposition that heaven might contain some surprises for all of us. “My surprise,” Nicole says, “might be to find in heaven more people than I expected; I shall be most happy about this. [Pinnock’s] surprise may be to find substantially less” — including millions of people never reached with the gospel because of inclusivist indifference to missions. “On balance,” Nicole continues, “I prefer my potential surprise to his!”²⁴

NOTES

1. All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
2. Ronald Nash, "Is Jesus the Only Savior? The Answer to Religious Pluralism," *Christian Research Journal* 27, 2 (2004): 22–31.
3. John Sanders, *No Other Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 229.
4. For a defense of the position Sanders opposes, see Ronald Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 2002), chap. 8.
5. For a detailed analysis of the major forms of ancient Gnosticism, see Ronald Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), part three.
6. See Clark H. Pinnock, "The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 159.
7. See Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 248.
8. See Ronald Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 120.
9. John Sanders, *No Other Name*, 265.
10. Given the inclusivist's problem with knowledge, how can the unevangelized be confident it is the true God they are seeking?
11. See Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 157.
12. *Ibid.*, 158.
13. *Ibid.*
14. See Ronald Nash, *The New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963).
15. Clark H. Pinnock, "The Finality of Jesus Christ," 158.
16. John Sanders, "Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?" *Evangelical Quarterly* 60 (1988): 235.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Pinnock, *A Wideness*, 98.
19. *Ibid.*
20. John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 143.
21. Pinnock, *A Wideness*, 94.
22. See Nash, *Is Jesus?* 128–29.
23. See Ronald Nash, *When a Baby Dies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).
24. Roger Nicole, paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Orlando, FL, 1989.