

*Is There Hope for Those Who Have Never Heard of Christ?  
An Historical and Theological Inquiry*

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2025*

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## *Prologue*

The question raised in the title of this work is one which has been posed both to and by believing Christians for a very long time. And it is a question of great significance. This question first occurred to me personally as a very young Christian, growing up in a pastor's home: "If faith in Jesus is the only way of salvation, then what of those who live in places far removed from any gospel witness? Is there hope of salvation for them?" This question was brought home to me again during my thirties, while engaging in ministry to international university students, many of whom were followers of non-Christian religions. The most frequent objection to the Christian faith that I heard from these students was that it presented itself as the only way of salvation. What then of those who grow up in cultures where they are unlikely to really hear the gospel?

It is important that serious consideration be given to this question, for at least two reasons. First, from an evangelistic and missiological perspective, if hearing the gospel and believing in Christ is not necessary for salvation, then the urgency of the task of world evangelization is at least diminished. This is difficult to deny. However, if faith in Christ is essential to salvation, then there is no more important enterprise than fulfilling the Great Commission. Second, from an apologetic perspective, it is essential that we have an answer for those who object that the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation is unfair to those who have never heard of Christ, or whose perception of Christianity has been clouded by the way in which it was presented. If the question of why God allows evil and suffering is the most serious objection to theism, the question of the unevangelized is perhaps the most serious objection to the Christian faith. "How could

faith in Christ be the only way of salvation, when there are so many who have never really heard the gospel?”<sup>1</sup>

These objections to the exclusive nature of the Christian faith have become even more pronounced in light of the acceptance of postmodernism (which denies that objective truth can be known), and more recently with the growth of critical theory (which views truth claims as simply attempts at preserving a position power over against other social groups).<sup>2</sup>

This work began as a doctoral dissertation at Dallas Theological Seminary in the late 1980s. However, due to long-lasting serious health challenges in my family, the work was delayed, and it was never presented as a dissertation. The Lord, however, knew what he was doing. For over the next three decades of life, I had opportunity to pursue more research and to give more thought to this topic than I ever could have if I had tried to bring it to completion in the prescribed time frame. I trust that it represents mature reflection. My prayer is that this work will encourage those of us who are believers, not only in giving a reason for our faith (I Peter 3:15), but also in giving ourselves to

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<sup>1</sup> James Davidson Hunter states that “The exclusivism and finality of the Christian soteriology is . . . the single most important source of contention between Christians and non-Christians.” James Davidson Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 34. See the entire section discussing his findings regarding the attitudes of evangelicals in the late twentieth century toward Christian exclusivism, pp. 34–40.

<sup>2</sup> For a critique of postmodernism, see Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995). For a critique of critical theory, see Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2023).

obedience to the Great Commission to “preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture passages quoted in this work will be from the *New American Standard Bible* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).





## Part I

### *History of the Discussion*

In this first of two parts of this work, I will survey the history of the discussion concerning this question among Christians (both Roman Catholic and Protestant/Evangelical).<sup>4</sup> I have included a number of lengthy quotes, particularly in the discussion of the views of Protestants since the Reformation. I felt it was important to do so, first because the views of Protestants have not been as well documented as those of Romans Catholics in the literature. But second, I have included these lengthy quotes, because the sources cited are often not as well known, nor are they always easily obtained. One of my purposes in writing has been to provide this documentation, and to make it accessible to more readers—whenever possible, in the words of the writers themselves. In the second part of this work, I will examine the biblical teaching on this issue.

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<sup>4</sup> The question of the salvation of Gentiles was also discussed in Judaism: “From an early date the belief in the universality of the divine grace existed among the Jews . . . . Consistently, then, the Rabbis see in an early Torah (the seven Noachian precepts . . . which prohibit idolatry, incest, homicide, blasphemy, robbery, lawlessness, and the eating of living flesh) the means of salvation ordained for the world before the birth of Israel and the revelation at Sinai . . . . Nor were the Gentiles cut off from salvation after the Torah was given; ‘deeds of mercy,’ declares the Talmud, ‘are their sin-offering,’ reconciling them with God.” “Salvation (Jewish),” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner’s & Sons, 1908–1926), XI:147. See also “Section IV. Salvation of the Gentiles,” in *Ibid.*, 147–148. See as well Jacob Katz, *Exclusivism and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 3, 23, 35–36, 106, 113, 119–124, 174–181; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964–1976), VI:740–742.

It should be mentioned that in many of the older quotations, the unevangelized are commonly referred to as “the heathen.” This term was used by most Christians of past generations to refer to those who did not worship the God of the Bible.<sup>5</sup> However, in recent times, as the Christian faith has been overshadowed by secularism in the West, the term seems to have taken on a more derogatory connotation, and is seldom used as it once was.<sup>6</sup> The reader should keep this in mind in reading these quotations from generations and centuries past. The use of the word “heathen” in this work is not intended to be disrespectful of those who find themselves among the unevangelized.

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<sup>5</sup> The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives this definition of the noun “heathen”: “an unconverted member of a people or nation who does not acknowledge the God of the Bible.” “Heathen,” at [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com) (Accessed February 12, 2020.)

<sup>6</sup> The second definition of the noun “heathen” in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is: “an uncivilized or irreligious person.” This seems to be the connotation that most people in the West attribute to the word in our day. Ibid.

## Chapter 1

### *A Brief History of Early Christian and Roman Catholic Views*

#### The Church Fathers

The question of the fate of the unevangelized has been addressed in one way or another by believing Christians since the early days of the church.<sup>7</sup> Louis Caperan, in his comprehensive work, draws the following conclusions regarding the convictions of the early Christian writers on this subject. First, they were unanimous in holding that since the coming of Christ salvation comes only through faith in him. The *Shepherd of Hermas*, for example, states: “If then thou canst not enter into the city except through the gate

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<sup>7</sup> The history of the discussion regarding the unevangelized among Roman Catholics (and some mostly brief descriptions of the views of Protestants in Caperan’s work) may be found in the following sources: Louis Caperan, *Le Probleme du Salut des Infideles—Nouvelle edition*, vol. i, *Essai Historique*, vol. ii, *Essai Theologique* (Toulouse: Grand Seminaire, 1934); Hendryk Nys, O.P., *Le Salut Sans L’Evangile: Etude Historique et Critique du Probleme du “Salut des Infideles” dans la Litterature Theologique Recente (1912–1964)* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1966); Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992). Since the history of the Catholic views on the unevangelized is better known than that of the Protestants, this work will focus more on the latter. I have relied primarily on the above sources for the Roman Catholic history. The history of evangelical views, however, is not nearly as well documented. The aim of this work is not to provide an exhaustive description of the views of Christian thinkers on this subject, but hopefully to survey their most important thoughts, and to document them in the original sources as much as possible. For histories of more liberal views, particularly of universalism, see the following: Richard J. Bauckham, “Universalism: A Historical Survey,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 15.1 (January, 1991): 22–35; Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed., *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell: Papers Presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics, 1991* (Carlisle UK: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil’s Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, 2 volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018); Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003); D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

itself, even so . . . a man cannot enter into the kingdom of God except by the name of His Son that is beloved by Him.”<sup>8</sup> Second, it was commonly believed that the entire world had been evangelized in the first century. This belief is reflected in the statement of Clement of Alexandria that the message of Christ’s salvation had been “diffused over the whole face of the earth.”<sup>9</sup> Hence, most of the church fathers did not have reason to directly address the question of those who may not have heard the gospel during their day. But they did respond to opponents of the gospel who questioned why Christ had come so late in history, leaving many who had lived before the first century without the possibility of salvation. Origen quotes Celsus as asking: “After so long a period of time, then, did God now bethink himself of making men live righteous lives, but neglect to do so before?”<sup>10</sup> A similar sentiment was later voiced by the Emperor Julian:

Therefore it is fair to ask of Paul why God, if he was the God not of the Jews only but also of the Gentiles, sent the blessed gift of prophecy to the Jews in abundance and gave them Moses and the oil of anointing, and the prophets and the law . . . ? And finally God sent unto them Jesus also, but unto us no prophet, no oil of

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<sup>8</sup> For citations see Caperan, *Le Probleme du Salut des Infideles*, 1:31–33. *Shepherd of Hermas*, Parable 9, 12 (89):5, in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, trans. J. B. Lightfoot, [www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/shepherd-lightfoot.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/shepherd-lightfoot.html) (Accessed October 20, 2020.)

<sup>9</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, Chapter X (last sentence). [www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-exhortation.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-exhortation.html) (Accessed October 29, 2020.) See also Caperan, *Le Probleme du Salut des Infideles*, 1:33–35. Citations from the church fathers reflecting their belief that the entire world had been evangelized may also be found in Cecil John Cadoux, *The Early Church and the World: A History of the Christian Attitude to Pagan Society and the State Down to the Time of Constantinus* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1925), 219, 301. See as well Irenaeus, *Five Books of S. Irenaeus Against Heresies*, trans. Rev. John Keble (London: James Parker and Co., 1872), I, 10:2, p. 34, where he lists several regions where the gospel had penetrated by the second century.

<sup>10</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 4:7, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), IV:870–871. See also Caperan, *Le Probleme*, 1:49–70.

anointing, no teacher, no herald to announce his love for man, which should one day, though late, reach even unto us also . . . . For if he is the God of all of us alike, and the creator of all, why did he neglect us?<sup>11</sup>

More than one answer was given to this question. Some suggested that Gentiles who lived before Christ could be saved apart from faith in the coming redeemer. Justin Martyr proposed that those who had been without God's revelation to Israel had sufficient means of being saved through the universal influence of the Logos (the Word of God), which he believed was implanted in every person's soul. He believed that those who "lived by reason (by this he means the Logos) are in some sort Christians, notwithstanding they may pass with you for atheists. Such among the Greeks were Socrates and Heraclitus and the like . . . ." <sup>12</sup> Irenaeus apparently embraced a similar idea, as reflected in his statement: "(T)he reason fixed in their minds acting upon them, and instructing them; —that there is One God the Lord of all." <sup>13</sup> Clement of Alexandria held that Gentiles were prepared for salvation through their own philosophy in a way similar to the way Israel was prepared through the Law: "For, having furnished the one with the

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<sup>11</sup> Emperor Julian, *Against the Galileans*, in *The Works of the Emperor Julian, with an English translation by Wilmer Cave Wright* (London: W. Heinemann, 1913–1923), III:343–344.

<sup>12</sup> Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of St. Justin for the Christians to Antoninus Pius*, in *The First Apology of Justin Martyr Addressed to the Emperor Antoninus Pius, Prefaced with some account of the writings of Justin Martyr by John Kaye* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1912), 56–57. For a discussion of Justin's view on the Logos see the following: Jean Danielou, *The Gospel Message in Hellenistic Culture: A History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea*, Volume 2, John Austin Baker, ed., trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973); J. Dupuis, "The Cosmic Christ in the Early Fathers," *Indian Journal of Theology* 15.3 (1966), 108–120; Graham Keith, "Justin Martyr and Religious Exclusivism," *Tyndale Bulletin* 43.1 (1992), 57–80.

<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II, 6:1, p. 106. See also Terrance L. Tiessen, *Irenaeus On the Salvation of the Unevangelized: ATLA Monograph Series, No. 31* (Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1993).

commandments, and the other with philosophy, He shut up unbelief to the Advent.

Whence, every one who believes not is without excuse. For by a different process of advancement, both Greek and Barbarian, He leads to the perfection which is by faith.”<sup>14</sup>

He even included followers of eastern philosophy, such as the Brahmins and followers of Buddha among those fulfilling this role.<sup>15</sup>

Others suggested that there was a post-mortem proclamation of the gospel to those who had been without an opportunity to believe prior to the coming of Christ. Both Origen and Clement of Alexandria held to this view. Speaking of Christ’s descent to hades, Clement states that he “there preached the gospel to those of the heathen who were ready for conversion.”<sup>16</sup> Chrysostom, however, rejected it. He states: “For the present life

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<sup>14</sup> Clement, *Stromata* 7:2, in *The Writings of Clement of Alexandria*, 2 volumes, trans. Rev. William Wilson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1867, 69), II:413. Clement speaks of those “justified by philosophy” in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* I:4. [www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.html) (Accessed October 20, 2020.) He also states: “Accordingly, before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness.” *Stromata* I:5, in *ibid.* He did however state that they must believe in the true God and abandon idolatry: *Stromata* VI:6, in *ibid.* (Accessed October 20, 2020.)

<sup>15</sup> Clement, *Stromata* I:15, in [www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.html) (Accessed October 21, 2020.)

<sup>16</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI:6 in [www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book6.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book6.html) (Accessed October 21, 2020.) For Origen, see, *Contra Celsus*, 2:43, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV:772. Though the idea of post-mortem evangelization of those who lived prior to Christ was rejected by Gregory the Great, and thus became anathema in the western church, it was held in favor by a number of the Greek and Alexandrian fathers. See Caperan, *Le Probleme*, 1:160–169 for the history of this discussion. For an historical overview of the discussion, from a writer sympathetic to this view see: A. O. Hudson, *Future Probation in Christian Belief* (Middlesex, England: Bible Fellowship Union, 1975), 73–82. See also, Ralph V. Turner, “Descent Ad Inferos: Medieval Views on Christ’s Descent Into Hell and the Salvation of the Ancient Just,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27.2: 173–194; Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue from the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (Oxford: University Press, 2001); James Belby, *Postmortem Opportunity: A Biblical and Theological Assessment of Salvation After Death* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), ch. 6.

indeed is the season for right conversation, but after death is judgment and punishment.”<sup>17</sup>

Still others believed that salvation had always come through faith in the promised redeemer, or at least faith in the true God. John Chrysostom believed that before Christ it was necessary to believe in the true God and forsake idolatry to be saved. But now, faith in Christ is also necessary. He states: “‘What then?’ one may say, ‘were they wronged who lived before his coming?’ By no means, for men might then be saved, even though they had not confessed Christ. For this was not required of them, but not to worship idols, and to know the true God . . . (B)ut now it is no more, but there is need also of the knowledge of Christ.”<sup>18</sup> As for those who had no knowledge of Christ, he made these comments:

For this life-present is a race course, and we ought to have thousands of eyes on every side, and not even to fancy that ignorance will be an adequate excuse. For there is such a thing, there certainly is, as being punished for ignorance, when the ignorance is inexcusable . . . For when thou art ignorant of those things which it is not possible to know, thou wilt not be subject to any charge for it; but when of things easy and possible, thou wilt be punished with the utmost rigour. Else if we be not excessively supine, but contribute our own share in its full amount, God will also reach forth his hand unto us in those things which we are ignorant of.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homily XXXVI (Matt. xi. 1),” in *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, 2 volumes, trans. Sir George Prevost (Oxford: J.H. Parker, 1843–1844), II:527. By “conversation” Chrysostom means “conduct.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, II:527.

<sup>19</sup> John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 438.

As for Augustine, he believed that salvation had always come only through faith in Christ. In his exposition of Psalm 105:9, Augustine says: “For no man was ever reconciled to God outside that faith which is in Christ Jesus, either before His incarnation, or after; as it is most truly defined by the Apostle: ‘For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.’”<sup>20</sup> Noteworthy also is his statement: “In that way the salvation brought by this religion, the only true religion by which true salvation is also truly promised, was never lacking to anyone who was worthy of it, and any to whom it was lacking was unworthy of it.”<sup>21</sup> Though he thought that there were some among the Gentiles who lived before Christ who had come to such a saving faith, he believed that most who lived prior to Christ were lost. In his earlier writings he attributed this to God’s foreknowledge of their unbelief, but after his conflict with

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<sup>20</sup> Aurelius Augustine, “Exposition on the Psalms,” in Philip Schaff, ed., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1886), 8:522. Augustine did make a very interesting comment about the faith of Cornelius: “A man begins to receive grace the moment he begins to believe in God, being moved to faith by some internal or external admonition. But the fullness and evidentness of the infusion of grace depends on temporal junctures and on sacramental rites. Catechumens are not unbelievers, otherwise Cornelius did not believe in God, although by his prayers and alms he showed himself worthy to have an angel sent to him. But these good deeds would have no effect had he not already believed; and he would not have believed had he not been called by some secret admonition coming through visions of the mind or spirit, or by more open admonitions reaching him through the bodily senses. In some there is the grace of faith, but not enough to obtain the kingdom of heaven, as in catechumens, or in Cornelius himself before he was incorporated into the Church by participation in the sacraments . . . . There are therefore inchoate beginnings of faith, which resemble conception. It is not enough to be conceived. A man must also be born if he is to obtain eternal life. None of these beginnings is without the grace of God’s mercy. And good works, if there are any, follow and do not precede the grace . . . .” *De Diversis Quaestionibus Ad Simplicianum* (*To Simplician On Various Questions*): 2, trans. John H. S. Burleigh, [www.romancatholicism.org/jansenism/augustine-simplician.htm](http://www.romancatholicism.org/jansenism/augustine-simplician.htm) (Accessed January 12, 2021.) Here he does acknowledge a grace and “faith” before saving faith.

<sup>21</sup> Aurelius Augustine, *Epist.* 102:15, in Boniface Ramsey, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Part II: Letters, Volume 2*, trans. and notes by Roland Teske (New York: New City Press, 2003), II:28.



Pelagius, he attributed their lost condition to original sin (and by implication, to God's decision to withhold grace).<sup>22</sup> As to the means by which some Gentiles had come to know of Christ, he attributed this mostly to the fact that the Jewish people had been "dispersed through the nations, in order to testify to the scriptures in which eternal salvation in Christ had been declared."<sup>23</sup> He also suggested, however, that some may have been taught by angels or by divine revelation about Christ. Speaking of the mystery of Christ he wrote: "but there is nothing far-fetched in the belief that among other peoples besides the Jews there existed men to whom this mystery was revealed . . . perhaps . . . they were taught by evil angels; for those spirits, as we know, acknowledged Christ in his presence."<sup>24</sup> But by whichever means, Augustine did not believe that salvation "was granted to anyone, unless the one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, was divinely revealed to him . . . ."<sup>25</sup>

## The Medieval Era

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, two topics relevant to our subject were vigorously debated. One was the minimum truths required for salvation prior to the

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<sup>22</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 29, 37–38. Regarding Augustine's attributing to God's election the matter of who is called through the gospel and who is not, see *On the Predestination of the Saints*, IX: "Christ willed...that his gospel should be preached among those...who had been elected in Himself before the foundation of the world." [www.newadvent.org/fathers/15121.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/15121.htm) (Accessed October 21, 2020.)

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *City of God* VII:32, in Marcus Dods, ed., *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, A New Translation*, Volume I: "The City of God, Vol. I," trans. Marcus Dods. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 299. See also *ibid.*, XVIII:42, 47. Speaking of the dispersion of the Jews, Augustine says they "have been torn from their native abode and dispersed over the whole world in order to bear this testimony, so that the Church of Christ has everywhere increased." *Ibid.*, XVIII:47, (p. 280).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, XVIII:47, (pp. 279–280).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, XVIII:47 (p. 280).

age of the gospel. Hugo of St. Victor (1096–1141) believed that for Gentiles who lived before Christ explicit faith in the mediator was not necessary, but rather faith in God as creator, ruler and redeemer (however he might accomplish our redemption).<sup>26</sup> According to Caperan, his view was widely accepted in the church, and received the endorsement of St. Bernard and Peter Lombard.<sup>27</sup> Abelard went even further, and stated that the ancient philosophers had been divinely inspired and filled the same role for the “pagans” as the prophets had for Israel (a view reminiscent of Justin and Clement of Alexandria, but not readily accepted during this time).<sup>28</sup> The other topic strongly debated was whether baptism was necessary for salvation. Hugo of St. Victor taught that when baptism is impossible, the desire for baptism is sufficient.<sup>29</sup>

During the Middle Ages, no one’s views were more important than those of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).<sup>30</sup> Not all students of Aquinas draw the same conclusions regarding his views on this subject. But the two ideas discussed above had a significant bearing on his understanding of this question. Thomas believed on the basis of Hebrews 11:6 that faith in Christ was “implicit” in faith in God as “rewarder.” He states: “In like manner all the articles are contained implicitly in certain primary matters of faith, such as

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<sup>26</sup> See Caperan, *Le Probleme*, 1:170f.

<sup>27</sup> Caperan, *Le Probleme*, 1:171–173. See also R. Martin, “La Necessite de croire au mystere de l’Incarnation,” *Revue Thomiste* 25 (1920), 273ff.

<sup>28</sup> Caperan, *Le Probleme*, 1:174.

<sup>29</sup> “Hugues de Saint-Victor enseigne que, dans l’impossibilite de recevoir le bapteme, la foi et la conversion du Coeur suffisent.” (“Hugo of St. Victor taught that, when it is impossible to receive baptism, faith and conversion of the heart is sufficient.”) Caperan, *Le Probleme*, 1:182. He cites Hugo of St. Victor’s work *On the Sacraments*, lib. II, part. vi, cap. vii.

<sup>30</sup> Aquinas’ teaching on the unevangelized is summarized and documented in Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 47–62. For a discussion of various views on Aquinas’ teaching regarding the unevangelized, see Maurice Eminyan S.J., “Saint Thomas On the Salvation of the Infidels,” *Melita Theologica* Vol. IX, No. 2 (Dec. 1956), 49–60.

God's existence, and his providence over the salvation of man, according to Heb. 11: 'He that cometh to God, must believe that He is, and is a rewarder to them that seek Him.'"<sup>31</sup> He did believe that some Gentiles who lived prior to Christ had come to explicit faith in an extraordinary way: "(M)any gentiles obtained salvation through the ministry of the angels . . . . Many of the gentiles received revelations of Christ."<sup>32</sup> But he also believed that many were saved through "implicit" faith in God; that is, by believing that God would save them in the way he would choose: "If, however, some were saved without receiving any revelation, they were not saved without faith in a Mediator, for, although they did not believe in Him explicitly, they did, nevertheless, have implicit faith through believing in Divine providence, since they believed that God would deliver mankind in whatever way was pleasing to Him . . . ."<sup>33</sup> Since the coming of Christ, however, Aquinas believed that explicit faith in Christ was necessary for salvation: "After grace had been revealed, both learned and simple folk are bound to explicit faith in the mysteries of Christ . . . ."<sup>34</sup> As for the rare person who may still remain outside the reach of the gospel, Aquinas states: "If someone . . . brought up in the forest or among wild beasts . . . followed the direction of natural reason in seeking good and avoiding evil, we most certainly hold that God would either reveal to him through internal inspiration what had to be believed, or would send some preacher of the faith to him as He sent Peter to

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II – II, q. 1, a. 7. Online edition (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province). [www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html](http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html) (Accessed October 16, 2020.)

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II – II, q. 2, a. 7. Ibid. (Accessed October 16, 2020.)

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa* II–II, q. 2, a. 7. Ibid. (Accessed October 16, 2020.)

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa* II–II, q. 2, a. 7. Ibid. (Accessed October 16, 2020.)

Cornelius (Acts 10:20).”<sup>35</sup> This was in keeping with the accepted scholastic dogma: “if one does what is in his ability, God will not deny him grace.”<sup>36</sup>

As for baptism, Thomas believed that it was necessary for salvation during this present age.<sup>37</sup> But he also believed that if a person was unable to be baptized, his desire for baptism was sufficient, even if it was only an implicit desire (in the case when the person was not aware of the requirement of baptism).<sup>38</sup> Both of these ideas (of “implicit faith” and “implicit desire for baptism”) would be utilized by later theologians in dealing with the problem of the unevangelized.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 11, ad 1. *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*. Questions 10–20, trans. James V. McGlynn, S.J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953). [www.isidore.co/aquinas/QDdeVer.htm](http://www.isidore.co/aquinas/QDdeVer.htm) (Accessed October 16, 2020.)

<sup>36</sup> Caperan, *Le Probleme*, 1:217; Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?* 52.

<sup>37</sup> *Summa* III, q. 68, a. 1: “(W)ithout baptism there is no salvation for men.” *Summa Theologica* III. Q. 68, a. 1. [www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html](http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html) (Accessed October 16, 2020.)

<sup>38</sup> Speaking of a man who dies before he is able to be baptized, Aquinas says: “such a man can obtain salvation without actually being baptized, on account of his desire for Baptism . . .” *Summa*, III, q. 68, a. 2. Ibid. (Accessed October 16, 2020.) He also stated: “man receives the forgiveness of sins before Baptism in so far as he has Baptism of desire, explicitly or implicitly . . .” *Summa* III, q. 69, a. 4. Ibid. (Accessed October 16, 2020.)

<sup>39</sup> Thomas F. O’Meara believes that Aquinas can be read in such a way that his teaching on the sufficiency of implicit faith for people who lived before Christ can also be applied to the unevangelized who have lived since Christ. See Thomas F. O’Meara, “The Presence of Grace Outside Evangelization, Baptism and Church in Thomas Aquinas’ Theology,” in Michael F. Casuto and F. Edward Coughlin, eds., *That Others May Know and Love: Essays in Honor of Zachary Hayes* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, 1997), 91–131. He cites, among other passages, *Summa* III, q. 60, a. 5: “(U)nder the state of the Law of nature man was moved by inward instinct and without any outward law, to worship God . . .” [www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html](http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html) (Accessed October 16, 2020.) A similar conclusion is reached by George Sabra in *Thomas Aquinas’ Vision of the Church* (Mainz: Matthias-Grunewald-Verlag, 1987), 156–169.

## The Age of Discovery and Beyond

With the discovery of the New World in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the matter of the unevangelized acquired a greater urgency. Here were entire civilizations that showed virtually no evidence of having been evangelized. Could it be that God had left them entirely without the means of being saved? This question would receive attention from both Catholic and Protestant theologians over the course of the sixteenth century and beyond. The historian Richard Westfall captures the dilemma that confronted the faith of many people of the time in these words:

When exploration brought Christendom into contact with a multitude of hitherto unknown pagan peoples, western Europe's first impulse was to convert them; but they also led some men to question the universality and binding force of the Christian revelation if many peoples had never heard of Christ. This consideration was one of the determinants of Lord Herbert's natural religion, and others followed his steps. Both John Locke and Isaac Newton, for example asked whether a heathen who has never heard of Christ can be saved; both answered in effect that . . . the principles of natural religion unaided by revelation can lead the well-meaning heathen to eternal life.<sup>40</sup>

Centuries before, at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) the church had confirmed the dogma that there was “no salvation outside the church” (“extra ecclesiam nulla salus”).<sup>41</sup> This had been the teaching of the church for centuries, and would be reaffirmed

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<sup>40</sup> Richard S. Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958), 4.

<sup>41</sup> “There is one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation.” Fourth Lateran Council, Canon 1. *Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215*. [www.sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/lateran4.asp](http://www.sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/lateran4.asp) (Accessed October 16, 2020.) For a history of this maxim, see Jerome P. Thiesen, *The Ultimate Church and the Promise of Salvation*, (Collegeville MN: St. John's University Press,

many times. But how could this dogma be squared with the discovery of such a great mass of humanity who seemed to be outside the church “through no fault of their own”? The debate within the Catholic Church continued for many years, with an increasingly open viewpoint being championed by theologians such as Domingo Soto, Albert Pigge, Robert Bellarmine, Francisco Suarez and Juan De Lugo.<sup>42</sup> Francisco Suarez summarized his own view in these words:

Now it is obvious that no one is actually in this church without being baptized, and yet he can be saved, because just as the desire of baptism can suffice, so also the desire of entering the church. Now we are saying the same thing with regard to anyone who has faith in God, and sincere repentance for sin, but who is not baptized, whether he has arrived at explicit or only implicit faith in Christ. For, with implicit faith in Christ he can have an implicit desire for baptism, which St. Thomas teaches can suffice.<sup>43</sup>

If implicit faith was sufficient for Gentiles before Christ, then it must be sufficient for those who have not received the gospel since his coming. This was the logic of their view.

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1976); Yves Congar, *The Wide World My Parish*, trans. Donald Attwater (Baltimore: Helicon, 1962), ch. 10. See also Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, ch. 1.

<sup>42</sup> The development of the views of these theologians is discussed in Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, ch. 5 and 6.

<sup>43</sup> Francisco Suarez, *De fide theologica*, disp. 12, sect. 4, n. 22 (ed. Vives, Paris, 1858), 12:359. For a discussion of the impact of the discovery of the Americas on Catholic theology, see Thomas F. O’Meara, “The Dominican School of Salamanca and the Spanish Conquest of America: Some Bibliographical Notes,” *The Thomist* 56.4 (Oct. 1992), 555–582.

## The Modern Era

Though some (particularly the Jansenists) opposed this perspective, in 1854, in an address before bishops assembled in Rome, for the first time the notion that implicit faith was sufficient for those who were “inculpably ignorant” of the gospel received official papal endorsement from Pope Pius IX . He stated: “(W)e must likewise hold it as certain that those who labor in ignorance of the true religion, if that ignorance be invincible, will never be charged with any guilt on this account before the eyes of the Lord” <sup>44</sup> Nine years later in a letter to the Italian bishops he wrote concerning followers of other religions that, “It is known to Us and to you that those who labor in invincible ignorance concerning our most holy religion and who, assiduously observing the natural law and its precepts which God has inscribed in the hearts of all, and being ready to obey God, live an honest and upright life can, through the working of the divine light and grace, attain eternal life.”<sup>45</sup>

A century later Vatican II would reaffirm this dogma:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine providence deny the help necessary for

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<sup>44</sup> Pope Pius IX, *Singulari quadam, Acta Pii IX*, I/1, 626. Quoted in Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 113.

<sup>45</sup> Pope Pius IX, *Quanto conficiamur moerore, Acta Pii IX*, I/3, 613. Quoted in Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 114. Two articles by P. De Letter, S.J. appeared in 1952, which advanced the belief that the unevangelized might be saved: “Good Pagans and Baptism of Desire,” *The Clergy Monthly* (September, 1952), 288–97; and “Good Pagans and Baptism of Desire: II. Contrition Perfected by Charity,” *The Clergy Monthly* (December, 1952), 409–416. In the latter article, De Letter stated: ‘When a good pagan who believes in God mispronounces His name and calls Him Rama or Krishna, or when a neo-pagan who attempts to do without religion calls the Ideal with humanistic names, may it not happen that their sincere deeds, when inspired by grace as they can be, speak louder and express better the deep aspiration of their being than the poor mistaken name their lips pronounce?’ (p. 413).

salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the gospel. She regards such qualities as given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, salvation comes to many who do not yet believe in Christ as Savior. And even in those who do not yet believe even in God (“through no fault of their own”), his prevenient grace may be actively at work.

Similar thoughts were expressed by the Greek Orthodox theologian Rev. Frank Gavin:

No Orthodox can maintain that all outside the Church are damned. As a personal problem, the answer of the question must be left in the hands of Him ‘who desireth not the death of a sinner’ but wills ‘that all men be saved’ (I Tim. 2, 4). In the individual instance it is both logically and theologically possible for a man to be saved outside the Church: (a) sincerity coupled with invincible ignorance may

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<sup>46</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 16. Quoted in Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 153–154. The literature on the subject of the unevangelized and on non-Christian religions among Catholic writers is voluminous. For a broad survey of the views of influential Catholic writers on this subject (including Rahner, Kung, Dupuis, and D’Costa) see Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical & Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003). For a thorough study of the teaching of Vatican II on non-Christian religions, see Miikka Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions According to the Second Vatican Council* (Leiden, New York, Koln: E. J. Brill, 1992). For a discussion of the views on salvation outside the church prior to Vatican II, see two works by Maurice Emyan: *The Theology of Salvation* (Jamaica Plain, Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1960), and *The Salvation of Infidels in Current Theology (1943–1958)* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1959). Emyan identifies four possible ways of salvation for those outside the church which were embraced by various Catholic theologians: 1) Supernatural and positive values in false religions; 2) Special divine intervention: interior inspiration; 3) At the dawn of reason: first human act; 4) At the sunset of life; the instant of death. See also Riccardo Lombardi, *The Salvation of the Unbeliever* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1956).



inhibit a man from accepting the formulations of the Faith presented to him; (b) he may have no opportunity to come to the knowledge of the truth; (c) the formularies of his own profession of belief 'may serve as a basis for supernatural life and fellowship with the Light', inasmuch as they contain portions and aspects of revealed truth; (d) we may not contend that God, who is free, restricts Himself to the use of the one means of Grace He has appointed. 'Other extraordinary acts of Grace are not precluded' by maintaining the conviction that 'every true member of the Church certainly shares in salvation.'<sup>47</sup>

Two Catholic theologians whose views on this matter have been quite influential in the twentieth century are Hans Kung and Karl Rahner. Kung's view is summarized in his statement: "As against the 'extraordinary' way of salvation which is the Church, the world religions can be called the 'ordinary' way of salvation for non-Christian humanity."<sup>48</sup> The following comments by Karl Rahner summarize his views. In his book *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, he states: "God . . . has already communicated himself in his Holy Spirit always and everywhere and to every person as the innermost center of his existence."<sup>49</sup> In his *Theological Investigations*, he writes:

Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover mixed up with human depravity which is the result of original sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason, a non-

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<sup>47</sup> Rev. Frank Gavin, Th.D., *Some Aspects of Contemporary Greek Orthodox Thought* (Milwaukee: Morehouse Publishing Co., London: A. R. Mowbray and Co., 1923), 240–241.

<sup>48</sup> Hans Kung, "The Freedom of Religions," in Owen C. Thomas, ed., *Attitudes Toward Other Religions: Some Christian Interpretations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 210.

<sup>49</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 139.

Christian religion can be recognized as a lawful religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it.<sup>50</sup>

Karkkainen summarizes Rahner's view of salvation in these words:

Rahner builds on the view of Yves Congar . . . of the 'mystical body of Christ,' according to which there is a state of being in which a person can respond positively to the grace of God even before hearing the gospel, which has the purpose of evoking explicit faith. A person in this state qualifies himself or herself as an 'anonymous Christian' insofar as this acceptance of grace is 'present in an implicit form whereby [the] person undertakes and lives the duty of each day in the quiet sincerity of patience, in devotion to his material duties and the demands made upon him by the person under his care.'<sup>51</sup>

The Roman Catholic priest, Raimundo Panikkar is another who holds similar views. He states: "Christ is the only mediator, but he is not the monopoly of Christians and, in fact, he is present and effective in any authentic religion, whatever the form or the name, of the ever-transcending but equally ever-humanly immanent mystery . . . . The means of salvation are to be found in any authentic religion (old or new), since a man

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<sup>50</sup> Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the non-Christian Religions," in volume 5 of *Theological Investigations* (New York: Crossroad, 1966), 5:121.

<sup>51</sup> Karkkainen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*: 195. He quotes from "Anonymous Christians," in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (New York: Crossroad, 1979), 6:394. Jacques Dupuis cites the view of V. Boublik, who in contrast to Rahner "proposes the concept of 'anonymous catechumenate,' which keeps people who belong to other religions oriented throughout their lives to an encounter with the mystery of Christ which will come only at the end. Human death will be for them 'the hour of salvation.'" Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 3.

follows a particular religion because in it he believes he finds the ultimate fulfillment of his life.”<sup>52</sup>

What is sometimes overlooked in this discussion is that the same document from Vatican II which expresses hope for the salvation of some who do not know Christ goes on to state:

But very often, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator. (cf. Rom. 1:21, 25.) Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. Hence to procure the glory of God and the salvation of all of these, the Church, mindful of the Lord’s command, ‘preach the Gospel to every creature’ (Mark 16:16), takes zealous care to foster the missions.<sup>53</sup>

One would wish that these words were remembered as often as the ones previously quoted. But many appear to overlook them.

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<sup>52</sup> R. Panikkar, “The Rules of the Game,” in Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, eds., *Missions Trends No. 5: Faith Meets Faith* (New York: Paulist Fathers; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 122. See also Panikkar’s book, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1965).

<sup>53</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 16. Quoted in Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 7–8. Martin contends that the fact that these latter words are so frequently overlooked has led to the virtual disappearance of evangelistic mission in the Catholic Church.



## Chapter 2

### *A Brief History of Reformation Views*<sup>54</sup>

Calvin

Among the Reformers, views on this matter varied widely.<sup>55</sup> Calvin held firmly that salvation came only through explicit faith in Christ. He wrote in his *Institutes*: “Surely after the fall of the first man no knowledge of God apart from the Mediator has had power unto salvation (cf. Rom. 1:16; I Cor. 1:24). For Christ not only speaks of his own age, but comprehends all ages when he says: ‘This is eternal life, to know the Father to be the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent’ (John 17:3).”<sup>56</sup> In the same section he wrote: “No worship has ever pleased God except that which looked to Christ . . . . Thus, all the more vile is the stupidity of those persons who open heaven to all the impious and unbelieving without the grace of him whom Scripture commonly teaches to be the only door whereby we enter into salvation (John 10:9).” Later in the *Institutes*, Calvin states: “But because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title ‘mother’ how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive

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<sup>54</sup> The following discussions are limited to the major views among evangelicals, defined as those who accept the inspiration and authority of Scripture, and the deity and atoning death and resurrection of Christ. The development of more liberal theology and associated universalistic views regarding salvation is beyond the scope of this work.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of the views of the Reformers see George Huntston Williams, “Erasmus and the Reformers on Non-Christian Religions and *Salus Extra Ecclesiam*,” in Theodore K. Rabb, Jerrolde Seige, eds., *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of E. H. Harbison* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 319–370.

<sup>56</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.6.1.

us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels [Matt. 22:30].”<sup>57</sup> In his commentary on Ephesians he writes:

From what has been said, the conclusion will be easily drawn that out of Christ there are only idols. Those who were formerly declared to be *without* Christ, are now declared to be *without God*; as John says, ‘Whosoever hath not the Son hath not the Father,’ (I John ii. 23); and again, ‘Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God.’ (2 John 9.) Let us know, therefore, that all who do not keep this way wander from the true God. We shall next be asked, Did God never reveal Himself to any of the Gentiles? I answer no manifestation of God without Christ was ever made among the Gentiles, any more than among the Jews. It is not to one age only, or to one nation, that the saying of our Lord applies, ‘I am the way;’ for he adds, ‘no man cometh unto the Father but by me.’ (John xiv. 6.)<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 4.1.4. It was because of his belief that salvation comes through the gospel, that Calvin was (contrary to the belief of some) a strong advocate for the importance of Christian missions. He wrote: “for it is our duty to proclaim the goodness of God to every nation . . . the work is such as ought not to be concealed in a corner, but to be everywhere proclaimed.” John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah 12:5* in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 7, *Isaiah 1-32*, 403. For a full discussion of Calvin’s theology of missions, and his promotion of missions outreach, see the paper “John Calvin and Missions: An Historical Study,” by Scott J. Simmons. Available on line at <https://www.monergism.com/content/calvin-and-missions-historical-study> (Accessed October 29, 2020.)

<sup>58</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1854), 234–235. Beza is of the same opinion: “This I say is how the Holy Spirit, by the preaching of the Gospel, creates in us the gift of faith which comes, at the same time, to take hold of all that is necessary for salvation in Jesus Christ . . .” Theodore Beza, *The Christian Faith*, trans. James Clark (E. Sussex, England: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1992), 4.28. “(O)utside of Jesus Christ there is no salvation . . .” Ibid., 5.1.

In his commentary on Romans 10:17 he states: “It must be further noticed, that faith is grounded in nothing else but the truth of God; for Paul does not teach us that faith springs from any other kind of doctrine, but he expressly restricts it to the word of God . . . . Hence also the Papal conceit respecting implicit faith falls to the ground, because it tears away faith from the word . . . .”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, in his *Institutes* he wrote: “Before the advent of Christ, about four thousand years passed away, during which he hid the light of saving doctrine from all nations.”<sup>60</sup> In seeking an explanation as to why God reveals saving truth to some and not to others, he answered that it was in the electing will of God: “They will in vain torment themselves in seeking for a deeper cause than the secret and inscrutable counsel of God . . . . (W)hile we maintain that none perish without deserving it, . . . it is owing to the free goodness of God that some are delivered . . . .”<sup>61</sup>

Though he did not believe it was salvific, Calvin did recognize the value of natural or general revelation. He stated in his comments on Romans 10:10:

God has already from the beginning manifested his divinity to the Gentiles, though not by the preaching of men, yet by the testimony of his creatures; for though the gospel was then silent among them, yet the whole workmanship of heaven and earth did speak and make known its author by its preaching. It hence appears, that the Lord even during the time during which he confined the favour of his covenant to Israel did not yet so withdraw from the Gentiles the knowledge of himself, but that he ever kept alive some sparks of it among them. He indeed

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<sup>59</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, trans., ed. the Rev. John Owen (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 401.

<sup>60</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.24.12.

<sup>61</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.24.12. In his commentary on Romans 10, Calvin attributed to God’s providence where and when the gospel was preached. “Moreover, faith is produced by the word of God, but the word of God is nowhere preached, except through God’s special providence and appointment.” John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 397.

manifested himself then more particularly to his chosen people, so that the Jews might be justly compared to domestic hearers, whom he familiarly taught as it were by his own mouth; yet as he spoke to the Gentiles at a distance by the voice of the heavens, he showed by this prelude that he designed to make himself known to them at length also.<sup>62</sup>

He did believe that once the time came for the gospel to go to the Gentiles, that it was widely disseminated throughout the world after the coming of Christ: “Christ, we know, penetrated with amazing speed, from the east to the west, like the lightning’s flash, in order to bring into the Church the Gentiles from all parts of the world.”<sup>63</sup>

It should be noted that Calvin believed that no one truly sought for God who did not find Him:

Since faith alone is required, wherever it is found, there the goodness of God manifests itself unto salvation: there is then in this case no difference between one people or nation and another. And he adds the strongest of reasons. For since he who is the Creator and Maker of the whole world is the God of all men, he will show himself kind to all who will acknowledge and call on him as their God: for as his mercy is infinite, it cannot but be that it will extend itself to all by whom it shall be sought . . . . (H)e promises salvation to all who would call on the name of the Lord. It hence follows, that the grace of God penetrates into the abyss of

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<sup>62</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 403.

<sup>63</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. Rev. James Anderson (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1843), 386. Beza even believed that the gospel might have reached America. Cited in Caperan, *Le Probleme*, 1:230. Luther also believed that through the dispersion of witnessing Christians, God had a “great number of believers among the pagans.” (By “pagans” he means Gentiles.) Melanchthon also believed that through the dispersion of the Jews in pre-Christian times, many Gentiles (perhaps many of his own German forebears) had come to salvation through faith in the yet to come Messiah. (Both Luther and Melanchthon cited in Caperan, *Le Probleme*, 1:227.)



death, if only it would be sought there; so that it is not by any means to be withheld from the Gentiles.<sup>64</sup>

Calvin believed that even at the moment of death, God's grace would be extended to anyone who sought it.

Calvin did believe that, though God's ordinary means of bringing people to faith was through the preaching of the word through a human messenger, it was not the only means at his disposal. He states in his *Institutes* concerning the salvation of infants:

Many he certainly has called and endued with the true knowledge of himself, by internal means, by the illumination of the Spirit, without the intervention of preaching . . . . Therefore, if it please him, why may the Lord not shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom he will illumine in the future with the full splendor of his light—especially if he has not removed their ignorance before taking them from the prison of the flesh? I would not rashly affirm that they are endowed with the same faith as we experience in ourselves, or have entirely the same knowledge of faith—this I prefer to leave undetermined—but I would somewhat restrain the obtuse arrogance of those who at the top of the lungs confidently deny or assert whatever they please.<sup>65</sup>

Calvin believed, then, that God could illumine infants regarding the means of salvation, even if not in the fullest sense, and that he would more fully illumine them after they had departed this world. He did not, however, limit this means of illumination to infants alone, but also contemplated it as the means by which many adults had been converted. In his commentary on Romans 10:14 (“And how will they hear without a preacher?”) he states it explicitly: “But were any on this account to contend that God

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<sup>64</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 395.

<sup>65</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.16.19.

cannot transfer to men the knowledge of himself, except by the instrumentality of preaching, we deny that to teach this was the Apostle's intention; for he had in view only the ordinary dispensation of God, and did not intend to prescribe a law for the distribution of his grace."<sup>66</sup>

### Zwingli and Zanchius

Zwingli, basing his hope on God's electing grace, was even more optimistic about those who lacked explicit knowledge of Christ.<sup>67</sup> In his commentary on Romans 2:14–15, Zwingli states: "For nothing prevents God from choosing from among the heathen men to serve Him, to honor Him, and after death to be united to Him. For his election is free."<sup>68</sup> In another place, he states: "Let their ignorance, therefore, not be counted against them to whom none hath come to preach the mystery of Christ."<sup>69</sup> In a famous passage, he included "Hercules, Theseus, Socrates, Aristides, Antigonus" and others who lacked knowledge of the gospel among those we can expect to see in heaven: "In short there had

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<sup>66</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 398.

<sup>67</sup> For discussion of Zwingli's views, see W. P. Stephens, "Zwingli and the Salvation of the Gentiles," in W. P. Stephens, ed., *The Bible, The Reformation and the Church: Essays in Honour of James Atkison* (Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 105: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 224–244. Stephens discusses Zwingli's views on election as they relate to the "heathen" on pp. 227, 231–244 of this work. See also W. Peter Stephens, "Bullinger and Zwingli on the Salvation of the Heathen," *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, 7.2–3 (Aug.–Dec. 2005), 283–300. Stephens points out in this article that though Bullinger defended Zwingli's views on the heathen, he was more cautious in that he "hoped for" the salvation of some of the heathen based on the work of Christ (p. 291), and ties their salvation to God's revelation to them regarding Christ (pp. 292–293). For Calvin's view of Zwingli's position see Fritz Blanke, "Calvin's Urteile über Zwingli," *Zwingliana* 11 (1959): 74–77.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Stephens, "Zwingli and the Salvation of the Gentiles," 238.

<sup>69</sup> Ulrich Zwingli, *A Short and Clear Exposition of the Christian Faith*, in W. J. Hinke, *The Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli* (Philadelphia: Heidelberg Press, 1922), II:13.

not been a good man and will not be a holy heart or faithful soul from the beginning of the world to the end thereof that you will not see in heaven with God.”<sup>70</sup> In his commentary on Romans 2:14–15, he makes this noteworthy statement: “For though those heathen knew not religion in the letter of it and in what pertains to the sacraments, yet as far as the real thing is concerned, I say, they were holier and more religious than all the little Dominicans and Franciscans that ever lived.”<sup>71</sup>

Some, such as the Polish reformer John Lasko and the Italian reformer Jerome Zanchius, held similar views as Zwingli’s. Zanchius believed that though God had withheld the outward means of salvation from many nations, nonetheless, he believed it was “not . . . improbable but some individuals, in these unenlightened countries, might belong to the secret election of grace; and the habit of faith wrought in these . . . .”<sup>72</sup>

#### Luther and Melancthon

Luther quite adamantly rejected Zwingli’s views in these words:

Tell me, any one of you who wants to be a Christian, what need is there of baptism, the sacrament, Christ, the gospel, or the prophets and Holy Scripture, if such godless heathen, Socrates, Aristides, yes, the cruel Numa, . . . and Scipio the

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<sup>70</sup> Hinke, *The Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, II:271–272.

<sup>71</sup> Stephens, “Zwingli and the Salvation of the Gentiles,” 238.

<sup>72</sup> Jerome Zanchius, *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination Stated and Asserted*, trans. Augustus Toplady (New York: George Lindsay, 1811), 141. Note Zanchius’ distinction between the “habit of faith” which he believed was infused in the elect, and the “act of faith” which followed. For a discussion of Zanchius’ views see also Otto Grundler, “From Seed to Fruition: Calvin’s Notion of the *semen fidei* and Its Aftermath in Reformed Orthodoxy,” in Elsie Anne McKee and Brian G. Armstrong, eds., *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.* (Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1989), 108–115. On John Lasko, see Dr. Augustus Neander, *Lectures on the History of Christian Dogmas*, 2 volumes, ed. Dr. J. L. Jacobi, trans. J. E. Ryland (London: Bell & Daldy, 1866), 2:669.

Epicurean, are saved and sanctified along with the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles in heaven, even though they knew nothing about God, Scripture, the gospel, Christ, baptism, the sacrament, or the Christian faith?<sup>73</sup>

In his *Large Catechism* Luther said, “For where Christ is not preached there is no Holy Spirit creating, calling and gathering the Christian church, outside of which no one can come to the Lord Christ . . . . But because outside the church there is no Gospel, there is no forgiveness there either, and sanctification is therefore an impossibility as well.”<sup>74</sup>

In his *Smalcald Articles*, Luther stated: “And in those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants his Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may [thus] be protected against the enthusiasts . . . .”<sup>75</sup> Melancthon shared Luther’s view: “It is certainly true that outside the Church, where there is no gospel, no sacrament, and no true invocation of God, there is no forgiveness of sins, grace, or salvation, as among the Turks, Jews, and heathen.”<sup>76</sup>

Luther did, however, voice *hopes* that some of the unevangelized might be granted mercy by God. Concerning Cicero, he said, “I hope our Lord God will be gracious to him and his like, though it is not for us to judge and determine this matter. Rather we should remain with the revealed word: ‘He that believeth and is baptized shall

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<sup>73</sup> *Luther’s Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957–1986), 38:289–291.

<sup>74</sup> *Luther’s Large Catechism*, trans. F. Samuel Janzow (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 74–76.

<sup>75</sup> *The Smalcald Articles*, by Martin Luther, Part III, Article 8.

[www.bookofconcord.org/smalcald.php](http://www.bookofconcord.org/smalcald.php) (Accessed October 22, 2020.)

<sup>76</sup> Philip Melancthon, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. Clyde Manschreck (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 212.

be saved' (Mark 16:16). But as to whether God could make some other provision and discriminate among other people in His own time and way, it does not behoove us to know."<sup>77</sup>

In his lecture on Genesis 4, Luther speaks of those outside God's covenant people who were saved by God's "accidental mercy." Yet he speaks of their being saved through "the knowledge of Christ" and due to God's electing grace.<sup>78</sup> In his lecture on Psalm 117, Luther says:

Now if all heathen are to praise God, this assumes that He has become their God. If He is to be their God, then they must know Him, believe in Him, and give up all idolatry. One cannot praise God with an idolatrous mouth or an unbelieving heart. And if they are to believe, they must first hear His Word and thereby receive the Holy Spirit, who through faith purifies and enlightens their hearts. One cannot come to faith or lay hold on the Holy Spirit without hearing the Word first, as St. Paul has said (Rom. 10:14): 'How are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard?' and (Gal. 3:2): 'You have received the Spirit through the proclamation of faith.' If they are to hear His Word, then preachers must be sent to proclaim God's Word to them . . . ."<sup>79</sup> In his comments on Genesis 47:26, he stated: 'I do indeed not exclude the heathen, but I say that they could not be saved in any other way than through the Word of Christ.'<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 1050. For a study of Luther's views regarding Cicero, see Carl P. E. Springer, *Cicero in Heaven: The Roman Rhetor and Luther's Reformation*. Vol. 9 in "St. Andrews studies in Reformation History." (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2017.)

<sup>78</sup> *Luther's Works*, 1:300–306. Speaking of the descendants of Cain, Luther says: "Therefore if any came to the knowledge of Christ and joined the true church, this happened to them not as a result of a promise but because of pure mercy." 1:300–301. Speaking of Gentiles who were saved in Old Testament times, such as Naaman, the King of Nineveh, Nebuchadnezzar, he refers to them as "the elect who had to be saved by accidental mercy." Ibid., 1:302.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 14:9.

<sup>80</sup> Plass, *What Luther Says*, 618.

Yet, Luther does make some remarks which suggest that he recognized a work of grace in the hearts of some prior to their knowing Christ, and which evidences itself in their obedience to what they know of God's law written on their hearts, at least to some degree. In his commentary on Romans 2, he states:

One could ask the question whether the Gentiles, who live outside of Christ but still fulfill the Law naturally and according to conscience, are saved, especially since original sin is not taken away without Christ and no commandment is fulfilled without grace . . . , and salvation is given through Christ alone. To be sure, the apostle seems to make the point here that some of the Gentiles have done and are doing the things of the Law by nature . . . . Original sin God could forgive them (even though they may not have recognized it and confessed it) on account of some act of humility towards God as the highest being that they know. Neither were they bound to the Gospel and to Christ as specifically recognized, as the Jews were not either. Or one can say that all people of this type have been given so much light and grace by an act of prevenient mercy of God as is sufficient for their salvation in their situation, as in the case of Job, Naaman, Jethro, and others . . . . Whatever was lacking (and for this lack they are excused on account of their invincible ignorance) God in His forbearance without doubt supplied so that it might be made perfect through Christ in the future. This is not different from what He did for the children who were uncircumcised and killed for His sake (cf. Matt. 2:16). He does the same thing today for our children.<sup>81</sup>

Here he compares God's grace toward the Gentiles he just described with children who are saved without coming to explicit faith in this life. A bit later in this section of his

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<sup>81</sup> *Luther's Works*, 25:181–182.

commentary, however, when discussing “Gentiles who do by nature things which are of the Law,” Luther says:

I prefer to think (as I did above) of the people who are in the middle between the ungodly Gentiles and the believing Gentiles, those who through some good action directed toward God as much as they were able earned grace which directed them farther, not as though this grace had been given to them because of such merit, because then it would not have been grace, but because they thus prepared their hearts to receive this grace as a gift . . . . They nevertheless still need the grace and mercy of Christ, just as it will be of no advantage to the Jews that they have observed the law externally. Thus both are under sin, no matter how much good they may have done, the Jews according to the inner man because they have observed merely the letter of the Law, the Gentiles in a twofold way, because they have fulfilled the Law only in part and not with their whole heart . . . . (A)ll men, and therefore both of these, are sinners and in need of the mercy of God.<sup>82</sup>

It would seem, then, that though Luther usually spoke in ways that emphatically required faith in Christ for salvation, he believed that prior to obtaining this faith there was a prevenient work of grace that prepared some people for the completion of their salvation.

With regard to those who die outside the faith, in a letter to an inquirer, Luther wrote these interesting words:

If God were to save anyone without faith, he would be acting contrary to his own words and would give himself the lie; yes, he would deny himself. And that is impossible for, as St. Paul declares, God cannot deny himself (II Tim. 2:13). It is as impossible for God to save without faith as it is impossible for divine truth to lie . . . . It would be quite a different question whether God can impart faith to some in the hour of death or after death so that these people could be saved through faith. Who would doubt God’s ability to do that? No one, however, can

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 25:185–186.

prove that he does this. For all that we read is that he has already raised people from the dead and thus granted them faith. But whether he gives faith or not, it is impossible for anyone to be saved without faith. Otherwise every sermon, the gospel, and faith would be vain, false, and deceptive, since the entire gospel makes faith necessary.<sup>83</sup>

Here, he at least entertains the possibility that God may lead some to saving faith at the time of death.

Arminius

Arminius expressed his opinion on this matter in his “Apology Against Thirty-one Defamatory Articles.”<sup>84</sup> He endorses the view presented in this statement: “The ordinary means and instrument of conversation (sic) is the preaching of the Divine word by mortal men, to which therefore all persons are bound; but the Holy Spirit has not so bound himself to this method, as to be unable to operate in an extraordinary way, without the

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<sup>83</sup> “A Letter to Hans Von Rechenberg on the Question Whether a Person who Dies Without Faith Can Be Saved,” in *Luther’s Devotional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968) II:53–54. With regard to praying for the dead, Luther said: “We have no command from God to pray for the dead; hence it is no sin not to pray for them. For what God has not commanded nor forbidden is something with respect to which no man can sin. On the other hand, since God has not more clearly made known to us what the condition of the departed is . . . it is not a sin if you pray for them. But it must be in such a way that you leave it uncertain and speak on this wise: ‘Lord, if the soul is in such a state that it can yet be helped, I pray Thee to be gracious to it.’ And when you have done this once or twice, let it go at that, and commend them to God.” Kirkenpostille, First Sunday after Trinity. Quoted in Joseph Stump, *The Christian Faith: A System of Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1942), 394. Here, he entertains the possibility that some might be granted grace beyond death. At least, he says it is not a sin to pray for this.

<sup>84</sup> Arminius’ views are set forth in Articles XV– XVIII, *The Writings of James Arminius: Translated from the Latin in Three Volumes, Vol. I*, trans. James Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956).



intervention of human aid, when it seemeth good to Himself.”<sup>85</sup> By “extraordinary way” Arminius implies an “internal revelation or the address of an angel.”<sup>86</sup> In another place he says:

The instrumental cause of vocation is the word of God, administered by the aid of man, either by preaching or by writing; and this is *the ordinary* instrument; or it is the divine word immediately proposed by God, inwardly to the mind and will, without human [*operam*] aid or endeavor; and this is *extraordinary*. The word employed, in both these cases, is that both of the law and of the gospel, subordinate to each other in their separate services.<sup>87</sup>

Arminius also embraces the belief that, “God will bestow more grace upon that man who does what is in him by the power of divine grace which is already granted to him, according to the declaration of Christ, *To him that hath shall be given.*”<sup>88</sup> In another place he says: “But consider whether a promise is not contained in that declaration of Christ, ‘Unto every one which hath shall be given,’ by which God pledges himself to illuminate, with supernatural grace, him who makes a right use of natural grace, or at least uses it with as little wrong as is possible for him.”<sup>89</sup> That is to say that if a person “profitably uses” the grace he already has, God will grant him more grace (which would include the revelation of the gospel, whether by ordinary or extraordinary means).<sup>90</sup> He

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 1:330–331.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 1:331.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 2:104–105.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 1:324.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 3:486.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 1:329. Henry C. Thiessen (1883–1947) would appear to espouse the same view as Arminius: “Does He not extend sufficient grace, even to the heathen . . . , to enable him to seek for more light and to accept Christ when he learns about Him? Is not the knowledge of God gained from nature the basis on which Paul declares that the heathen are ‘without excuse’ (Rom. 1:20)? Would they not, if acting on the ability that grace bestows on them, seek for the true Gospel and be able to accept it when they found it?”

does emphasize that even if conversion comes in an extraordinary way, “no one is converted except by this very word, and by the meaning of this word, which God sends by men to those communities or nations whom He hath purposed to unite to himself” (that is by the gospel).<sup>91</sup> Whereas Arminius attributes the revelation of saving truth to a person’s “profitable use of grace already granted,” Calvin attributes it to the “secret and inscrutable counsel” and “free goodness of God.”<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, Calvin and Arminius (as well as Luther) appear to be agreed that the instrument of conversion is the word of God, whether communicated by ordinary or extraordinary means.

### Confessions of the Reformation Era

The views of the Reformers were endorsed in large measure by the Reformed and Lutheran confessions, which voiced the conviction that salvation is mediated only through the gospel. This can be seen, for example, in the French Confession of Faith

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Henry C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1949), 231. Likewise, Winfried Corduan appears to embrace a similar view. He states: “The pattern in the New Testament is this: There are several instances in which a person or group of persons has come to have some faith in God and is attempting to be faithful to what they know of him. In these cases God does provide the means by which they can hear the full gospel and exercise explicit faith, which they do.” Winfried Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 166. H. A. Ironside voices a similar sentiment: “Wherever a man is found in all the world who turns in repentance to God and takes the place of a lost sinner and trusts God for deliverance, He will make Himself responsible to give that man light enough to be saved.” H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (New York: Loizeaux Bros., 1943), 254. Also, A. T. Pierson: “If there be anywhere a soul feeling after God, following the light of nature and conscience, in hope and faith that the Great Unknown will somehow give more light, and lead to life and blessedness, we may safely leave such to His fatherly care.” A. T. Pierson, *The Crisis of Mission: Or, the Voice out of the Cloud* (New York: Carter & Brothers, 1886), 297.

<sup>91</sup> Arminius, *Writings*, 1:331.

<sup>92</sup> See note 61 above.

written primarily by Calvin (1559), which affirmed that “we enjoy Christ only through the gospel.”<sup>93</sup> The Augsburg Confession (1530) of the Lutherans states: “For the Holy Spirit is given to people through the Word and sacraments, the tools through which God works. Wherever and whenever it pleases God, this ministry creates faith in those who hear the gospel.”<sup>94</sup> The Canons of Dort (1619) state: “And that men may be brought to believe, God mercifully sends the messengers of these most joyful tidings to whom He will and at what time He pleases . . . .”<sup>95</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) states: “All those whom God hath predestined unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call by his Word and Spirit . . . to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ . . . .”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *The French Confession of Faith* (1559), XXV, [www.apostles-creed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/French-Gallican-Confession-1559.pdf](http://www.apostles-creed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/French-Gallican-Confession-1559.pdf) (Accessed October 22, 2020.)

<sup>94</sup> *The Augsburg Confession*, Article V. This article also goes on to “condemn the Anabaptists and others, who imagine that the Holy Spirit can come to people without the external Word, through their own preparations, thoughts, and actions.” *The Unaltered Augsburg Confession A.D. 1530*, trans. Glen L. Thompson (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, n.d.), 5. *The Formula of Concord* (1577) affirms the necessity of the word in Section II, “On Free Will,” Affirmative Thesis 3, “God the Holy Ghost, however, does not effect conversion without means, but uses for this purpose the preaching and hearing of God’s word . . . .” It also denies illumination apart from the preached word in the same section, Negative Thesis 6: “Also, we reject and condemn the error of the Enthusiasts, who imagine that God without means, also without the use of the holy Sacraments, draws men to Himself, and enlightens, justifies, and saves them.” *The Epitome of the Formula of Concord*, [www.bookofconcord.org/fc-ep.php](http://www.bookofconcord.org/fc-ep.php) (Accessed October 22, 2020.)

<sup>95</sup> Henry Petersen, *The Canons of Dort: A Study Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1968), 94.

<sup>96</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), X:1. [www.graceandtruthrpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Westminster\\_Confession1647.pdf](http://www.graceandtruthrpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Westminster_Confession1647.pdf) (Accessed October 22, 2020.) The same sentiments are found in *The Savoy Declaration* (1658), XX, and in *The Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), XX.

As is the case with the statement just cited, some of the confessions likewise emphasize God's determination of the times and places where the gospel is proclaimed. The Canons of Dort reject those who teach "That the reason why God sends the gospel to one people rather than to another is not merely and solely the good pleasure of God, but rather the fact that one people is better and worthier than another to whom the gospel is not communicated."<sup>97</sup>

The Second Helvetic Confession (1566) written by Zwingli's successor Heinrich Bullinger (and accepted by a number of national Reformed churches) affirms that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the word of God by the preaching of Christ."<sup>98</sup> Nonetheless, it not surprisingly goes on to say (in agreement with Zwingli's views): "At the same time we also recognize that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry, for that is in his power, but we speak of the usual way of instructing men . . . ."<sup>99</sup>

Many of the Reformed confessions also explicitly reject the notion that the "light of nature" or other religions are of any saving value. The 39 Articles of the Church of England (1563) states: "They also are to be accursed who presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the light of Nature. For Holy Scripture doth set

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<sup>97</sup> Henry Petersen, *The Canons of Dort*, 99. See also *The Helvetic Consensus* (1675), Canon XVII. "The Formula Consensus Helvetica (1675)," trans. Martin I. Klauber, *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990), 103–123. [www.apostles-creed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Creed\\_Helvetic.pdf](http://www.apostles-creed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Creed_Helvetic.pdf) (Accessed October 22, 2020.)

<sup>98</sup> *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), Chapter I. [www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm](http://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm) (Accessed October 22, 2020.)

<sup>99</sup> *Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter I.

out unto us only the name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.”<sup>100</sup> The Canons of Dort rejected those who teach, “That in election unto faith this condition is beforehand demanded, namely, that man should use the light of nature aright, be pious, meek, fit for eternal life, as if on these things election were in any way dependent.”<sup>101</sup> They also reject as promoting error those who teach:

That the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (by which they understand the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, that is, the evangelical or saving grace, and salvation itself. And that in this way God on His part shows Himself ready to reveal Christ unto all men, since He applies to all sufficiently and efficiently the means necessary to conversion.<sup>102</sup>

The Westminster Confession of Faith states: “(M)uch less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to so frame their lives according to the light of nature and the laws of that religion they do profess; and to assert and maintain that they may is very pernicious, and is to be

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<sup>100</sup> *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (1563), Article XVIII. Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (Oxford: At the University Press, 1831), 239.

<sup>101</sup> Henry Petersen, *The Canons of Dort*, 98.

<sup>102</sup> Henry Petersen, *The Canons of Dort*, 108.

detested.”<sup>103</sup> The Helvetic Consensus (1675) also rejects the idea that “God will provide the light of grace to those who use the light of nature correctly . . . .”<sup>104</sup>

The belief that the opportunity for salvation is limited to this life was also implied in some of the confessions by their statements that the souls of the unbelieving dead remain forever under judgment.<sup>105</sup>

During the post-reformation era a debate ensued among Protestants, between those who were convinced that an explicit faith in Christ was necessary for salvation, and those who believed that an implicit faith in God was sufficient (or who at least believed that God would grant greater grace to those who respond to the “light of nature”). The former view (that explicit faith was necessary) was endorsed by most conservative Calvinists and Lutherans. Attention will be given to this discussion in the following chapters.

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<sup>103</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, X:IV. See note 96 above. Note also X:III: “Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit . . . . So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.” Ibid. Anthony Tuckney, one of the authors of the Westminster Confession, states that those “incapable of being outwardly called” are in his words “distracted persons . . . which want the use of reason.” Quoted in Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 249. It was not the intention of the writers of the Confession that this phrase be interpreted as applying to those outside the reach of the gospel (which W. G. T. Shedd would later contend, as will be shown below).

<sup>104</sup> *The Helvetic Consensus*, Canon XX. See note 97 above.

<sup>105</sup> *Scottish Confession of Faith* (1560) ch. 17, [www.apostles-creed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Scots\\_Confession\\_1560.pdf](http://www.apostles-creed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Scots_Confession_1560.pdf). (Accessed October 20, 2020.) *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) ch. 26, see note 98 above; *Westminster Confession* (1646) 32:1, see note 96. above; *Westminster Larger Catechism* (1647) question 86, [www.bpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/D-Icatechism.pdf](http://www.bpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/D-Icatechism.pdf) (Accessed October 22, 2020.)

### Chapter 3

#### *The Reformed and Calvinistic Views*

##### Calvinists with Particularist Views

Among the heirs of the Reformation, defenders of the view that explicit faith in Christ is necessary for salvation were many.<sup>106</sup> One of the central features of Reformed

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<sup>106</sup> An exhaustive list would be impossible. But the following are representative of the defenders of the necessity of explicit faith in Christ. Among the Reformed / Calvinists the following might be mentioned, in relative chronological order: Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583), *The Summe of the Christian Religion*, trans. A. R. (London: James Young, 1645), 132–142, 352, 359, 378; Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus, on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Columbus OH: Scott & Bascom, 1852), 114, 292–293, 322–323; William Perkins (1558–1602), “The Golden Chain,” in *The Workes of That Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Universitie of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*, 3 volumes (London: John Legatt, 1626), 1:111–112; William Pemble (1591–1623), *Vindiciae Gratiae. A Plea For Grace. More Especially The Grace of Faith . . . . Fourth Edition* (Oxford: Henry Hall, 1659); John Davenant (1572–1641), “A Dissertation on the Death of Christ as to its extent and special benefits,” in *An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians*, 2 volumes (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1832, originally published 1650), 2:531–569; Peter Du Moulin (1568–1658), *The Anatomy of Arminianism* (London: Nathaniel Newbery, 1620); Peter Du Moulin, *A Treatise of the Knowledge of God* (London: A. Mathews, 1634); Samuel Maresius (1599–1673), *Theologiae Elencticae Nova Synopsis*, 2 volumes (Groningen: Joannem Nicolaum, 1646–48); Anthony Tuckney (1599–1670), *None but Christ, or a Sermon Upon Acts 4.12 . . . To which is annexed, an Enquiry after what hope may be had of the salvation of Heathens, Those of the old world, the Jews and others before Christ, Such as die Infants, and Idiots, etc. now under the Gospel* (London: John Rothwell and S. Gellibrand, 1654); John Owen (1616–1683), “A Display of Arminianism,” Chapter XL “Whether salvation may be attained without the knowledge of, or faith in, Christ Jesus,” in *The Works of John Owen*, 16 volumes, ed. William H. Goold (Banner of Truth Trust, 1965–), X:107–114; John Owen, *Biblical Theology or The Nature, Origin, Development, and Study of Theological Truth, In Six Books, An English interpretation from the Latin text of William Goold, D.D.*, ed. Stephen P. Westcott (Orlando, FL: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994, originally published 1661): 21–144, 169–200, 839–854; Francis Turretin (1623–1687), *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 volumes (Phillipsburg NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992, originally published 1679–1685), 1:6–16, 390–393, 402–3, 683–685, 2:205–217, 501–542; Herman Witsius (1636–1708), *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man, Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity* 2 volumes, trans. William Crookshank (London: T. Tegg & Son, 1837), 1:309–337; Herman Witsius, *Sacred*

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*Dissertations on what is commonly called The Apostles' Creed*, 2 volumes, trans. Donald Fraser (Edinburgh: A. Fullerton & Co., 1823), 16–41, 128–132; William Beveridge (1637–1708), “Christ the Only Savior,” in *Twenty-Six Sermons on Various Subjects, Selected from the Works of the Right Rev. William Beveridge, D.D.* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1850), 189–212; William Beveridge, *Ecclesia Anglicana Ecclesia Catholica; or, The Doctrine of the Church of England Consonant to Scripture, Reason, and Fathers: in A Discourse Upon The Thirty-Nine Articles Agreed Upon in the Convocation Held at London MDLXII*, 2 volumes (Oxford, 1840), 2:90–96; William Beveridge, *The Theological Works of William Beveridge, D.D.*, 10 volumes (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843–1852), 1:64–66; Thomas Halyburton (1674–1712), *Natural Religion Insufficient, and revealed necessary, to man's happiness in his present state, or A rational inquiry into the principle of the modern deists* (Albany NY: H.C. Southwick, 1812, originally published 1714); John Edwards (1637–1716), *Veritas Redux. Evangelical Truths Restored*, 2 volumes (London: Jonathon Robinson, John Lawrence, John Wyatt, 1707), 1:426–447; Thomas Ridgeley (1667–1734), *A Body of Divinity*: 2 volumes (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855, originally published 1731–1733), 1:635–647; Johnathan Edwards (1703–1758) *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 volumes (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1998, originally published 1834), 1:593, 2:158–159, 253; John Gill (1697–1771), *Body of Divinity* (Atlanta, GA: Turner Lassetter, 1957, originally published 1839), 543; John Brown (1722–1787), *The Systematic Theology of John Brown of Haddington* (Originally published as *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion*, 1782, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002), 29–39, 341–349; John Witherspoon (1723–1794), *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 4 volumes (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1802), 2:353–355; John Dick (1764–1833), *Lectures on Theology*, 2 volumes (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851), 1:144–49, 332–333; John Dick, *Lectures on Divine Sovereignty, Election, The Atonement, Justification, and Regeneration . . .* Third Edition (London: John Gladding, 1846), 330–398; George Payne (1781–1848), *Lectures on Christian Theology*, 2 volumes (London: John Snow, 1850), 206–207; George Hill, *Lectures in Divinity* (New York: Robert Carter, 1856), 601–617; Charles Hodge (1797–1878), *Systematic Theology*, 3 volumes (New York: Scribners, 1906, originally published 1871), 2:646–649; Robert L. Dabney (1820–1898), *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971, originally published 1871), 587–588; Robert L. Dabney, “The World White to Harvest: Reap, or it Perishes,” in *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney*, 3 volumes, ed. C. F. Vaughan, (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 1:575–594; Heinrich Heppe (1820–1879), *Reformed Dogmatics*, revised and ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), 510–542; Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1950, originally published 1903), 401–438; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 465–476, 504; James Oliver Buswell (1895–1977), *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 1:348–355, 2:157–175.



theology is the belief that salvation is extended to God's elect through his efficacious grace, and that this comes through God's call which is both external (through the word) and internal (by the Spirit). William Pemble, for example, spoke of the calling to the elect as of two kinds: "Inward, in the work of the Spirit of grace upon our hearts, regenerating and sanctifying them by the infusion of holinesse . . . . Outward, in the preaching of the Word calling us to Faith and Repentance; whereto the Spirit joynes his secret vertue to make it effectuall in whom he pleaseth."<sup>107</sup> Jonathan Edwards also wrote of the necessity of the gospel: "It is the only means that the true God has made successful in his providence, to give the nations of the world the knowledge of himself; and to bring them off from the worship of false gods."<sup>108</sup> With regard to the external call, the preached or written word is viewed as God's "ordinary" means of salvation.

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<sup>107</sup> William Pemble, *Vindiciae Gratiae*, 34.

<sup>108</sup> *Works*, 2:253. In recent years a debate has ensued over whether Edwards may have entertained the possibility that some might be saved apart from explicit faith in Christ, but through an immediate inner transformation of their disposition (regeneration). This would have been a view similar to that of Zanchius, whom Edwards did praise as "the best of the protestant writers in his judgment" (*Works*, 2:611). Yet Edwards did clearly state to the contrary: "When Christ speaks of men being drawn to him, he does not mean any preparation of disposition antecedent to their having the gospel, but a being converted to Christ by faith in the gospel . . . ." *Works*, 2:558. He also stated: "Therefore hearing is absolutely necessary to faith; because hearing is necessary to understanding . . . . The reasons which induce the soul to love, must first be understood, before they can have a reasonable influence on the heart . . . . Such is the nature of man, that no knowledge can come at the heart but through the door of the understanding: and there can be no spiritual knowledge of that of which there is not first a rational knowledge. It is impossible that any one should see the truth or excellency of any doctrine of the gospel, who knows not what that doctrine is." *Works*, 2:158. Those arguing in favor of the view that Edwards held a more inclusive position include: Anri Morimoto, *Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Anri Morimoto, "Salvation as Fulfillment of Being: The Soteriology of Jonathan Edwards and Its Implications for Christian Mission," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 20.1 (1999): 13–23; Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Steven M. Studebaker,

Francis Turretin writes:

I say the Spirit does not act without the word. For since . . . God wills here to act in a manner suitable to a rational nature and, according to the apostle, ‘faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God’ (Rom. 10:17), it is evident that the word ought necessarily to concur with the Spirit for our conversion from the order of God and the constitution of the covenant of grace (Is. 59:21) and without it the Spirit does not work faith in adults.<sup>109</sup>

John Owen stated this view very emphatically:

(W)e absolutely deny that there is any saving mercy of God toward [the unevangelized heathen] revealed in the Scripture, which should give us the least intimation of their attaining everlasting happiness. For, not to consider the corruption and universal disability of nature to do anything that is good (‘without Christ we can do nothing,’ John 15:5), nor yet the sinfulness of their best works and actions, the ‘sacrifice of the wicked being an abomination unto the LORD,’

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“Jonathan Edwards’ Pneumatological Concept of Grace and Dispositional Soteriology: Resources for an Evangelical Inclusivism,” *Pro Ecclesia* XIV.3 (Summer 2005), 324–339. McDermott quotes Edwards concerning Jews who were saved during the Old Testament era, that they “did not receive Christ in any conscious or explicit manner, but they had the proper disposition, which alone is necessary for salvation.” (McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods*, 134.) Those arguing against this view include: John J. Bombaro, “Jonathan Edwards’ Vision of Salvation,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003), 45–67; Greg D. Gilbert, “The Nations Will Worship: Jonathan Edwards and the Salvation of the Heathen,” *Trinity Journal* 23.1 (Spring 2002), 53–76. The view of Edwards’ son, Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (1745–1801), is interesting: “In favor of the salvation of the heathen, it is sometimes said, if a heathen be truly virtuous and holy, what will become of him? Will he be cast off merely because he is ignorant of Christ; though if he had known him, he would most cheerfully have received him as his Savior? On this I observe, no doubt if any heathen be truly virtuous and holy; if he love God supremely, as an infinitely great, wise, holy and good God, and his neighbor as himself, he will be saved. But the question is, whether any such persons can be found among the heathen . . . . Therefore we have no evidence that any one of them was possessed of true virtue or holiness, and on that ground there is no reason to believe, that any of them are saved.” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, D.D.: Late President of Union College*, 2 volumes (Andover: Allen, Morrill & Wardwell, 1842), 2:465–466.

<sup>109</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:526.

Proverbs 15:8 ('Evil trees cannot bring forth good fruit; men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles,' Matthew 7:16–17);—the word of God is plain, that 'without faith it is impossible to please God,' Hebrews 11:6; that 'he that believeth not is condemned,' Mark 16:16; that no nation or person can be blessed but in the seed of Abraham, Genesis 12:3. And the 'blessing of Abraham' comes upon the Gentiles only 'through Jesus Christ,' Galatians 3:14. He is 'the way, the truth, and the life,' John 14:6. 'None cometh unto the Father but by him.' He is the 'door,' by which those that do not enter are 'without,' with 'dogs and idolaters,' Revelation 22:15. So that 'other foundation' of blessedness 'can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ,' I Corinthians 3:11. In brief, do but compare these two places of St. Paul, Romans 8:30, where he sheweth that none are glorified but those that are called; and Romans 10:14–15, where he declares that all calling is instrumentally by the preaching of the word and gospel; and it will evidently appear that no salvation can be granted unto them on whom the Lord hath so far poured out his indignation as to deprive them of the sole means thereof, Christ Jesus. And to those that are otherwise minded, I give only this necessary caution,—Let them take heed, lest, whilst they endeavor to invent new ways to heaven for others, by so doing, they lose the true way themselves.<sup>110</sup>

I will quote Charles Hodge (1797–1878) at some length, because he represents very well the views common to conservative theologians who believed salvation comes only through explicit faith in Christ. He states:

It has ever been and still is, the doctrine of the Church universal in almost all its parts, that it is only in and through the Scriptures that the knowledge necessary to salvation is revealed to men. The Rationalists, as did the Pelagians, hold that what they call 'the light of nature,' reveals enough of divine truth to secure the return of the soul to God, if it be properly improved. And many Arminians, as well as Mystics, hold that the supernatural teaching of the Spirit is granted in sufficient

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<sup>110</sup> John Owen, *Works*, 10:112–113.

measure to every man to secure his salvation, if he yields himself up to its guidance. It would be very agreeable to our natural feelings to believe this, as it would to believe that all men will be saved. But such is not the doctrine of the Bible: and it requires but little humility to believe that God is better as well as wiser than man; that his ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts; and that whatever he ordains is best . . . . That the Scriptures do teach that saving knowledge is contained only in the Bible, and consequently that those ignorant of its contents, are ignorant of the way of salvation, is plain.— 1.

Because the Scriptures both of the Old and of the New Testament, constantly represent the heathen as in a state of total ignorance. They are declared by the ancient prophets to be afar off from God; to be worshippers of idols, to be sunk in sin. The people of Israel were separated from other nations for the express purpose of preserving the knowledge of the true religion. To them were committed the oracles of God. In the New Testament the same representation is given of their condition. It is said, They know not God. The Apostle proves at length in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, that they are universally and justly in a state of condemnation. He exhorts the Ephesians to call to mind their condition before they received the gospel. They were ‘without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.’ (Eph. ii. 12.) Such is the uniform teaching of the Word of God. It is utterly inconsistent with these representations, to assume that the heathen had such knowledge of God, either by tradition, or by inward revelation, as was sufficient to lead them to holiness and God. 2. This doctrine follows also from the nature of the gospel. It claims to be the only method of salvation. It takes for granted that men are in a state of sin and condemnation, from which they are unable to deliver themselves. It teaches that for the salvation of men the Eternal Son of God assumed our nature, obeyed and suffered in our stead, and having died for our sins, rose again for our justification; that, so far as adults are concerned, the intelligent and voluntary acceptance of Christ as our God and Saviour is the one indispensable condition of salvation; that there is no other name under heaven whereby men can

be saved. It provides, therefore, for a Church and a Ministry whose great duty it is to make known to men this great salvation. All this takes for granted that without this knowledge, men must perish in their sins. 3. This is further evident from the nature of the message which the ministers of the gospel are commissioned to deliver. They are commanded to go into all the world, and to say to every creature, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.' 'He that believeth on the Son, hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son, shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.' Where is the propriety of such a message if men can be saved without the knowledge of Christ, and consequently without faith in Him. 4. This necessity of a knowledge of the gospel is expressly asserted in the Scriptures. Our Lord not only declares that no man can come unto the Father, but by Him; that no man knoweth the Father, but the Son, and he to whom the Son shall reveal Him; but He says expressly, 'He that believeth not shall be damned.' (Mark xvi. 16; John iii. 18.) But faith without knowledge is impossible. The Apostle John says, 'He that hath the Son hath life; he that hath not the Son of God, hath not life.' (1 John v. 12.) The knowledge of Christ is not only the condition of life, but it is life; and without that knowledge, the life in question cannot exist. Him to know is life eternal. Paul, therefore, said, 'I count all this but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.' (Phil. iii. 8.) Christ is not only the giver, but the object of life. Those exercises which are the manifestations of spiritual life terminate on Him; without the knowledge of Him, therefore, there can be no such exercises; as without the knowledge of God there can be no religion. It is consequently, as the Apostle teaches, through the knowledge of Christ, that God 'hath called us to glory and virtue.' (2 Peter i. 3.) To be without Christ is to be without hope, and without God. (Eph. ii. 12.) The Apostle Paul, while asserting the general vocation of men, saying, 'Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord, shall be saved,' immediately adds, 'How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?' (Rom. x. 14.) Invocation implies faith; faith implies knowledge; knowledge implies objective teaching. 'Faith cometh by

hearing, and hearing by the word of God.’ (Verse 17.) There is no faith, therefore, where the gospel is not heard; and where there is no faith, there is no salvation . . . . This is indeed an awful doctrine. But are not the words of our Lord also awful, ‘Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat; because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it’? (Matt. vii. 13, 14.) Is not the fact awful which stares every man in the face, that the great majority even of those who hear the gospel reject its offer of mercy? Facts are as mysterious as doctrines. If we must submit to the one, we may as well submit to the other. Our Lord has taught us, in view of facts or doctrines which try our faith, to remember the infinite wisdom and rectitude of God, and say, ‘Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in Thy sight.’ The proper effect of the doctrine that the knowledge of the gospel is essential to the salvation of adults, instead of exciting opposition to God’s word or providence, is to prompt us to greatly increased exertion to send the gospel to those who are perishing for lack of knowledge.<sup>111</sup>

However, many (perhaps most) Calvinists also acknowledge that God may extend his call to salvation in an “extraordinary” manner, apart from the working of human instrumentality. Thomas Ridgeley, for example, wrote: “For we know not when, to whom, or by what means, God will reveal Christ to those who now sit in darkness, and are unacquainted with the way of salvation by him. And as for the possibility of God’s revealing Christ in a secret way to those who do not sit under the sound of the gospel, we will not deny it.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:646–648.

<sup>112</sup> Ridgeley, *A Body of Divinity*, 636. Not all, however, allowed for such extraordinary means. The Scottish theologian John Dick (1764–1833) said that to affirm that God does use means other than the preached or written word is “a gratuitous assumption” and “downright presumption.” *Lectures on Theology*, 1:332–333. Likewise, Presbyterian theologian John L. Girardeau (1825–98) wrote: “The hypothesis of an immediate revelation of the plan of redemption to the heathen is too wild and fanciful to merit

John Owen also acknowledged this possibility: “But the question is not whether a Gentile believing in Christ may be saved, or whether God revealed himself and his Son extraordinarily to some of them. For shall we straiten the breast and shorten the arm of the Almighty, as though he might not do what he will with his own?”<sup>113</sup>

Francis Turretin was of the same opinion:

Calling is again distinguished into ordinary and mediate, and extraordinary and immediate. The former God employs in the ordinary dispensation of his grace by the intervention of external means (or the ministry of men). The latter, however, is usually exercised beyond the order, with respect to certain individuals whom God immediately and of himself (without the intervention of men) calls and turns to himself (such as was seen in the thief, in Paul and others immediately called by God).<sup>114</sup>

Though emphasizing that the proclamation of the gospel by human means is God’s ordinary method, Charles Hodge did allow for the possibility of an extraordinary

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serious refutation.” John L. Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism* (Columbia, SC: W. J. Duffie & New York: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1890), 386. Referring to Paul’s statement in Ephesians 2:12–13, he says: “Here he tells the Ephesian believers that when they were heathen they were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, that is to say, that they had no connection with the church of God; and in consequence of that fact that they were strangers to the covenants of promise, by which he means to say that they were ignorant of the gospel. Because they were not in contact with the church they could have no knowledge of the gospel. And because they were ignorant of the gospel, they were, he goes on to argue, without Christ; plainly intimating that there can be no saving relation to Christ apart from the knowledge of the gospel. Further, because they were without Christ, he declares that they were without God. Having in their heathen condition had no saving relation to Christ they could have had no saving relation to God, and therefore they had no hope. In this passage the apostle plainly teaches that the heathen, apart from the evangelizing labors of Christian missionaries, have no saving knowledge of the gospel, and that so long as that ignorance continues their condition is hopeless.” Ibid., 386–387.

<sup>113</sup> John Owen, *Works*, 10:111.

<sup>114</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:503.

revelation in some cases. In his *Systematic Theology* he states: “The call in question is made only through the Word of God, as heard or read . . . . It is not denied that God may, and in past ages certainly did, convey this saving knowledge by direct revelation without the intervention of any external means of instruction. Such was the fact in the case of the Apostle Paul. And such cases, for all we know, may even now occur. But these are miracles. This is not the ordinary method.”<sup>115</sup>

Later in the same work, he says:

There can, therefore, be no doubt that the Scriptures teach that the Word of God is the specially appointed means for the sanctification and the salvation of men. This doctrine of the Bible is fully confirmed by the experience of the Church and of the world. That experience teaches,—First, that no evidences of sanctification, no indications of the saving influences of the Spirit are found where the Word of God is unknown. This is not saying that none such occur. We know from the Bible itself, ‘That God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him’ (Acts x. 34, 35.) No one doubts that it is in the power of God to call whom He pleases from among the heathen and to reveal to them enough truth to secure their salvation. Nevertheless it remains a fact patent to all eyes that the nations where the Bible is unknown sit in darkness. The absence of the Bible is just as distinctly discernible as the absence of the sun. The declaration of the Scriptures is that ‘the whole world lieth in wickedness’ (1 John v. 19); and that declaration is confirmed by all history.<sup>116</sup>

Heinrich Heppe was another Reformed theologian who recognized God’s extraordinary means of communicating the gospel: “‘Without the Word God calls man only in unusual ways, unfamiliar to us.’—*Leiden Synopsis* (XXX, 33): God does not

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<sup>115</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:646.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:468–469.



always apply the two methods of calling possible to Himself (i.e., outward and inward calling), but calls some to Him only by the inner light and leading of the H. Spirit without the ministry of His outward Word. This method of calling is of course *per se* sufficient for salvation, but very rare, extraordinary and unknown to us.”<sup>117</sup>

It should be emphasized, however, that this “extraordinary” means should not be identified with the so-called “inner light” which groups such as the Quakers believed was universally disseminated among men.<sup>118</sup> These Reformed theologians were speaking of

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<sup>117</sup> Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 514.

<sup>118</sup> For the Quaker understanding of God’s immediate revelation to all men, see Douglas Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986), 57–113; *The Select Works of William Penn*, 3 volumes. Fourth Edition (London: William Phillips, George Yard, 1825), 1:227–330; Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity: Being an Explanation and Vindication of the Principles and Doctrines of the People Called Quakers* (Philadelphia: John Fagan, 1867, originally published 1678). Note Barclay’s statement: “First, That God, who out of his infinite love sent his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, into the world, who tasted death for every man, hath given to every man, whether Jew or Gentile, Turk or Scythian, Indian or Barbarian, of whatsoever nation, country, or place a certain day or time of visitation; during which day or time it is possible for them to be saved, and to partake of the fruit of Christ’s death . . . . Secondly, That for this end God hath communicated and given unto every man a measure of the light of his own Son, a measure of grace, or a measure of the Spirit, which the scripture expresses by several names . . . . Thirdly, That God, in and by this Light and Seed, invites, calls, exhorts, and strives with every man, in order to save him; which, as it is received and not resisted, works the salvation of all, even of those who are ignorant of the death and sufferings of Christ, and of Adams fall . . . .” Barclay, *ibid.*, 131. Peter Adam describes the Quaker approach to missions: “Fox firmly believed in ‘that of God in every man’, and so the task of the Quaker missionary was to alert people to the God within, to encourage them to respond to this God and to learn from the witness of their internal revelation.” Peter Adam, *Hearing God’s Words: Exploring Biblical Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 188–190. John Owen offered a critique of the notion of the “inner light” in his *Biblical Theology*, 839–854. The foremost critic of the Quakers was Charles Leslie (1650–1722) who wrote *The Snake in the Grass: or, Satan Transformed into an Angel of Light, Discovering the Deep and Unsuspected Subtilty (sic) Which is Couched Under the Pretended Simplicity, of Many of the Principal Leaders of Those People Called Quakers* (London: Charles Brome, 1698).

an extraordinary communication of the gospel to those without the normal means of hearing God's word.

In responding to the question of why one individual or nation is granted the ordinary means of salvation and others are not, the response of John Davenant (1572–1641) was not uncommon: “We must . . . refer it to . . . the free good pleasure of God in granting or denying these means. He by his special providence directs them to be administered by his servants, as may be seen Acts xvi. 6, 7, *They were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia; after they were come to Mysia, they essayed to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit suffered them not.*”<sup>119</sup>

#### Calvinists with Inclusivist Views

There have been some among the Reformed who have held that God does implant the seed of faith and regeneration apart from any means at all (that is, apart even from any ordinary or extraordinary revelation of Christ) . . . not only in infants but in some adults. This was the view of Zanchius and of Zwingli, as noted above, and apparently also of the Calvinist Augustus Toplady (1740–1778), who wrote: “No objection can hence arise against the salvation of such as die in infancy (all of whom are undoubtedly saved): nor yet against the salvation of God's elect among the Heathens, Mahometans (sic), and others. The Holy Spirit is able to inspire the grace of virtual faith into those hearts (especially at the moment of dissolution), which are incapable of exerting the

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<sup>119</sup> John Davenant, *A Dissertation on the Death of Christ*, 2:484. Girardeau stated: “God's decretive will, as indicated in the measures of his providence, must . . . be regarded as implicated in the fact that the gospel is not actually communicated to every individual of the race.” Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism*, 382.

explicit (sic) act of faith.”<sup>120</sup> It will be remembered that Toplady was the translator of Zanchius’ work on predestination, in which he set forth a similar view. Toplady’s optimism about the number of the saved is revealed in his response to the charge that Calvinism was a “gloomy” doctrine:

Is it gloomy to believe that the far greater part of the human race are made for endless happiness? There can, I think, be no reasonable doubt entertained, concerning the salvation of very young persons. If (as some, who have versed themselves in this kind of speculation, affirm) about one-half of mankind die in infancy;—And if, as indubitable observation proves, a very considerable number of the remaining half die in early childhood;— And if, as there is the strongest reason to think, many millions of those who live to mature years, in every successive generation, have their names in the Book of life: then what a very small portion, comparatively, of the human species, falls under the decree of preterition and non-redemption!<sup>121</sup>

It should also be noted that Toplady was not alone in suggesting that some among the unevangelized may be regenerated at the moment of death (in his words, “at the moment of dissolution”). Historian John Hunt (1826–1907) states that in answer to the problem of the unevangelized: “Some divines had tried to obviate it by supposing that Christ was revealed to the heathen at the moment of death.”<sup>122</sup> Presbyterian William Annan (1804–1882) noted that, “Calvinists indulge the pleasing hope, that especially in

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<sup>120</sup> Augustus Toplady, *The Works of Augustus Toplady: A New Edition. In One Volume. Printed verbatim from the first edition of his works, 1794* (London: J. J. Chidley, 1844), 811. It does appear that Calvin intimated as much in his comments on Romans 10:13, “It hence follows, that the grace of God penetrates into the abyss of death, if only it be sought there . . .” (See chapter 2 above, n. 64).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>122</sup> John Hunt, *Religious Thought in England: From the Reformation to the End of the Last Century*, 3 volumes (London: Strahan & Co., 1870), 1:443–444.

the last struggle, some of the heathen may be thus extraordinarily enlightened and saved.”<sup>123</sup> W. G. T. Shedd (1820–1894) also advocated this view. Referring to those who are regenerated either by God’s special revelation, or by his “unwritten revelation,” Shedd says: “These are all regenerated before or at death.”<sup>124</sup>

Likewise, Professor Samuel B. Wylie, D.D. (1773–1852) wrote in *The Presbyterian Magazine*:

Whether it be his purpose to save any of the heathen, living and dying without any opportunity of external *objective* revelation, by some extraordinary *subjective* manifestation of himself, as a God in Christ, to them, in their *last moments*, is a point we can neither affirm nor deny. We know it not. ‘Secret things belong unto God: revealed things to us and our children.’ We dare not limit the Holy One of Israel, from extending the exuberance of his grace, to whomsoever he will, even without the external means of knowledge, by the extraordinary communications of his Spirit. Yet we have no *positive* evidence of such extension. All we can say is, that we think it involves no contradiction to the attributes of the Divinity, or to any declaration in the sacred oracles. Philanthropy, in all such cases, will incline to the side of mercy.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> William Annan, “Appendix II: The Heathen World—Its State and Prospects,” in *The Difficulties of Arminian Methodism: A Series of Letters Addressed to Bishop Simpson of Pittsburgh*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Philadelphia: Wm. S. & Alfred Martien, 1860), 331–332.

<sup>124</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, “The Heathen: A Symposium,” *Methodist Review* 71 [May 1889]: 369–370.

<sup>125</sup> Samuel B. Wylie, “On the Duration of Future Punishment,” *The Presbyterian Magazine* 1.3 (March 1821) Philadelphia: Little & Henry, 124–125. (It is admittedly unclear as to whether the above comments are those of Samuel Wylie or of the editor of *The Presbyterian Magazine*, as they appear in a subnote to the main body of the article.) G. W. Leibniz (1646–1716) also embraced this view. He wrote: “And I believe that God always gives sufficient aid and grace to those who have good will, that is to say, who do not reject this grace by a fresh sin. Thus I do not admit the damnation of children dying unbaptized or outside the Church, or the damnation of adult persons who have acted according to the light that God has given them. And I believe that, *if anyone has followed the light he had*, he will undoubtedly receive thereof in greater measure as he has need, even as the late Herr Hulsemann, who was celebrated as a profound theologian at Leipzig, has somewhere observed; and if such a man had failed to receive light during his

Among others who advocated the possibility that some among the unevangelized may be enlightened apart from ordinary means was the commentator Matthew Poole (1624–1679). Commenting on Romans 10:17 (“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”), Poole writes: “He speaketh here of the ordinary means whereby faith is wrought; not confining or limiting the Spirit of God, who worketh, or may work, by extraordinary means, yea, without any means at all.”<sup>126</sup>

This was also the view of the British theological writer John Edwards (1637–1716) who spoke of the possibility and even probability of an “extraordinary” work of God in the elect among the “heathen,” producing in them “a lively Faith, a sincere Hatred of Sin, a Love of Righteousness, and . . . good Works and a holy life. This is done by an extraordinary and unusual Power of the Spirit on Mens (sic) Hearts. In the want of outward Means, they are supplied by the inward, secret and unsearchable Operation of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>127</sup>

The Anglican Calvinist pastor, John Newton (1725–1807) voiced similar sentiments:

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life, he would receive it at least in the hour of death.” Gottfreid W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God the Freedom of man and the Origin of Evil*, trans E. M. Huggard (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1985, originally published 1710), 385.

<sup>126</sup> Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 3 volumes (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1963, first edition published in 1685), 3:515. When he says “without any means at all” it would seem to imply something beyond “extraordinary means,” that is an immediate impartation of the habit of faith through regeneration.

<sup>127</sup> John Edwards, *Veritas Redux*, 1:445. Edwards was careful, however, to state that apart from such an “extraordinary dispensation” there was no hope of salvation apart from faith in Christ. “So that barring *Extraordinary* Dispensations, we may determine, without breach of Charity, concerning the final State of *Pagans*. If we consider that without Knowledge of, and Faith in *Christ*, there is no Salvation, in the usual way, we cannot pronounce any of them in the number of the Blessed.” *Veritas Redux*, 1:446. See the entire section on the question of the “heathen” (1: 426–447.)

But if we suppose a Heathen, destitute of the means of grace by which conversion is usually wrought, to be brought to a sense of his misery, of the emptiness and vanity of worldly things, to a conviction that he cannot be happy without the favour of the great Lord of the world, to a feeling of guilt, and a desire of mercy; and that, though he has no explicit knowledge of a Saviour, he directs the cry of his heart to the unknown Supreme, to this purport, *Ens entium, miserere mei*,—Father and source of beings, have mercy upon me! Who will prove that such views and desires can arise in the heart of a sinner, without the energy of that Spirit which Jesus is exalted to bestow? Who will take upon him to say, that his blood has not sufficient efficacy to redeem to God a sinner who is thus disposed, though he has never heard of his name? Or who has a warrant to affirm, that the supposition I have made, is, in the nature of things, impossible to be realized? But I stop—I do not often amuse you with conjecture. And though, for want of express warrant from Scripture, I dare not give the sentiments I have now offered a stronger name than probable or conjectural, I hope I do not propose them for your amusement. They will prove to your advantage and my own, if they are helpful to guard us against a narrow, harsh, and dogmatical spirit; and if, without abating our reverent submission to the revealed will of God, they have a tendency to confirm our views of his goodness, and the power and compassions of the great Redeemer.<sup>128</sup>

The foremost proponent of this view among the Reformed was no doubt William G. T. Shedd (1820–1894). Shedd believed that though salvation comes only through Christ, the unevangelized could nevertheless be saved by the direct regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, apart from knowledge of Christ. He states:

(T)he Scriptures and the Confession teach that the Divine Spirit exerts his regenerating grace, to some extent, within adult heathendom, making use of

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<sup>128</sup> *Works of John Newton*. 6 volumes, ed. Rev. Richard Cecil. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. First published by Hamilton Adams, 1820. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985–1988), IV:555–556.

conscience, or ‘the law written on the heart’, as the means of convicting of sin preparatory to imparting the new divine life; and that in the last day a part of God’s elect ‘shall come from the east and from the west, and from the north and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God’ (*Luke 13:29*). These are all regenerated in this life. And since regeneration in the instance of the adult immediately produces faith and repentance, a regenerate heathen is both a believer and a penitent. He feels sorrow for sin, and the need of mercy. This felt need of mercy and desire for it is potentially and virtually faith in the Redeemer. For although the Redeemer has not been presented to him historically and personally as the object of faith, yet the Divine Spirit by the new birth has wrought in him the sincere and longing *disposition* to believe in him. With the penitent and believing man in the Gospel, he says, ‘Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?’ (*John 9:36*). Such a man is ‘regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit’, and belongs to that class of ‘elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the Spirit’, and belongs to that class of elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word (Conf. x. 3).<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *Calvinism Pure and Simple: A Defense of the Westminster Standards* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), 134. It was Shedd’s conviction that “the immense majority of the race that fell in Adam will be saved ‘by the washing of regeneration’.” Ibid., 135. Shedd’s convictions on this matter may be also found in the following works: *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 volumes (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888–1894), 1:436–441; 2:706–711; *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), 204–5; “The Meaning and Value of the Doctrine of Decrees,” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, 1.1 (Jan., 1890), 18–22; “The Heathen: A Symposium,” *Methodist Review* 71 (May, 1889), 365–370. It will be noted that this view is consistent with the idea generally held by the Reformed that regeneration is an immediate work of the Holy Spirit on the soul of man, not dependent on the instrumentality of the word of God (even though it is normally accompanied by the ministry of the word). See the discussion on the relation between regeneration and the word (with citations of advocates of various views) in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology, Fourth revised and enlarged edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941), 473–476.

Herman Bavinck also made comments that indicate he shared sentiments similar to Shedd's: "For God, no door is locked, no creature unapproachable, no heart inaccessible. With his Spirit he can enter the innermost being of every human, with or without the Word, by way of or apart from all consciousness, from old age or from the moment of conception. Christ's own conception in Mary's womb is proof that the Holy Spirit can, from that moment on and continually, be active in a human being with his sanctifying presence."<sup>130</sup> Henry B. Smith (1815–1877) voiced a similar view, stating that "there may be, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, renewal of the soul without this explicit knowledge" (that is, of Christ).<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 volumes, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–8), IV:123. Other statements by Bavinck confirm this sentiment, though he did imagine such instances to be rare exceptions. "And it is really a Reformed doctrine that, though God ordinarily grants the benefits of Christ by means of the word and sacraments, he is not bound to this method and, be it very rarely, also grants salvation outside the institution of the church." Ibid., IV:289. "(I)n those who grow to adulthood, Regeneration by the Holy Spirit certainly *can* precede, though it does not always precede, baptism, the hearing of the word of God, and the exercise of faith . . . . Whether God, as Zwingli taught, also caused his electing grace to work among the pagans can be left undiscussed here, since in any case, according to the confession of all Christian churches, this refers to an exception. The rule is that God freely binds the distribution of his grace to the church of Christ." Ibid., IV:446–47. "Christ brings his own to their destiny in many and varied ways and can do this since he alone is and remains the acquirer and distributor of grace. Accordingly, he does this either apart from or through the word and the sacraments, but always through the internal calling of the Spirit, whom he bestowed on the church, which he instructed to preach the gospel to all creatures; in the way of the covenant that received the gospel as its content and the sacraments as sign and seal." Ibid., IV:448. "Aside from whether the Holy Spirit sometimes also works and can work in pagans, something that is in any case exceptional, as a rule he effects regeneration only in those who live under the administration of the covenant . . . . The Holy Spirit, who in regeneration applies nothing other than the word, power, and merit of Christ, also automatically leads the conscious life of the person toward the word that he took from Christ and caused to be recorded by the prophets and apostles." Ibid., IV:460. "God . . . can save also without the external preaching of the Word, solely by the internal calling and regeneration of the Holy Spirit." Ibid., IV:632.

<sup>131</sup> Henry B. Smith, *System of Christian Theology*, ed. William S. Karr, 4<sup>th</sup> edition revised (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1892), 517. He did, however, imply that this is not a



It should be noted, however, that B. B. Warfield (1851–1921) considered the idea that men may be saved apart from the gospel “an erroneous opinion.”<sup>132</sup>

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common occurrence: “There is, humanly speaking, no probability of salvation apart from such knowledge.” Ibid., 516. He also went on to say that “such internal renewal, if it be genuine, will always lead to a belief in Christ as the only Saviour, when He is made known. The test of the reality of the new birth would be, that as soon as Christ is presented the soul will welcome Him.” Ibid., 517. This view is also reflected in the writings of the Calvinistic Southern Baptist, James Petigru Boyce. He states: “The relation of regeneration to conversion will . . . appear to be one of invariable antecedence . . . . There is not only antecedence, but in some cases an appreciable interval . . . . This must be true of all infants and of all persons otherwise incapable of responsibility, as for example idiots . . . . There is no reason why it should not be true of some heathen. The missionaries of the cross have been sought by men, who knew nothing of Christianity, but whose hearts, unsatisfied with the religion of their fathers, were restlessly seeking for what their soul was crying out.” James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887), 380–381. See also the article, “The Reformed System and the Larger Hope” by Presbyterian J. N. McGiffert in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 48.190 (1891), 279–297. In this article he states: “The Holy Ghost, who alone works regeneration under the teaching of the gospel in Christian lands, is able to work regeneration under the teaching of conscience in heathen lands.” Ibid., 286. “If there be in any soul a trusting, loving disposition toward God as its Saviour, Helper, and Ruler, this disposition is faith. The relation of the soul to God is the important matter; not the external knowledge or circumstances which produce or accompany it.” Ibid., 288. He also quotes A. A. Hodge to similar effect (from the *New York Independent* of Sept. 17, 1885): “The establishment of this personal relation to our Lord, so as to constitute one a beneficiary of his redemption, is generally conditioned upon personal recognition and confession of him. This is even essential, whenever intellectually possible. But it is not absolutely essential, as is proved in the case of those dying in infancy, and of idiots. On like ground of principle, it might hold true in the case of some exceptionally enlightened heathen.” Ibid., 289. Some have read Charles Hodge as allowing for the possibility of regeneration apart from the ministry of the Word: “Yet they (Lutherans) believe in infant regeneration. But if infants are incapable of using the Word; and if the Spirit never operates except in the Word and by its use, how is it possible that infants can be regenerated. If, therefore, the Bible teaches that infants are regenerated and saved, it teaches that the Spirit operates not only with and by the Word, but also without it, when, how, and where He sees fit. If Christ healed only those who had faith to be healed, how did He heal infants, or raise the dead?” Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:483. Compare this statement, however, with the citation of Hodge in the previous section.

<sup>132</sup> Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, “Are They Few That Be Saved?” in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1968), 350. Even Charles A. Briggs critiqued Shedd’s idea in “Have the Quakers Prevailed?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 47 (April 1890), 325–352.

## Calvinist Views on General Revelation

One of the significant issues that was debated among the Reformed was what role, if any, general, or natural revelation played in the possible conversion of the unevangelized.<sup>133</sup> Before discussing the views among the Reformed on this subject, however, it is important to remember that this was the dawn of the “Age of Reason.”

David Pailin characterizes the mood of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

(T)he debates about the truth of belief in this period were linked to a growing recognition of reason as the final authority for deciding what is true in matters of religious belief as in all else. Appeals to other authorities—ecclesiastical bodies, sacred texts, private illumination or personal conviction—were increasingly found to provide no bases for agreement. In the disputes during and after the Reformation, it seemed that no faction found any difficulty in finding some plausible authority to justify its own position and to condemn those of its opponents. The resulting impasses led to bigotry, persecution and even war. Frustrated over attempts to secure agreement, some considered that violence was justified in order to establish conformity to what they were convinced to be the truth. Gradually, though, it was accepted that the use of force was no satisfying way to settle disputes about religious truth. It might compel outward conformity but it could not produce conviction. Revulsion at the consequences of persecution thus combined with the absence in practice of any other agreed authorities to lead

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<sup>133</sup> Much has been written on this discussion. For a brief overview of contemporary Reformed views on general revelation, see N. H. Gootjes, “General Revelation in its Relation to Special Revelation,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989), 359–368. See also: William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace: A Defense of the Historic Reformed Faith Over Against the Theology and Philosophy of the So-called “Reconstructionist” Movement*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1953); Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Richard A. Muller, “Natural and Supernatural Theology,” in *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 1:167–193.

people to view reason as the only proper basis for established religious beliefs and for resolving religious disputes.<sup>134</sup>

Of course, deism was the most extreme expression of this turn toward reason, arguing that reason alone was sufficient to find salvation. Though many orthodox Christians sought to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christianity, some also sought to show that reason alone (apart from revelation) was not sufficient. Thomas Halyburton's work *Natural Religion Insufficient* (cited above in n.106) was an influential Calvinistic response to the deism of Herbert of Cherbury. In this work he sought to prove the insufficiency of natural revelation with regard to what can be discovered about God, concerning the worship of God, concerning man's true happiness, concerning man's moral duty and its motives, concerning the origin of sin, and its inability to show how sin may be pardoned and overcome.

Anthony Tuckney's work *None But Christ* (cited in n. 106 above) also argued against the notion that men might be saved through natural revelation, particularly responding to the work of the Puritan, Nathanael Culverwell (1619–1651): *An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature* (London, 1652). In this work, Culverwell sought to show the compatibility of reason with religion and faith. He also made the following statement regarding the unevangelized:

Yet notwithstanding their censure is too harsh and rigid, who as if they were judges of eternal life and death, damne (sic) *Plato* and *Aristotle* without any question, without any delay at all; and do as confidently pronounce that they are in hell, as if they saw them flaming there. Whereas the infinite goodnesse and

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<sup>134</sup> David A. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative religion in seventeenth-and eighteenth-century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 9–10.

wisdom of God might for ought we know finde out several ways of saving such by the pleonasmes of his love in Jesus Christ; he *might* make a *Socrates* a branch of the true Vine, and *might* graffe *Plato* and *Aristotle* into the fruitful olive; for it was in his power, if he pleased, to reveal Christ unto them, and to infuse faith into them after an extraordinary manner; though indeed the Scripture does not afford our charity any sufficient ground to believe that he did; nor does it warrant us peremptorily to conclude the contrary. *Secreta Deo*, it does not much concern us to know what became of them; let us then forbear our censure, and leave them to their competent Judge . . . (I)f then God do choose and call an Heathen, 'tis not by universal, but by distinguishing grace.<sup>135</sup>

Tuckney is saying that if any among the unevangelized are saved, it is not through their use of natural revelation, but by an extraordinary revelation to them of Christ.

Though some promoted the idea that truth found in other religions was due to the discoveries of reason, many others tried to show that these truths were borrowed from biblical revelation. Pailin comments on this fact:

Theophilus Gale goes to great lengths to argue that 'The wisest of the Heathens stole their choicest Notions and Contemplations, both Philologic, and Philosophic, as wel (sic) Natural and Moral, as Divine, from the sacred Oracles' of the Jewish tradition. In defending this thesis he claims the concurrence of such 'learned Papists' as Stenchus Eugubinus and Ludovicus Vives and of such Protestant divines as the Scaligers, Serranus, Vossius, Sandford, Heinsius, Bochart, Jackson, Hammond, Usher, Preston, Owen and Stillingfleet.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Nathanael Culverwell, *An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature* (London, 1652), 208–210.

<sup>136</sup> David A. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions*, 35–36. He cites Theophilus Gale, *The Court of the Gentiles: or a Discourse touching the Original of Human Literature, Both Philologie and Philosophie from the Scriptures & Jewish Church* (Oxford, 1672), Part I. 'Advertissements' pp. A2 f. Pailin also refers to the British writer John Edwards who made this statement: "*Moses's* Laws and the Customs of the Patriarchs were not

Though the Reformed acknowledged a certain knowledge of God attainable through natural revelation, they generally denied that it was sufficient for salvation. This is due both to its inherent limitations, in that God might be known as Creator but not as Redeemer (Ps. 19), and to the response of sinful man in suppressing what can be known about God through creation (Rom. 1:18ff), rendering man inexcusable for his unbelief.

Commenting on the inadequacies of natural revelation and the need for special revelation, Reformed theologian Benedict Pictet wrote:

First, the imperfection of natural knowledge, which was insufficient either for true knowledge or for true worship of God, and which could not, in any way, comfort the human soul against the fear of death, and under the consciousness of sin, because it could not point out the mode of satisfying the divine justice . . . . The second argument is drawn from the great corruption of mankind after the sin of the first parents, their speedy forgetfulness of God and blindness in divine things, their propensity for all kinds of error, and especially to the invention of new and false religions . . . . A revelation beyond the natural was therefore necessary in which God might not only cause to be known, in a clearer manner, his own perfections, which he had revealed in the first, but also discover new perfections, and reveal ‘the mystery of godliness.’<sup>137</sup>

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borrowed from the Pagans (as some have imagin’d,) but that the *Chaldeans, Phoenicians, and Egyptians*, yea, that the *Arabians and Persians* . . . and that the *Greeks* and *Latins* have derived their Mysteries from the *Hebrews*, and that all the Gentile Theologers borrowed their Great Truths from the Books of the Old Testament.” John Edwards, *A Discourse concerning the Authority, Stile, and Perfection of the Books of the Old and New Testament* (London, 1693), 269. The Calvinist Abraham Taylor gave two lectures in London in 1730 or 31 which had a broad influence, arguing for the necessity of divine revelation, entitled “The Insufficiency of Natural Religion,” published in *A Defense of Some Important Doctrines of the Gospel, in Twenty-six Sermons: Preached at the Lime Street Lecture* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1844, originally published 1732), 24–65.

<sup>137</sup> Benedict Pictet (1655–1724), *Christian Theology*, trans. Frederick Reyroux (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1900, originally published 1696), 23.

Anglican clergyman Peter Du Moulin stated:

For surely the contemplation of the creatures doth not touch men with the sense of sin nor doth show to a man the way of salvation and reconciliation with God: yea and there can be no profitable and saving contemplation of nature unless those things which in a doubtful light and in worn-out letters are hardly read to by the word of God, as it were through spectacles, appear plain and distinct to us . . . . Furthermore, although the knowledge of the creatures doth not suffice to salvation, yet the Gentiles who were instructed by no other teacher than nature, are therefore inexcusable because they did not use these (although small) helps to a good purpose as they might: and because they endeavor to choke or deprave those natural good notions and sparks of goodness which are put into them by nature. Therefore they alone do profit in piety by the teaching of the creatures and are by the pricks of conscience stirred up to the fear of God, to whom God hath vouchsafed the prerogative of his Word.<sup>138</sup>

Francis Turretin wrote concerning natural revelation:

It is one thing to allow some knowledge of God as Creator and preserver however imperfect, corrupt and obscure; another to have a full, entire and clear knowledge of God as Redeemer and of the lawful worship due to him. Natural theology has the former in that which may be known of God . . . . Revelation alone has the latter in the faith . . . which is gained only from the word . . . . It is falsely asserted that in that which may be known of God . . . there is given objectively a revelation of grace, and a Redeemer sufficient for salvation, if not clear and explicit, at least obscure and implied, inasmuch as in it God is known as merciful and therefore, in a certain although confused manner, as a Redeemer who will accept a satisfaction, may call to repentance and promise remission of sin. For in the first place, to be able to know God as merciful by a general mercy

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<sup>138</sup> Peter Du Moulin (1568–1658), *Anatomy of Arminianism*, 145–146. He is stating that though natural revelation may point man toward God, only his Word can lead him to the conviction of sin, and the fear or true knowledge and worship of God.

tending to some temporal good and the delay of punishment is far different from being able to know him as merciful by a mercy special and saving in Christ after a satisfaction has been made . . . . Now who will say that this could be derived from the book of nature where God manifests himself only as the Creator and preserver? On the contrary, who does not confess that it can be sought for only in the word of the gospel, which reveals to us the mercy of God in Christ?<sup>139</sup>

Likewise, the Scottish theologian Robert Shaw (1795–1863) believed that salvation comes only through the special revelation of the gospel:

Those cannot be saved who are totally destitute of revelation. Though the invitation which nature gives to seek God, be sufficient to render those without excuse who do not comply with it, yet it is not sufficient, even objectively, for salvation; for it does not afford that lively hope which maketh not ashamed, for this is only revealed by the Gospel; whence the Gentiles are said to have been without hope in the world. It does not show the true way to the enjoyment of God, which is no other than faith in Christ. It does not sufficiently instruct us about the manner in which we ought to worship and please God, and do what is acceptable to him. In short, this call by nature never did, nor is it even possible that it ever can, bring any to the saving knowledge of God; the Gospel alone is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. We are persuaded there is no salvation without Christ; no communion of adult persons with Christ, but by faith in him; no faith in Christ without the knowledge of him; no knowledge but by the preaching of the Gospel; no preaching of the Gospel in the works of nature.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:11–13. John Brown similarly states: “The voice of nature . . . calls them to God as a Creator and Preserver, but affords no hints of him as a Redeemer.” John Brown, *Systematic Theology*, 341.

<sup>140</sup> Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Blackie & Son, 1861, originally published 1845), 123–124. Shaw did state his belief that God can bring someone to faith in an extraordinary way: “The Holy Spirit usually works by means; and the word read or preached is the ordinary means which he renders effectual to the salvation of sinners. But he has immediate access to the hearts of men, and can produce a saving change in them without the use of ordinary means.” *Ibid.*, 122–123.

Herman Witsius (1636–1708), believed that the “call by nature never did, nor is it even possible that it ever can, bring any to the saving knowledge of God; the gospel alone ‘is the power of God unto salvation, to every one that believeth.’”<sup>141</sup> He did, however, believe that God uses the revelation of nature to prepare people for the ultimate reception of the gospel. To those who reject the light of nature, it serves to “render them without excuse.”<sup>142</sup> But for others:

(T)hat calling serves to prepare the way for a further, a more perfect, and a more explicit call by the Gospel, and as a prelude of a fuller instruction. For as grace supposes nature, and makes it perfect, so the truths revealed in the Gospel are built on those made known by the light of nature . . . . And thus the knowledge he learns from nature being sanctified by the Spirit, better prepares the mind for embracing those truths which, though they surpass, are yet so far from destroying, that they perfect nature.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 1:315.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:315.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:315–316. This is consistent with the statement of Bruce A. Demarest: “General revelation is the necessary prerequisite to special revelation . . . . Special revelation completes, not negates, the disclosure of God in nature, providence, and conscience . . . . God gains an entrance to the human heart initially and imperfectly by nature and then subsequently and perfectly by grace.” Demarest, *General Revelation*, 250–251. William Temple stated: “Natural theology ends in a hunger for that Divine Revelation which it began by excluding from its purview.” William Temple (1881–1944), *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1949), 520. Heinrich Heppe also speaks in similar terms: “He first prepares the hearts of the elect for faith, whereas from the rest who are not aroused to faith He takes away every ground for excuse, by holding before them as His creatures their boundness to fulfill the covenant of works and the law attested in conscience as well as in the tables of the law, and making them realize their righteous condemnation by their transgression of the law. The horrors of conscience which proceed from this knowledge are for the rejected a foretaste of the future judgment. For the elect on the other hand, who in view of the law and the covenant of works see themselves in the first instance in the same situation as the rejected, they are a preparation for faith, since by His prevenient grace God leads the elect out of darkness into light by causing a serious longing for redemption to proceed from these terrors of conscience, and then holding before them the promise of grace in the Gospel and causing what is offered them from without to be brought into their hearts by the H. Spirit . . . .” Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 513–514. Speaking of the means by which God calls his elect, he says:



## Calvinist Views on Preparation for the Gospel

A word should be said at this point regarding the views among Calvinists on the matter of preparation for salvation. Though the Synod of Dort rejected the notion that there is a work of the Holy Spirit preparatory to regeneration, the delegates to the Synod from England did endorse the idea. In the following generation, John Owen is representative of those who held the view that prior to conversion there “are certain *previous* and preparatory works, or workings in and upon the souls of men, that are antecedent and *dispositive* unto it.”<sup>144</sup> He is careful to distinguish between a *material disposition* (which he accepts) and a *formal disposition* (which he rejects). The former he defines as “that which disposeth and some way maketh a subject fit for the reception of that which shall be communicated, added, or infused into it as its form. So wood by dryness and a due composure is made fit and ready to admit of firing, or continual fire.”<sup>145</sup> The latter he defines as “where one degree of the same kind disposeth the subject unto farther degrees of it; as the morning light, which is of the same kind, disposeth the air to the reception of the full light of the sun.”<sup>146</sup> Owen notes three *internal spiritual*

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“These means are first of all the revelation of the kindness in God, because to the sin-conscious heart they cannot give the comfort of the forgiveness of sin and because man blinded by sin is all too prone to misunderstand the misuse God’s revelation in nature. The proper means of calling . . . is the Word by which God proclaims His eternal counsel and His eternal covenant, that He will redeem, sanctify and restore to Himself the sinner on whom He has had mercy for Christ’s sake.” Ibid., 513–514.

<sup>144</sup> “Works of the Holy Spirit Preparatory Unto Regeneration,” in *The Works of John Owen*, 3:229.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 3:229.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 3:229. It will appear later in this work that Arminians such as John Wesley did endorse the idea of a *formal disposition* in preparation for regeneration. That is, owing to the universal possession of sufficient grace, persons may become gradually more inclined to the truths of God revealed to them (whether they be of a general or special nature), as they are gradually renewed in their heart. This is an important distinction between Calvinist and Arminian conceptions of “prevenient grace.” Roger Olson speaks of

*effects* preceding regeneration. The first is *illumination*. This entails not only understanding of the truth, but a certain assent to it, and even a temporary joy in the truth. The second is *conviction of sin*. This entails a sense of guilt over sin, sorrow or grief over sin, humiliation for sin (such as through confession or fasting), and even a desire for deliverance from sin. The third is *reformation of life*. All these things, in Owen's view, are wrought by the word of God and the Spirit of God. But all are short of regeneration.<sup>147</sup> As to the "light of nature" Owen denies that they are "a sufficient outward means of the conversion of any one soul . . . ."<sup>148</sup> And he does not seem to believe that they may be used by God in preparing persons for conversion through the gospel, as Witsius did.

#### Views of the Moderate Calvinists

An even more optimistic view of the role of natural revelation than that of Witsius was embraced by some of the more moderate Calvinists. Moyse Amyraut (1596–1664), for example, believed that more could be gleaned from natural revelation, and that it was therefore at least hypothetically possible that people might be saved through this means alone.<sup>149</sup> Witsius quotes Amyraut concerning what may be discerned through nature

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"partial regeneration" which precedes conversion. Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 36.

<sup>147</sup> Owen, "Works of the Holy Spirit Preparatory Unto Regeneration," 3:229–242.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:302–3.

<sup>149</sup> Et bien qu'il y ait plusieurs nations vers lesquelles peut ester la Claire predication de l'Evangile n'est point encore parvenue par la bouche des Apostres, ni de leurs descendans, & qui n'ont aucune distincte connoissance du Sauveur du monde, il ne faut pas penser pourtant qu'il y ait ni aucun people, ni mesmes aucun home esclus par la volonte de Dieu, du salut qu'il a acquis au genre humain, pourveu qu'il face son profit des tesmoignages de misericorde que Dieu luy donne" ("And although there are many nations toward which perhaps the clear preaching of the Gospel has never yet come,

alone: “(M)en, if not willfully blind, could, by what is known of God, have attained to some knowledge of the divine mercy, by which they might obtain salvation, in a manner perhaps unknown to us; though destitute of the distinct knowledge of some mysteries, which they could no way discover of themselves.”<sup>150</sup> However, Amyraut also denied that anyone had ever actually come to salvation through natural revelation alone for lack of the enabling work of the Spirit, which he believed was always accompanied by the gospel.<sup>151</sup>

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neither by the Apostles nor by their successors, and which have no distinct knowledge of the Savior of the world, yet one need not think that there are any people, nor even any individual excluded by the will of God from the salvation that He has acquired for mankind—provided that he profit from the testimonies of mercy that God gives him.”) Text with translation of Amyraut’s *Brief Traite de La Predestination et ses Principales Dependence* (Saumur, 1634), 80–81, from Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 211–212.

<sup>150</sup> Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 1:315.

<sup>151</sup> Stephen Strehle writes: “According to Amyraut, nature itself, apart from the gospel, supplies any required gnosis with respect to salvation in its testimony to God’s providential mercy. So therefore, even though it is true that the satisfaction of Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation, the specific knowledge of it is unnecessary for the heathen, since he subsists under another dispensation. Nevertheless, Amyraut is quick to add that natural revelation has never led any of them to that point, seeing that the efficacy of the Spirit, which alone produces a veritable repentance, is conjoined only to the gospel proper.” Stephen Strehle, “Universal Grace and Amyraldianism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989), 351–352. See also Roger Nicole, *Moyse Amyraut (1596–1664) and the Controversy on Universal Grace (1634–1637)*, Ph.D. Dissertation presented to Harvard University (Cambridge MA, 1966). After noting Amyraut’s contention that salvation is possible “without distinct knowledge of Christ,” Nicole says that this “is tempered by repeated statements that this possibility does not eventuate into actual redemption.” *Ibid.*, 84. Augustus Neander states: “Amyraut agreed with Zwingli, in his views respecting the relation of the Heathen to Salvation. If ever any man turns to God and seeks to obtain salvation through divine grace, he will succeed, even though the definite historical knowledge of Christ is wanting to him. The National Synod of Alencon, A.D. 1637, declared against this doctrine but spared its advocates. The doctrine was treated more mildly by the Synod of Charenton, A.D. 1644. Frederick Spanheim was one of the warmest opponents of this theory; on the other hand, Amyraut was defended by David Blondel and Jean Daille.” Augustus Neander (1789–1850), *Lectures on the History of Christian Dogmas*, 2 volumes, ed. Dr. J. L. Jacobi, trans. J. E. Ryland

Richard Baxter (1615–1691) was even more open to the possibility of salvation through natural revelation. In his work on *Universal Redemption* Baxter sets out a number of propositions about God that he believes can be inferred from the Light of Nature alone, including the belief that in his mercy “God hath found out some sufficient means, grounds or terms on which he both may and doth actually dispense with the rigour of exact Justice” (that is, to provide for our deliverance from sin).<sup>152</sup> He also proposes that the “heathen” are given “sufficient Grace or merciful aid to receive and obey those (or some of those) Truths . . . and so to come nearer to Christ than before they were.”<sup>153</sup> Whether any are actually saved by the natural revelation alone he is not certain. But he certainly argues for the reasonableness of believing they might be:

I cannot find in Scripture where it is clearly revealed to us, on what terms God will Judge those that heard not of Christ. In general we find the he will judge them according to their usage of the Talents of Mercy received . . . ; but particularly how God will proceed with them, or whether any Heathen be ever saved? I cannot find that he hath revealed. For indeed it doth not concern us to

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(London: Bell & Dalby, 1866), 2:680–681. Amyraut’s views were also condemned by the Helvetic Consensus Formula (1675), Canons 17–20.

<sup>152</sup> Richard Baxter, *Universal Redemption of Mankind, by the Lord Jesus Christ* (London: Printed for John Sallusbury, 1694). Baxter enumerates these propositions on pages 461–466. The statement quoted here is found on p. 464. Speaking of the “heathen” Baxter said: “I find not myself called or enabled to judge all these people, as to their final state, but only say, that if any of them have a holy heart and life in the true love of God, they shall be saved; but without this, no form of religion will save any man, be it ever so right.” *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* . . . 4 volumes (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), 2:78. “More is necessary where the gospel cometh, than where it doth not.” *Ibid.*, 2:145. He offers an even more optimistic view in this statement: “Yet I am not so much inclined to pass a peremptory sentence of damnation upon all that never heard of Christ, having some more reason that I knew of before to think that God’s dealing with such is much unknown to us, and that the ungodly here among us Christians are in a far worse case than they.” N. J. Keeble, ed., *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, abridged by J. M. Lloyd Thomas (Dent, London: Rowman & Littlefield; Totowa, NJ, 1974), 117–118.

<sup>153</sup> Baxter, *Universal Redemption*, 469.

know it. I dare not say that any of them . . . are saved: Nor dare I say that I am certain they are not . . . Those Scriptures that speak of the necessity of Christ to mans (sic) Salvation . . . do plainly extend it to all men in the World, but those that speak of the necessity of believing seem to limit it to them that hear the Gospel, or might have heard it but for their own fault . . . Personal Believing was never commanded to Infants or Ideots (sic), nor required as necessary to their Salvation . . . The same Faith which is now among us of absolute necessity to our Justification and Salvation, was not so to those before Christ; therefore it is not *per se* of absolute necessity to Justification by Christ: Therefore if God so please, those that hear not the Gospel may be Justified without that Faith which to us is necessary.<sup>154</sup>

The moderate Calvinist and nonconformist John Humfrey (1621–1719) exhibited greater confidence in stating his belief that many “heathen” would be saved apart from explicit faith in Christ:

There is *One* Religion therefore, Law or *Rule*, for all Mankind to obtain Life by, which being the Law of our Lapsed Nature, or Remedying Law, containing God’s Grace administered to all the Earth, in a threefold State, of such as were, or are, *without the Law*, (or before it) and *under the Law*, and *under the Gospel*. As this Administration is threefold, so hath the Faith, which is the Condition thereof, been diversified. *But now is the Righteousness of God revealed from Faith to Faith*. The *Righteousness of God*, is the Righteousness of this Law, which hath ever been a foot in the world: And though a *Heathen* hath not that *Faith as is required of the Christian*, in the Third Edition of it, or that which was required of the Jew under the Second; yet hath he such a Faith as belongs to the *First*, such as the *Ancients* before *Abraham* had: And so long as that *Faith* he has does *work* by *Love*, or by sincere Obedience to God, according to the Light he has, it will justify him, as well as that which is now farther required of us under the Gospel.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 475–477.

It follows, that this Law (being that which is given for Life, and so the one only true Measure of Religion to all the World) must belong to the Government of God, which is *Universal*, and that is the *Natural Government of God* . . . . The Law of Nature, as I take it, is the Dictates of right Reason, declaring to us our Duty to God, to our Selves, to our Neighbours; and the Light of the same Reason will dictate to us, when we have fail'd in that Duty, to repent, and turn to God with trusting in his Mercy, for pardon if we do so, and not else . . . . Now, I say, that though the *Heathen* be not under (or have not) this Law of Grace, in the third and last setting out, or in the State under the Gospel, yet they are under it (or have it) in the State of the Ancients, or as they had it in the first Promulgation; and upon Supposition, that any of them do, according to the Light they have, live up in Sincerity to this Law, I dare not be the Man that shall deny but *through the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ* (procuring this Law of Covenant for them, as for us, and all the World) *they shall be saved, even as we*; and we shall be saved, even as they . . . . But I am hugely persuaded . . . that there are Millions that have been, and Thousands are living in the World, that have never known, and shall never know, how much they are beholding to Jesus Christ, till they come before him in Judgment, and then they shall know it to their Comfort . . . .<sup>155</sup>

German Reformed theologian J. H. A. Ebrard (1818–1888) is another who is representative of those who held an open view toward the possibility of salvation for those who never received the gospel during this life. In his major work, *Christliche Dogmatik*, he states that the salvation of those who sought after immortality in this life

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<sup>155</sup> John Humfrey. *A Letter to George Keith, concerning The Salvability of the Heathen* . . . . (London: 1700), 21–22, 25, 31–32. See also John Humfrey, *Peaceable Disquisitions. Which Treat The Natural and Spiritual Man. Preaching with the Demonstration of the Spirit. Praying by the Spirit. Assurance. Of The Arminian Grace. Possibility of Heathens Salvation. The reconciliation of Paul and James. The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness; with other Incident Matters. In some Animadversions On a Discourse writ against Dr. Owen's Book of the Holy Spirit*. (London: Printed for Thomas Parkhurst, 1678), 54ff.

(cf. Rom. 2:7) but never received the gospel, would be realized after death.<sup>156</sup>

Baptist theologian Augustus H. Strong (1836–1921) also embraced similar views.

In his *Systematic Theology* he states:

Since Christ is the Word of God and the Truth of God, he may be received even by those who have not heard of his manifestation in the flesh. A proud and self-righteous morality is inconsistent with saving faith; but a humble (sic) and penitent reliance upon God, as a Savior from sin and a guide of conduct, is an implicit faith in Christ; for such reliance casts itself upon God, so far as God has revealed himself,—and the only Revealer of God is Christ. We have, therefore, the hope that even among the heathen there may be some, like Socrates, who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit working through the truth of nature and conscience, have found the way of life and salvation.<sup>157</sup>

Presbyterian theologian Edward D. Morris (1815–1921) believed that “in the case of heathen to whom the Gospel has not been proclaimed, the truth used by the Spirit in regeneration, so far as regeneration may occur in such cases, must be what the law of nature and the divine law stamped on the heart and conscience have supplied.”<sup>158</sup>

Other evangelicals have held similar views. One was the British pastor and commentator G. Campbell Morgan. He wrote concerning Cornelius:

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<sup>156</sup> J. H. A. Ebrard. *Christliche Dogmatik*, 2 volumes, second edition (Königsberg: A. W. Unzer, 1862–1863), 2:750–751.

<sup>157</sup> Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium and Commonplace-book Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Rochester, NY: E. R. Andrews, 1886), 843. He does go on to say (on this same page): “The number of such is so small as in no degree to weaken the claims of the missionary enterprise upon us. But that there are such seems to be intimated in Scripture . . . . And instances are found of apparently regenerated heathen . . . .”

<sup>158</sup> Edward D. Morris, *Theology of The Westminster Symbols: A Commentary Historical, Doctrinal, Practical, on the Confession of Faith and Catechisms and Related Formularies of the Presbyterian Churches* (Columbus, OH: Smythe, 1900), 433–434.

(H)ere was a man . . . who had been true to the light that was within him . . . .  
(H)ad he never heard the message, then he would have been judged by the light he had, and his obedience to it . . . . (N)o man is to be saved because he understands the doctrine of the Atonement. He is saved, not by understanding it, but because he fears God, and works righteousness. Oh, the glad and glorious surprise of those ultimate days when we find that there will be those who walked in the light they had, and wrought righteousness, and were acceptable to Him; not because of the morality, but by the infinite merit of the Cross, and by the fact that they yielded themselves to the light they possessed.<sup>159</sup>

Evangelical pastor and author F. B. Meyer expressed a more open opinion during the later years of his life. After ministering in many other countries over a period of years, he wrote: “And may there not have been myriads, in all lands and ages, who have been true to such light as they had, following the gleam—and will not these come from the east and west, from north and south, as Christ said, and sit down in the kingdom of God.”<sup>160</sup>

Another was Rene Pache, who wrote: “If the sacrifice of Christ could save the relatively unenlightened men of the Old Covenant, could it not also bring something to such ignorant heathen as obey with all their hearts what light they have?”<sup>161</sup>

Sir Norman Anderson likewise states:

My suggestion is that we can, perhaps, find a ray of light by going back to what we have already said about those Jews who, in Old Testament times, turned to God in repentance, brought the prescribed sacrifice . . . and threw themselves on his mercy. It was not that they *earned* that mercy by their repentance or obedience, or that an animal sacrifice could ever avail to atone for human sin. It

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<sup>159</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1924), 267, 280–281.

<sup>160</sup> Bob Holman, *F. B. Meyer* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), 163. See also Meyer’s work *The Wideness of God’s Mercy* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham; New York: Eaton and Mains, 1906).

<sup>161</sup> Rene Pache, *The Future Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 273.



was that their repentance and faith (themselves, of course, the result of God's work in their hearts) opened the gate, as it were, to the grace, mercy and forgiveness which he always longed to extend to them, and which was to be made for ever available at the cross . . . . It is true that they had a special divine revelation in which to put their trust. But might it not be true of the follower of some other religion that the God of all Mercy had worked in his heart by his Spirit, bringing him in some measure to realize his sin and need for forgiveness, and enabling him, in the twilight as it were, to throw himself on God's mercy?<sup>162</sup>

It is somewhat understandable that moderate Calvinists who held to an unlimited atonement might hold the views on the unevangelized proposed by Amyraut or even Baxter. If God provided the objective grounds of salvation for all, then he might also have provided the means of obtaining its benefits to all (not only to those who hear the gospel). But not all moderate Calvinists shared such views, as can be attested by these comments of the British Presbyterian minister, and moderate Calvinist, John England (d. 1724):

We no where (sic) find, that any of the Apostles told the Heathen, to whom they preached, that they might have been saved before they preached to them, by the light they were under: but now having received better light, they could not, without imbracing (sic) the Gospel: But they told them, in order to perswade (sic) them to receive the Gospel, that they were in a damnable state, that they worshipped the Devil, that they were aliens to the Covenant, and without Hope.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Sir Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 148–149.

<sup>163</sup> John England, *A View of Arminianism Compared with Moderate Calvinism* (London: T. Parkhurst, 1707), 109.

## Views of the New England Theologians

It is appropriate at this point to mention the views of those who embraced what became known as the New England Theology, as the seeds of this movement were originally planted in the soil of Calvinism.<sup>164</sup> The views of the early leaders of this influential theological movement with regard to the unevangelized echoed the traditional Calvinism of their predecessors. Joseph Bellamy (1719–1790) summarized his view on the salvation of the “heathen” in these words: “He effectually sends the gospel to one nation, and not to another; and where the gospel is preached, he, by his Spirit, awakens, convinces, humbles, converts whom he pleases, and leaves the rest.”<sup>165</sup>

Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803) likewise believed that the gospel was the exclusive means of salvation. Speaking of the person of Christ, Hopkins said: “(T)here is no salvation for men, without a degree of true knowledge of his person and character; and such knowledge is connected with eternal life.”<sup>166</sup> Concerning the necessity of believing the gospel, Hopkins said:

Therefore, as they must really do this, and it must be their own voluntary act in order to be saved, it is proper and necessary that they should be made to know it,

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<sup>164</sup> Though the New England Theology took root in the soil of Calvinism, it eventually strayed quite far from its roots. The views of its later adherents were much more similar to those of Arminians, including their views on the possibility of salvation for the unevangelized. For an account written by one of its late proponents, see Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1907).

<sup>165</sup> *The Works of Joseph Bellamy in two volumes* (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1853), 1:118. Regarding those who are virtuous or honest among the unevangelized, Bellamy stated: “That natural kind of honesty, many times, is an occasion of men’s being hardened against Christianity; for they are very ready to say, *God, I thank thee, I am not as other men . . . like him in Luke xviii.*” Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated* (Boston: Morris-Town, 1750; Reprinted by Henry P. Russell, 1804), 384.

<sup>166</sup> *The Works of Samuel Hopkins, D.D. in three volumes* (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1854), 1:265.

by requiring it of them. And the gospel cannot be preached in any other way . . . . Because in this way sinners are brought to repentance and have a heart given them to embrace the gospel. As they could not be under advantages to do this, unless the gospel were preached to them, and they were called upon to repent and believe, so men are brought to this in no other way, and by no other means, but the preaching of the gospel. And under this, and when men enjoy the gospel, God opens the hearts of whom he pleases, to receive the truths which are published, and to obey them, as he opened the heart of Lydia to receive the gospel preached by Paul . . . . God is under obligation to none, and he gives a heart to repent to those who live under the gospel, to whom he pleases, and when and where he sees fit.<sup>167</sup>

Concerning the means of salvation, he wrote:

He cannot be saved who does not believe, and he cannot believe who has not heard and attended to the report of the gospel, so has no right speculative notions about the objects of faith; and he cannot hear and understand who has not the advantage of divine revelation . . . . God can, doubtless, as easily change the heart of the most ignorant, deluded Mahometan (sic), or heathen . . . as that of the most awakened, enlightened sinner under the gospel. But if he should do so by the regenerating influences of his Spirit, there could be no right and proper exercises of Christian virtue and holiness; because such a one is without any right speculative knowledge of those truths, in the view of which alone Christian holiness is exercised. And giving a new heart, or a right taste and temper of mind, would not remove this darkness. This only prepares the mind to discern and relish the beauty and sweetness of divine things, when set before it in the use of means, but does not give any new speculative ideas or knowledge. Therefore, we have no reason to think God ever does so.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 1:506–7.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 3:265–266.

Though acknowledging the hypothetical possibility that God might regenerate someone apart from knowledge of the gospel, he does not believe it is a reality.

The grandson of Jonathan Edwards, Timothy Dwight IV (1752–1817), was of a similar mind as Hopkins, but not entirely so. In his sermon on “The Means of Grace” he made the following comments regarding the means of regeneration:

It is not here intended, that God could not, if he pleased, produce this change in the human character, without these, or any other means. Nor is it intended, that in some cases he does not actually thus produce it. It is unquestionably in the power of God to effectuate this change, with infinite ease, in any manner which he shall think proper. Nor have we any proof, that he has not, in many instances, renewed men, without connecting the renovation with any means whatever. But it is here intended, that this is not the usual course of his Spiritual providence; and that, in that course, means are really employed to bring men into the heavenly kingdom. It is further intended, that *these means are so far necessary, as that without them, this important end would not, in the ordinary course of providence, be accomplished.*<sup>169</sup>

In commenting on Paul’s statement in Romans 10:14, he wrote: “In other words, he declares the Preaching of the Gospel to be, in the ordinary course of Providence, indispensably necessary to the faith of mankind in Christ . . . .”<sup>170</sup> He continued:

I speak here, it will be remembered, of the ordinary course of God’s Spiritual providence. That exceptions to this assertion may have existed, I am not disposed to deny. That they must have been comparatively few is, I think, clearly evidence from the fact, that no satisfactory reasons have appeared, even to the mind of charity itself, to believe them numerous. If God has pursued, in countries

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<sup>169</sup> “Sermon CXXXV: The Means of Grace. The Ordinary Means of Grace. Proofs that there are such Means,” in *Theology Explained and Defended in a Series of Sermons by Timothy Dwight, in four volumes*, 12<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Harper & Bros, 1846), 4:39.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:41.

unenlightened by the Gospel, a different system of dispensations from that which we have been contemplating; it must be admitted, that we have no evidence of this fact; or at least none which can be pronounced satisfactory. The Scriptures certainly give us very little information of this nature; and the history of mankind furnishes still less. Without limiting the mercy of God, or attempting to investigate his Spiritual providence, with respect to nations who have not the Gospel, it may safely be concluded, that the instances, which they furnish, of apparent renovation, are very few.<sup>171</sup>

In the following sermon, he wrote:

Thus it is evident, that the Gospel is indispensable to the very existence of Christianity in the mind of man: and, as the Gospel cannot be of any possible use to man, unless known by him; so the knowledge of the Gospel is indispensable to the existence of faith, repentance, and holiness . . . . It is indeed perfectly obvious, that God can, with infinite ease, reveal the fundamental truths, and all other truths, of the Gospel, to any man immediately, as he did to *St. Paul*. This, however, is not to be expected; as it is certainly no part of his ordinary providence. In the usual course of that providence, men are taught the Gospel by *Preaching, Reading*, and other modes of instruction. These, or some of these, are therefore indispensable, in the usual course of things, to the existence of Christianity in the minds of men. Hence, in one respect, the Gospel is said to be *the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth*: and hence, in the same respect, it is said, that, *when the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe*.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 4:44.

<sup>172</sup> Timothy Dwight, "Sermon CXXXVI: The Ordinary Means of Grace. What they are; and what is their Influence," in *ibid.*, 4:52.

Nathanael Emmons (1745–1840) believed that God regenerated at least some children though they were ignorant of Christ, who died “soon after they become moral agents.” He states:

As soon as the youngest sinner is born of God, he is a new creature, has a new nature, and is a child of God. Though he cannot exercise repentance towards God, nor faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, yet he may exercise true benevolence, which is true holiness; and God may pardon and save him through the atonement of Christ, on the condition of benevolence as well as on the condition of repentance or faith, or any other exercise of holiness . . . . It is sufficient for God to know that he pardons and saves them on the ground of Christ’s atonement; and when they arrive in heaven, they will love and trust in Christ as their only Saviour.<sup>173</sup>

Nonetheless, with regard to adults who are without the gospel, he was of another opinion:

There is no ground to hope that any of the heathen will be saved, while they remain totally ignorant of the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. It does not appear from the past dispensations of grace, that God ever sends his Spirit where he does not send his gospel . . . . If the character of Christ were exhibited to them, they would have an opportunity of exercising that faith, without which it is impossible to please God and obtain eternal life. For faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Though God intends to give unto his Son the heathen for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession, yet there is no ground to expect this desirable event, until the way is prepared by the universal spread of the gospel.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> “Sermon XLI: Native Depravity,” in *The Works of Nathanael Emmons*, 6 volumes (New York: Garland, 1987 reprint), 2:626–627.

<sup>174</sup> “Sermon X: Exhibition of Christ Tries the Heart,” in *ibid.*, 4:135–136. See also Emmons’ “Sermon XXII: The Hopeless State of the Heathen,” in *ibid.*, 6:284–297.

Presbyterian Lyman Beecher (1775–1863) likewise expressed a traditional Calvinist viewpoint:

Nor have I been able to find any declaration in the Bible, that God regenerates by his own almighty power, without any instrumental agency . . . (A)ll the passages which speak of the instrumentality of the word, prove that he does not regenerate by omnipotence alone, but by power associated with the reading and especially the preaching of the word . . . That God is able by his direct immediate power to approach the mind in every faculty, and to touch all the springs of action and affection, I have never denied or doubted . . . That he is able, also, if it seemed good in his sight, to reveal the truth and manifest himself savingly to the heathen, is as plain as that he could reveal the same truths to holy men of old, and make them effectual through a written word and established ordinances. Nor is it denied or doubted, in respect to possibility, that God, if it seemed wisest and best under the gospel, might make such manifestations of himself to the souls of men, attended by such energy of his almighty power, as would call them unfailingly into his kingdom . . . The question, as we have said, is not a question of possible or impossible, but a question of fact, as to the manner in which God does actually call effectually sinners into his kingdom—a question of wisdom and goodness in doing what is best in the best manner . . . The question, also, has respect not to extreme cases, but to the ordinary methods of his sovereign power in saving men; and here the Bible and Confession are express, that regeneration is accomplished by the word and Spirit of God.<sup>175</sup>

Enoch Pond (1791–1881), professor at Bangor Theological Seminary, held to the hypothetical possibility of some of the unevangelized being saved . . . but only some: “I can conceive of a heathen who may be saved by Christ, though he has never heard of

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<sup>175</sup> Lyman Beecher, *Views in Theology* (Cincinnati: Truman & Smith; New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1836), 207–10.

him, and of course has never exercised that particular form of holiness which we call *faith in Christ*. But if he is truly pious, he has the *element* of faith, though not the form. He has that which *will be* faith, the moment he gets a view of Christ, or comes where he is.”<sup>176</sup>

Concerning the possibility of someone being saved apart from the gospel, he wrote:

By making the best possible use of the teachings of nature, such an one might come to the knowledge of God and his law; might see his sins, and repent of them; and might cast himself upon divine mercy; though he could know nothing, for the time, of the particular method in which the divine mercy was to be exercised towards him. He might have the *element* of faith in Christ, without the form of it. In other words, he might have that which would be faith in Christ, so soon as he came where Christ was, or came to the knowledge of him; in which case, I suppose, he would be saved by him. I can conceive of such a character as a *pious heathen*,—a heathen reconciled to God, and prepared essentially for heaven. Whether there have been any such characters, and, if so, how many, I pretend not to say. I hope there have been some; and the opposite of this is not implied in anything I am about to say as to our need of divine revelation . . . I have spoken here of what *might be done*, in heathen lands, on supposition the best possible use was made of the light and teachings of nature. But *is* the best possible use made of these teachings? Has it ever been? Is it likely to be? Is not the light of nature everywhere perverted and abused? And, to prevent us all from perishing together, do we not need more and stronger light,—a light shining down upon us directly from heaven?<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Enoch Pond, *Lectures On Christian Theology* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1867), 376–377.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 35–36.



Concerning the “heathen” he concluded: “With few exceptions, here and there, they give no evidence of repentance, but the most painful evidence to the contrary . . . . The conclusion, therefore, is irresistible, that the great body of the heathen, throughout the world, live and die in sin, and perish forever.”<sup>178</sup>

James H. Fairchild (1817–1902), who succeeded Charles Finney as president of Oberlin College, was of a different persuasion than those in this group we have considered so far. He represents a more radical departure from the Old School Presbyterianism. He wrote concerning the salvation of the unevangelized:

There seems no proper foundation for the idea that there can be no Faith without a knowledge of Christ and the Gospel. The Faith under the Gospel is not morally different from the Faith before the Gospel. When Christ is presented he must be accepted, or there is no Faith; and in a Christian land the failure to receive Christ as the Son of God affords strong presumption of moral unbelief. We cannot always know what darkness and perplexity may gather about an honest soul, one ready to know the truth; and it is not ours to judge . . . . A prominent religious writer defines Faith to be ‘An acceptance of the fact that God now pardons my sins for Jesus’ sake.’ This is Faith in one who has the full Gospel light; it is not clear that it was the Faith of Abraham or of David. The mistake in every such definition is that it is an objective instead of subjective definition; that is, a definition from the content of faith in the mind, rather than from the responsible moral attitude, the disposition to accept truth. As a moral disposition, Faith is one and the same thing in all conditions and degrees of knowledge and ignorance.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 569.

<sup>179</sup> James H. Fairchild, *Elements of Theology, Natural and Revealed* (Oberlin, Ohio: Edward J. Goodrich, 1892), 260–261. He further states: “Hence Faith in its subjective moral nature involves, not so much any particular form or amount of truth embraced, as the disposition to know and do the truth . . . . The feeblest light which is consistent with moral agency lays the foundation for Faith. It is not necessary to know the gospel, in its highest revelation, in order to the possibility and obligation of Faith.” Ibid., 254–255.

Congregational theologian Edwards A. Park (1808–1900) was one of the foremost proponents of the New England Theology. His views on the salvation of the unevangelized are summarized by Congregational theologian Frank Hugh Foster (1841–1935):

The means of regeneration is the truth. By this Park does not mean the Bible, but any truth; it may be simply the truth of conscience. ‘God may regenerate little children by the truth which their own consciences give to them. God may regenerate heathen by the truth which their consciences and the volume of nature give them.’ We are thus incidentally brought to the fact that he followed the tendency of our theologians to emphasize the freedom of the working of the Spirit of God among all men, and the consequent possibility of the salvation of the heathen. He reduced the condition of salvation to its ultimate ethical element, the act of the will in view of truth . . . . Let any man anywhere submit to the truth, more or less ample, which he understands; let him exercise a disinterested love toward such being, and such a God as he knows about, or thinks he knows about; and that man is *right*, because his will is right, and will receive the forgiving grace of God. This position, which was later designated as the holding of salvation by the *essential* Christ, rather than by the *historical* Christ, was not the result of the rationalizing tendency of our theology, but was believed to be an interpretation of Scripture; for example, of such passages as Rom. 2:14, 15; 4:4.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology*, 528. Foster expressed his own view on the matter: “Passages of Scripture are sometimes quoted to show the indispensability of means. E.g. Rom. 10, 14. But this denotes the ordinary means of regeneration, cf. Jn. 5, 8. Paul himself implies that some heathen are regenerated, though outside of the circle of the preaching of the word, Ro. 2, 14 . . . . The ‘word’, then, if it is understood in the sense of truth, and this is enlarged to comprehend all truth, and not divorced from the personality of the Spirit of God, is comprehensively the means of regeneration.” Frank Hugh Foster, *Outlines of Lectures in Systematic Theology: Delivered in Chicago Theological Seminary, Jan. & Feb. 1894* (Chicago: David Oliphant, 1894), 198. In the same volume, in answer to the question whether knowledge of the historical Christ was essential to the exercise of Christian faith, Foster wrote: “(1) Motives are essential to elicit the action of the will. (2) Any motive which is sufficient to elicit the act of holy choice, of love to being, is sufficient to the exercise of

## Post-Mortem Evangelization?

Another view emerged within Congregationalism in the late nineteenth century. That is the view that the opportunity to believe in Christ continues after death. This was known as the “future probation” theory, and was espoused particularly by the faculty of Andover Seminary, who promoted what they called “Progressive Orthodoxy” during the 1880s. It was their contention that salvation comes only through knowledge of Christ, and therefore every person must have an opportunity to respond to Christ, either during this life or after death.<sup>181</sup> The Andover view of future probation was particularly based on its conception of the atonement as one of moral influence. It is through Christ that the sacrificial love and goodness of God is seen, and man is moved to repentance which reconciles him to God. Thus, every person must be personally exposed to Christ in order to have an opportunity to be saved.

David Everett Swift notes:

(P)rogressive orthodoxy emphasized the atonement as redemption through the creative forces released into humanity by the incarnation . . . . This man-ward emphasis in the atonement was characteristic of progressive orthodoxy . . . . A natural result of this stress on the atonement as an influence enabling man to rise to the achievement of righteousness was the assumption that the atonement could

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Christian faith, since this is Christian faith. (3) As a matter of fact, some seem to be regenerated without a knowledge of the historic Christ (Ro. 2, 14). (4) The fullest enjoyment of the gospel requires a complete knowledge of its provisions; and if by ‘Christian faith’ it meant the complete exercise of faith in its highest forms, then the knowledge of Christ is essential to such faith.” Ibid., 208.

<sup>181</sup> This view had a long history in the church. But the unique perspective of the Andover faculty was set forth in the book, *Progressive Orthodoxy: A Contribution to the Christian Interpretation of Christian Doctrines*, By the Editors of “*The Andover Review*” Professors in Andover Theological Seminary (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1886).

be effective for men only when they are consciously acquainted with the gospel message.<sup>182</sup>

Swift states the progressives' view that "this atonement will eventually be brought to bear as a consciously experienced influence on all men. Those who have not experienced Christ in this life will meet him in the next."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> David Everett Swift, "Conservative Versus Progressive Orthodoxy in Later 19<sup>th</sup> Century Congregationalism," *Church History* xvi.1 (March 1947), 26.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. Swift's article describes the conflict which resulted between conservatives and progressives in Congregationalism in America. Swift also discusses the cultural factors which he felt influenced progressive orthodoxy: "During the 19<sup>th</sup> century a concept, in itself neither religious nor anti-religious, modified the thought of a great number of Americans. This was the concept of gradual development . . . . Another concept, closely related to that of development, also gravely disturbed the New England theology of the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was a revival of stress on the immanence of God within the created world. For certain Congregationalists, divine influence upon man came to be viewed as working wholly through the channels of natural law and natural growth, rather than by sudden invasion from without. To conservatives, this stress seemed to blur a central truth in evangelical theology, the perilous chasm between sinful men and the holy, judging God . . . . Thus man's regeneration is primarily by gradual development rather than by unpredictable invasion. Moreover, this spiritual development may carry on beyond death into the intermediate state." *Ibid.*, 22–23. For a defense of the Andover view (in addition to the book *Progressive Orthodoxy*) see Thomas P. Field, "The 'Andover Theory' of Future Probation," *The Andover Review: A Religious and Theological Monthly*, vii.xli (May 1887), 461–475. For a critique of their view, see S. H. Kellogg, "Future Probation," *The Presbyterian Review* 6.22 (1885), 226–256. See also R. D. C. Robbins, "Does the New Testament Warrant the Hope of a Probation Beyond the Grave?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* xxxviii.cli (July 1881), 460–508. See as well the impassioned rebuttal of future probation by Presbyterian J. L. Withrow, D.D. (1837–1909) in his article, "Probation After Death. Is There Any Foundation for the Dogma in Reason or Revelation?" *The Homiletic Review* xi.6 (June, 1886), 465–478. Withrow states: "When the inspiring Spirit informs us that at judgment we are to be awarded according to the 'deeds done through the body,' even our imagination dares not venture to alter it to mean, that we shall be chiefly judged for deeds done outside of the body, and after death." *Ibid.*, 474. To the idea that insufficient knowledge during this life requires additional knowledge be afforded after death, for a fair probation to be granted, Withrow responds: "Thus the reasoning would end in the conclusion that forever increasing claims for knowledge can forever debar Christ from condemning anybody." *Ibid.*, 475. For an account of the controversy the Andover view brought to foreign missions among Congregationalists, see Wm. J. Potter, "The Orthodox Confusion," *The Index*, xviii.879

In contrast to the view of future probation, however, the idea that the unevangelized could obtain salvation in this life by responding to the light they have, continued to gain many adherents among the heirs of the New England Theology in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An effective spokesman for this view was Lewis French Stearns (1847–1892), professor of theology at Bangor Theological Seminary. In his book *Present Day Theology*, he makes the following statements. I quote him at length, because his words reveal in a clear way the state of the debate regarding the unevangelized at that time in history.

The view that God gives to the heathen a sufficient opportunity in this life to make the great decision seems to me the most satisfactory . . . . It is not needful, in order to the making of the great decision of life, that men should have a knowledge of Christ and his redemptive work. It is sufficient if they receive the benefits of the Saviour's salvation and have his Spirit working in their hearts . . . . The question how many heathen are saved is one that we cannot answer. There is not much to encourage us in the outward life of heathendom. But we must remember that the heathen are not to be judged by the same standard as those who have been brought up under the light of the Gospel. God may see what we do not see, a spark of faith in the soul, which His grace can kindle under better conditions into a bright flame . . . . When our Saviour uttered his wonderful parables of the kingdom, the first and most striking had reference to the sowing of the Gospel seed. The different effect produced in different hearts was made to depend upon a different state of those hearts as regarded their susceptibility . . . . The Master did not explain how the hearts came to be in the condition in which the Gospel found them, but the fair inference is that the difference lay in the free choices of the different souls. In other words, there is a pre-Christian faith—pre-Christian in the sense of preceding the knowledge of Christ—as well as a pre-

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(Oct. 28, 1886), 206. Potter states that there were many who felt that this doctrine would “cut the nerve of missionary work.”

Christian unbelief, which practically decide destiny and anticipate the outward decision which the preaching of the Gospel brings about. The Saviour seems to have had the same fact in mind when he said, 'Everyone that doeth ill hateth the light, and cometh not to the light, lest his works should be reproved. But he that doeth the truth cometh to the light, that his works may be manifest, that they have been wrought in God' (John iii. 20, 21). He said to Pilate, 'Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice' (John xix. 37). Such a pre-Christian faith, which may render even the most ignorant man a 'doer of the truth,' it seems to me may be exercised by many heathen, who will in the other world come to the perfect light, and whose works will then be made manifest that they have been wrought in God. God only knows how many such heathen there are. While the Christian church is so backward in the work of missions to the heathen, we may well hope that they are very many . . . . The old Calvinism, which our fathers loyally accepted, left a part of mankind wholly out of reach of Christ's redemptive grace. When the New England theology broke the iron ring of this consistent and logical system by the adoption of the doctrine of a universal atonement, it was inevitable that new questions should arise . . . . During the last decade we have been discussing, as the world pretty well knows, the relation of the heathen to God's grace in Christ. The old view, which prevailed during the last century, and had many advocates until quite recent times, doomed the heathen as a mass to perdition. This severe doctrine has been generally abandoned. Our discussions have not been upon this point, but upon the question as to the manner and grounds of the salvation of those heathen who are saved. The common view has been that their imperfect faith, based upon the natural knowledge of God and such elements of truth as are to be found in their corrupt religions, is reckoned to them for righteousness for the sake of Christ, who gave himself a ransom for all, and that so their eternal destiny is settled on the basis of the decisions of this life. The able and devoted teachers in our beloved mother theological seminary at Andover have urged the other view, common in Germany, that an opportunity is granted the heathen in the other life, between death and the judgment, to hear the Gospel and accept or reject Christ. I do not propose to enter into the merits of our controversy. So far as it has

involved unchristian bitterness, we are ashamed of it. We are hard fighters on our side of the water, and both parties have dealt heavy blows. The result of the discussion has been to emphasize the silence of the Scriptures on the subject. The majority still hold the older view, because it seems to us more in accord with the general drift of the Scripture and the principles of our New England theology. But there is an increasing willingness to admit that our speculations cannot exhaust the possibilities of God's redemptive grace, and that a point of this sort can never permanently be made a test of orthodoxy . . . . The much more difficult question of future punishment has not been the subject of important controversy among us. But it has profoundly affected us. Our deeper conception of Christianity, our enlarged view of the infinite love and mercy of God, our stronger realization of the power of Christ's redemption, have united to give this subject a peculiar painfulness and solemnity. It has pressed not only upon our theologians, but upon all our thoughtful men and women. It is a subject of peculiar difficulty to many of our most promising students of divinity. Some among us find relief in the theories of the 'larger hope' and 'conditional immortality.' If the greater number continue to hold in substance the immemorial doctrine of the Christian church, it is because we cannot convince ourselves that the words of Christ and his Apostles, fairly interpreted, sanction any other view.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Lewis French Stearns, *Present Day Theology: A Popular Discussion of Leading Doctrines of the Christian Faith*. Second edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), 420–423, 543–544. Two other articles by writers of this era sympathetic to Stearns' view should be mentioned: The Congregationalist, W. W. Patton (1821–1889), "The True Theory of Missions to the Heathen," *Bibliotheca Sacra* xv.lix (July 1858), 543–569; and the article by the Baptist Lucius E. Smith (b. 1825), "Is Salvation Possible Without a Knowledge of the Gospel?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* xxxviii.clii (Oct. 1881), 622–645. Neither of these writers is confident that there are *many* who are saved apart from the gospel; but they are confident that there are *some*. See also the Congregationalist, Thomas W. Jenkyn (President of Coward College, London): "All will be dealt with according to the light that they have. And wherever there is a heathen Cornelius, he will be accepted before God for the sake of a Saviour of whom he has not heard . . . . Faith is necessary to salvation only to those who have the gospel. Faith cometh by *hearing*—and hearing can only be where the gospel is. Infants are saved for Christ's sake, though they do not know the medium of their salvation; and so might a virtuous heathen be, wherever such can be found." Rev. Thomas W. Jenkyn, D.D., *The Extent of the Atonement, in its Relation to God and the Universe* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1859), 354–355. See also

These comments by Professor Stearns reveal how far those who considered themselves the theological descendants of the Calvinistic theology had moved from the traditional views on these important subjects, and the reasons and sentiments behind their convictions. Stearns' view, as we shall see, was exactly that of most Arminians.

### Calvinists in the Modern Era

The various views on the matter of the unevangelized entertained by those in the Calvinistic tradition have continued to claim their proponents.<sup>185</sup> The traditional view that salvation comes only through explicit faith in Christ is defended by many (probably most, though certainly not all) of those who identify themselves as Calvinists today. The following statement by John Witherspoon (though of an earlier era: 1723–94), President of the College of New Jersey (1768–94), summarizes graciously the traditional Reformed view that continued to be embraced by many Calvinists in modern times:

The question is, Whether an objective revelation and explicit discovery of Christ, and what he hath wrought, is necessary to salvation? Or if his undertaking may not be the ground of acceptance for many who never heard of his name? In support of the last of these it is said, That many of the ancient patriarchs and prophets were far from having distinct views of the person, character, and work of Christ; and if (as all suppose) his undertaking was available for their acceptance, why not of others also? On such a question, no doubt, modesty and caution is

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the comments by Baptist theologian Henry E. Robins: "Those who are saved where the New Testament revelation has not been made known, must possess the same disposition as those who are saved having heard it,—such a disposition as would insure their acceptance of Christ if he were made known to them,—an implicit faith in Christ." Henry E. Robins, *The Harmony of Ethics with Theology* (New York: A.C. Armstrong, 1891), 35.

<sup>185</sup> A brief discussion of the views of evangelicals in the twentieth century will be reserved for a later chapter.



highly commendable, and perhaps it were wise in some respects to suspend the determination altogether. But there are cases in which it comes necessarily to be considered: for instance, I do not see how it can be avoided, in speaking of the importance or necessity of propagating the gospel among the nations that know not God . . . . We may there observe, that the only just foundation of our hope in God, either for ourselves or others, especially as sinners, is his promise. The first of these ought to be precisely commensurate to the last. In so far as it is defective, or falls short of this measure, we are chargeable with unbelief; and in so far as it exceeds, with presumption. Now, to whomsoever the true God is revealed in any measure, as merciful and gracious, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; however obscurely he points out the meritorious cause of pardon, if they believe his word and accept his mercy, they shall be saved; as we are told, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.’ As to any others, if they are in absolute ignorance of the true God, we must say, that there doth not appear, from Scripture, any ground on which to affirm, that the efficacy of Christ’s death extends to them: on the contrary, we are expressly told, that they have ‘no hope.’ We find indeed in Scripture, that the display of divine perfection in the works of creation, and the conduct of Providence, is represented as rendering the heathens inexcusable in their contempt and neglect of God: ‘Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.’ ‘Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead; so that they are without excuse.’ Should any desire from these passages to infer, that if any of them made a just and dutiful use of these natural notices of God, he would not frustrate their search, but would lead them to the saving knowledge of himself, I have nothing to object against the general position; but I am afraid it will be difficult to make any other legitimate use of this concession than the apostle has made already, that they are ‘without excuse’ in their estrangement from God. One thing more we are authorized from Scripture to

say, that their guilt is in proportion to their means of knowledge; that they continue in their natural state, and are not chargeable with the sin of rejecting the gospel which they never heard: ‘For as many as have sinned without the law, shall also perish without law; and as many as have sinned in the law, shall be judged by the law.’<sup>186</sup>

Nonetheless, the diversity of views still reflected in the Reformed/Calvinist tradition is illustrated by the fact that when the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland passed a revision of its standards for ordination to ministry in 1879, one section entitled “Destiny of the heathen and of children dying in infancy” reads:

While the Church adheres to the Westminster positions that none are saved except through the mediation of Christ and by the grace of His Holy Spirit, ‘who worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth,’ that the duty of sending the gospel to the heathen, who are sunk in ignorance, sin, and misery is clear and imperative, and that the outward and ordinary means of salvation for those capable of being called by the Word are the ordinances of the gospel, she does not require those who accept her Standards to hold ‘that any who die in infancy are lost, *or that God may not extend His grace to any who are without the pale of ordinary means, as it may seem good in His sight*’ (italics added).<sup>187</sup>

Of interest in this regard are the views of the Scottish Presbyterian, James Macknight (1721–1800), who in his commentary on Romans embraced a view favorable to the salvation of many unevangelized:

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<sup>186</sup> John Witherspoon, *Works*, 2: 353–55.

<sup>187</sup> From the Declaratory Act of the United Presbyterian Church, found in C. G. M’Crie, *Confessions of the Church of Scotland: their evolution in History. The Seventh Series of the Chalmers Lectures* (Edinburgh: Macniven & Wallace, 1907), 282–283. For an account of the development of Scottish theology leading up to this change in perspective, see Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).

(T)he Gentiles, who have not the benefit of revelation, may attain that faith and holiness which is necessary to justification: in which case he (St. Paul) assures us, that they shall be rewarded with glory and peace. Besides, it is well known, that in every Gentile nation, there were always many who believed in the one true God, and who, in the persuasion that he is, and that he is the rewarder of them who diligently seek him, were anxious to know and do his will; and who being instructed and strengthened by God, behaved in such a manner as to be acceptable to him . . . . The heathens in general believed their deities placable, and, in that persuasion, offered to them propitiatory sacrifices, and expected to be pardoned and blessed by them, even in a future state . . . : nay, many of them believed they were to reanimate their bodies. But these hopes they did not derive from the law or light of nature, but from the promise which God made to the first parents of mankind. For that promise being handed down by tradition to Noah, and his sons, they communicated the knowledge thereof, together with the use of sacrifice, to all their descendants. So that the hope of pardon and immortality, which the pious heathens entertained, was the very hope which the gospel hath more clearly brought to light, and was derived from the same source, namely, from divine revelation . . . . Reader, behold and admire the benignity and impartiality of the divine government, as set forth in the gospel. At the judgment, God will render to every man according to his works, without shewing more favour to those who have enjoyed revelation, than to those who, in the exercise of his sovereignty, have been denied that favour. In other words, the enjoyment of revelation will not be imputed to any man for merit, nor the want of it be considered as a fault; but in judging men, God most righteous will consider the advantages and disadvantages which result from the nature of the dispensation under which they lived, and will pass sentence upon them accordingly. And therefore, if, at the judgment, some who have not enjoyed revelation, are found to have feared God, and wrought righteousness, notwithstanding the disadvantages they labored under, he will not deny them those rewards, which persons in more happy circumstances have reason to expect, from his mercy in Christ . . . . Faith does not consist in the belief of particular doctrines . . . far less in the belief of doctrines which men never had

an opportunity of knowing, but in such an earnest desire to know and do the will of God, as leads them conscientiously to use such means as they have, for gaining the knowledge of his will, and for doing it when found . . . . Withal, since at the judgment the ground of the salvation of mankind shall be declared in the hearing of the assembled universe, the discovery of Christ as Saviour will be made to the saved heathens, in time sufficient to lay a foundation for their gratitude and love to him, through all eternity . . . . This liberal doctrine puts an end to those specious cavils, whereby the enemies of revelation have endeavoured to discredit the gospel, in the eyes of the intelligent. For it can no longer be pretended, that by making faith the means of salvation, the gospel hath consigned all the heathens to damnation. Neither can God be accused of partiality, in conferring the benefit of revelation upon so small a portion of the human race, in the false notion, that the actual knowledge of revelation is necessary to salvation . . . . Moreover, all the heathen who are condemned, shall be condemned, not because they lived without revelation, but because they have lived in opposition to the law of God written on their heart.<sup>188</sup>

Also of significance are the views of Scottish Presbyterian James Denney (1856–1917). While rejecting the notion of a future probation (which he said was held by “many theologians” in his day), he embraced the notion that those who have not heard the gospel would be judged by a different standard:

In the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew our Lord expressly gives, in pictorial form a representation of the judgment of the heathen. All nations—all the Gentiles—are gathered before the King; and their destiny is determined, not by their conscious

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<sup>188</sup> James Macknight, D.D., *A New Literal Translation From the Original Greek. Of All the Apostolic Epistles. With a Commentary and Notes, Philological, Critical, Explanatory, and Practical. To Which is Added a History of the Life of the Apostle Paul. A New Edition. To which is prefixed, an account of the life of the author. In Six Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969. Reprinted from the London edition made in 1821) 1:167–168, 204–7.

acceptance or rejection of the historical Saviour, but by their unconscious acceptance or rejection of Him in the persons of those who needed services of love. Those who acknowledge the claim of a brother's need prove themselves the kindred of Christ and are admitted to the Kingdom; those who refuse to acknowledge it prove themselves children of another family and are shut out. This is unquestionably Christ's account of the judgment of the heathen . . . . It . . . tells us plainly that men may do things of final and decisive import in this life, even though Christ is unknown to them . . . . What came into the world in Jesus Christ was the true light which lighteneth every man, and no man is quite without it. What that light wins from the heathen may not be what it wins from the disciplined Christian, but it may be enough to prove him Christ's kinsman, and secure his entrance into the Kingdom . . . . The motive of missions to the heathen is not to be found in the belief that all the heathen who die without having heard the name of Christ are lost for ever (sic). It is to be found in obedience to Christ's command, in devotion to His honour in the world, and in that love, learned of Him, which, looking not on its own things but on the things of others also, longs to impart to those who are yet in darkness the blessings of that light in which itself rejoices. It is the love of Christ which constrains the true evangelist, and not the apprehension of an awful future.<sup>189</sup>

Among Reformed writers in recent times who embrace a wider view is Paul Helm. He writes:

Anyone who, in prayer, addresses 'the Creator' is in fact addressing the only true God. And anyone who, in addressing the Creator, pleads for his mercy, is in fact casting himself on the mercy of Christ . . . . The so-called atheist's prayer 'O God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul' is often the subject of some merriment. No doubt such a prayer can be offered in a cynical and God-defying

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<sup>189</sup> Rev. James Denney, D.D., *Studies in Theology: Lectures Delivered in Chicago Theological Seminary* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1895), 243–246.

way. But what if it were to be the cry of someone who despairs of himself? Is there any convincing reason to think that that prayer will not be answered?<sup>190</sup>

Other Reformed writers have also promoted a wider view. R. Todd Mangum, professor at Biblical Theological Seminary, in an article written for the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, argues that, “God may, through extraordinary means, albeit fully on the basis of the atoning cross-work of Christ, gain the salvation of some who are denied full assurance (epistemologically) of their salvation.” Specifically, he argues “that God may reach some of these: (1) through general revelation (accompanied with an extraordinary ability to discern its truths, which only the Holy Spirit could provide); and/or (2) through extraordinary expansion of the covenantal community’s parameters.”<sup>191</sup> With regard to his second point, he asks: “Is it possible that believers will have the opportunity to ‘vouch for’ some of those who did not explicitly join the covenant community while on earth, but who are received into the covenant community in eternity by covenant members with whom they showed affiliation by their kindnesses toward them?”<sup>192</sup> In his conclusion, however, he says: “I believe the Bible encourages agnosticism on the part of believers as to what the fate of the unevangelized will be . . . . We do not know what he (God) will do, though we are given some grounds to draw both some pessimistic and some optimistic expectations. He calls for us simply to trust him

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<sup>190</sup> Paul Helm, “Are They Few That Be Saved?” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 278.

<sup>191</sup> R. Todd Mangum, “Is There a Reformed Way to Get the Benefits of the Atonement to ‘Those Who Have Never Heard’?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47.1 (March 2004), 125.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

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The Reformed theologian J. I. Packer (1926–2020) expressed a cautious view in 1981:

In any case, those who did not hear the gospel presented ‘intelligently’ still had light from God in their consciences, which they either heeded or disregarded, either setting themselves to seek the God of whom they had inklings or not. We may safely say (i) if any good pagan reached the point of throwing himself on his Maker’s mercy for pardon, it was grace that brought him there; (ii) God will surely save anyone he brings thus far (*cf.* Acts 10:34f.; Rom. 10:12f.); (iii) anyone thus saved would learn in the next world that he was saved through Christ. But what we cannot safely say is that God ever does save anyone this way. We simply do not know. All we are sure of is that ‘the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth’, and that Paul does not hesitate to echo the psalmist’s generalization, ‘none is righteous, no, not one’ (Rom. 1:18; 3:10, *cf.* 9–18). Nor does God owe any presentation of the gospel, let alone an ‘intelligent’ one, to any man.<sup>194</sup>

In a later work, Packer expresses himself more confidently:

A British lay theologian, Sir Norman Anderson, poses an often-asked question as follows: ‘Might it not be true of the follower of some other religion that the God of all mercy had worked in his heart by his Spirit, bringing him in some measure to realize his sin and need for forgiveness, and enabling him, in his twilight as it were, to throw himself on God’s mercy?’ The answer surely is: yes, it might be true, as it seems to have been true for some non-Israelites in Old Testament times: think of Melchizedek, Job, Naaman, Cyrus, Nebuchadnezzar, the sailors in Jonah’s boat, and the Ninevites to whom he preached, for starters. In heaven, any such penitents will learn that they were saved by Christ’s death and their hearts

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<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>194</sup> J. I. Packer, *God’s Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 210.

were renewed by the Holy Spirit, and they will worship God accordingly.

Christians since the second century have voiced the hope that there are such people, and we may properly voice the hope today.<sup>195</sup>

Reformed theologian Terrance L. Tiessen has also written extensively on this topic, particularly in his book, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World*, in which he contends that “God holds people accountable only for the revelation that has been made available to them,” and that “*everyone receives potentially saving revelation.*”<sup>196</sup> Furthermore, he believes that “*it may be that God gives everyone sufficient grace to enable them to believe in him but that he only draws and persuades effectively the elect.*” Not only does everyone receive revelation sufficient to lead to salvation if responded to with faith, but at least once in everyone’s life that divine revelation is accompanied by a divine enabling that makes a faith response possible, *in the sense that people are justly condemned for failing to believe when God is made known to them on that occasion.*”<sup>197</sup>

Christian Reformed minister, Neal Punt (b. 1928) has published his views in several books.<sup>198</sup> He presents what he calls “Evangelical Inclusivism,” which he defines

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<sup>195</sup> J. I. Packer, “Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation: New Challenges to the Gospel—Universalism, and Justification by Faith,” in *Evangelical Affirmations*, eds. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 121–123. Packer even speculated that Socrates and Plato might be among those saved, even though they did not have explicit knowledge of the true God. J. I. Packer, “What Happens to People Who Die Without Hearing the Gospel?” *Decision*, January 2002, 11.

<sup>196</sup> Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 125.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>198</sup> Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980); *What’s Good About the Good News?* (Chicago, Northland Press, 1988); *So Also in Christ*. (Chicago: Northland Press, 2002); *A Theology of Inclusivism* (Allendale, MI: Northland Press, 2008).



as “the teaching that all persons are elect in Christ except those who the Bible expressly declares will be finally lost, namely, those who ultimately reject or remain indifferent to whatever revelation God has given of himself to them, whether in nature/conscience (Rom. 1 & 2) *or* in gospel presentation.”<sup>199</sup> He does believe that faith in Christ is necessary for salvation “for *everyone to whom the gospel is presented in a meaningful way*.”<sup>200</sup> And he does believe that “it is impossible for anyone who has said ‘yes’ to the lesser light of nature and conscience to say ‘no’ to the greater light that breaks forth from the gospel.”<sup>201</sup> But he also states: “We may and must assume that everyone we approach with the gospel has a new standing with God and Christ unless or until we have decisive evidence to the contrary. Such evidence to the contrary will not be given us until ‘the last day’ . . . .”<sup>202</sup> If the assumption is that everyone we encounter already has a relationship with God based on the fact that they have not rejected whatever revelation they have, does not appear to provide much incentive for proclaiming the gospel to those who have as yet not made a conscious profession of faith in Christ. This is particularly the case, since he doesn’t believe we will have evidence to the contrary until the judgment. This seems quite out of step with the evidence we have in the New Testament concerning the state of those who have not yet trusted in Christ. We will address these issues thoroughly in the later chapters of this work.

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<sup>199</sup> Neal Punt, *A Theology of Inclusivism*, 10.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

Mention should also be made at this point of the views of Karl Barth (1886–1968), as he does stand in the broader Reformed tradition. It is well known that he hoped for the possibility of the salvation of all men, as expressed in this statement:

There is no good reason why we should forbid ourselves, or be forbidden, openness to the possibility that in the reality of God and man in Jesus Christ there is contained much more than we might expect and therefore the supremely unexpected withdrawal of that final threat, i.e., that in the truth of this reality there might be contained the super-abundant promise of the final deliverance of all men. To be more explicit, there is no good reason why we should not be open to this possibility . . . of an apokatastasis or universal reconciliation.<sup>203</sup>

We may not be able to call Barth a convinced universalist based on these words; but we can certainly conclude that he was a “hopeful” universalist.

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<sup>203</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 5 volumes in 14, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–1977), IV/3, first half, 478.

## Chapter 4

### *The Arminian Views*

We now turn to the development of views among the Arminians on the matter of the unevangelized. It was noted above that there was a great deal of similarity between the views of Calvin and Arminius on the matter of the unevangelized. Both believed that faith in Christ is a necessary condition for salvation. And both believed that God could communicate the gospel by extraordinary means. The difference between their views, however, arose from their conception of the nature of God's grace toward the recipients of salvation. Whereas Calvin believed that salvation (and all that it entailed) was due to God's "secret and inscrutable counsel" and the "free goodness of God" (i.e. his elective grace), Arminius, on the other hand, believed that it was due to the "profitable use of grace already granted."<sup>204</sup> That is, he believed that God granted to all people "sufficient grace" to believe, and it was the proper use of this ability which determined one's salvation. In view of this fact, later Arminians came to believe that God must also grant to all sufficient knowledge to lead them to salvation. William Cunningham (1805–1861), speaking of the Arminians, stated it this way: "(T)hey usually maintain, that it is indispensable, in order to the vindication of the divine character, that *all men*—however inferior in degree the privileges of some may be to those of others—should have, at least, such means of knowing God, as that, by the right use and improvement of them, they can attain to salvation."<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> See notes 61 and 92 above.

<sup>205</sup> William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 2 volumes (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960 reprint), 2:397.

The Presbyterian William Annan stated accurately with regard to the hope that some among the unevangelized might be saved: “The Calvinist founds his hope of their salvation on the Divine mercy—the Arminian founds his upon the justice of God.”<sup>206</sup> The Calvinist bases his hope that some might be extraordinarily enlightened, on the grace and mercy of God. The Arminian bases his hope that some might improve on grace which God in his justice has already granted to all.

British professor Isabel Rivers provides some background to the discussions of this chapter. She states that there were two changes that took place in British theology from the mid-seventeenth to later eighteenth centuries:

The first is an emphasis in Anglican thought on the capacity of human reason and free will to co-operate with divine grace in order to achieve the holy and happy life. This optimistic portrait of human nature represents a rejection of the orthodox Reformation tradition, which stresses the depravity of human nature and God’s arbitrary exercise of his free grace in electing the few to salvation. The second is the attempt to divorce ethics from religion, and to find the springs of human action not in the co-operation of human nature and divine grace but in the constitution of human nature alone.<sup>207</sup>

She further describes these changes:

(T)he latitude-men . . . opposed the Calvinist doctrines of irresistible grace and imputed righteousness because they thought that these attribute everything to God and nothing to man, and supported the pre-Augustinian, Erasmian, and Arminian view that man’s will is free, that God’s grace is given to all, and that man can

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<sup>206</sup> William Annan, “Appendix II: The Heathen World—Its State and Prospects,” in *The Difficulties of Arminian Methodism*, 332.

<sup>207</sup> Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780*, 2 volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1:1.

work with or against it as he chooses. There were exceptions to this full-scale Arminianism: Culverwell (who died in 1651) remained, however, inconsistently, a Calvinist, rejecting the view that grace is universally offered, though he was obviously unhappy about the implications of the doctrine of the divine decrees. For example, on the vexed question of the salvation of the heathen (who are categorically damned in the *Larger Catechism*), after sidestepping the issue of whether they could be saved, he continues: ‘though we say not with the Pelagians, that the emprovements (sic) of nature can make men happy, nor yet with the Semi-Pelagians, that natural preparations and predispositions do bespeak & procure Grace; nor yet with the Papists and Arminians, that works flowing from Grace do contribute to more Grace & Glory, yet this we say, that upon the improvement of any present strength, God out of his free goodness, may if he please give more.’<sup>208</sup>

### The Remonstrants

As noted in a previous chapter, Arminius believed that if one properly responded to the knowledge he had of God through nature, he would be granted sufficient knowledge by which he might be saved (the gospel).<sup>209</sup> At the Synod of Dort, most of the Remonstrants (followers of Arminius, led by Simon Episcopius, 1583–1643) echoed this same belief; though a few contended that one might be saved apart from the gospel (Venator, Bertius).<sup>210</sup> The successor to Episcopius was J. A. Corvinus (1582–1650). He

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 73–74.

<sup>209</sup> See notes 84ff above.

<sup>210</sup> John Owen lists direct quotes of Venator (and also Bertius) to the effect that salvation can be obtained apart from faith in Christ. John Owen, *Works*, X:109–10, 114. Gerard Brandt refers to Adolphus Venator’s book *Theologia Vera & Mera* (1617), in which his opponents charged that he had overthrown “the absolute necessity of the christian (sic) religion in order to salvation, and opened a wide door, whereby people of all other religions, whether *Jews, Turks, or Heathens (provided they feared God and kept his Commandments)* were admitted to eternal life.” Gerard Brandt, *The History of the Reformation and other Ecclesiastical Transactions in and about the Low-Countries*,

argued that though salvation comes through the word of God, nonetheless, the light of nature may be considered in a sense “salvific.” He wrote: “Although the true way of worshipping God is to be learned from the Word of God; yet the knowledge of the invisible God which is discerned by the understanding from created things also implants in minds that God is to be worshipped and creatures are stimulated through it so that they worship God according to that knowledge.”<sup>211</sup> He continued:

Although the knowledge of God which is drawn from created things is not in itself sufficient for salvation and in that sense it cannot be said to be salvific: yet that same knowledge can be said to be salvific to the extent that it in itself led to salvation and immediately precedes the knowledge conducive to salvation . . . . However, both forms of revelation, whether the more obscure and imperfect or the clearer and more perfect have the end that we seek, (to) worship and glorify God.<sup>212</sup>

Speaking of the Socinian belief that “those who worship God according to the light of nature . . . are pleasing to him and find him their rewarder,” Turretin writes:

The Remonstrants evidently agree with them: some more openly as Curcellaeus and Adolphus Venator (Adolf de Jager) who, in his defense against the ministers

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*From the Beginning of the Eighth Century, Down to the Famous Synod of Dort, inclusive*, 4 volumes (London: T. Wood, 1720), 2:315.

<sup>211</sup> J. A. Corvinus, *Petri Molinaei novi anatomici mala encheiresis, seu Censura Anatomies Arminianismi* (Frankfurt, 1622): 589. Translated from the original Latin by John Platt and cited in his work: *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: The Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 184. I am dependent to large degree on the work of Platt in this section. See his work for a full discussion of the debate between the Calvinists and the Remonstrants on these issues.

<sup>212</sup> Corvinus, *Petri Molinaei*: 589–590. Translated and cited in Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, 184–185.

of Dort (cf. Een besonder Tractaet . . . der Predicanten der Stadt Dordrecht [1612]), expressly denies the proposition ‘no one can be saved who is not placed in Christ by true faith’; others more cautiously, as Arminius, Corvinus, Episcopus (who, not immediately indeed, but mediately), admit the Gentiles and others to salvation, holding that by a right use of the light of nature, the light of grace can be obtained and by grace admission to glory (Arminius, ‘The Apology or Defence of James Arminius Against Certain Theological Articles,’ 15, 16, 17 . . . ; and Arnoldus [Johannes Arnoldus Corvinus], *Defensio sententiae...I. Arminii* [1613] against Tilenus).<sup>213</sup>

John Platt summarizes the Arminian view in this way:

It is evident that the good pagan does obtain sufficient knowledge of God to enable him to believe in the Deity as Creator of the world and to worship Him accordingly. Furthermore, we may trust that God in His justice and mercy will in some way crown this with greater grace sufficient for salvation. However, to say that such knowledge is purely natural is to leave oneself open to the ever present threat of the charge of Pelagianism. Hence such effective knowledge must itself be the result of grace.<sup>214</sup>

Rather than seeing the purpose of the things revealed in nature to be to render man “inexcusable” (as most Calvinists did), Corvinus says that “they witness to the goodness of God and indeed . . . so that the gentiles by feeling seek God; it is apparent that the internal aid of grace was present with them, by which, through the contemplation of those benefits their minds were stirred up to seek God and through the contemplation of those benefits they were moved to worship the author of the same.”<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:9–10.

<sup>214</sup> Platt, *Reformed Thought*, 185.

<sup>215</sup> Corvinus, *Petri Molinaei*, 633. Translated and cited in Platt, *Reformed Thought*, 186.

Stephen De Courcelles (1586–1659) was to be the next leader among the Remonstrants. De Courcelles wrote extensively on the matter of the relationship between faith in God (which he believed could be acquired through contemplation of nature and providence—God’s moral dealings with men), and faith in Christ (which comes through the word of God). He wrote:

(T)he instructions which God gives to men in His works cannot in truth be called sufficient to lead to salvation in the way which is declared to us in the Gospel by faith in Jesus Christ, but only so far that God has given indications that He is willing extraordinarily to be content with this degree of piety that such instructions can produce in those who were destitute of all other means of knowing Him, of whom His justice does not allow him to demand more than they have received . . . Faith in God is absolutely necessary for salvation and there is no difficulty in pronouncing that without it no one can have eternal life . . . But faith in Jesus Christ as mediator between God and men and who by his death has ransomed us from perdition, is not necessary until it is announced and one has the means of knowing him. . . .<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> J. A. Corvinus, *Advis d’un personnage desinteresse sur ledit Examen (The Advice of a disinterested person on the said Examination)*, 121, 26–27. This was a work attached to the work of Pierre Du Moulin, *Examen de la Doctrine de Messieurs Amyrault et Testard...touchant la Predestination et les points qui en dependent (An Examination of the Doctrine of Messrs. Amyrault and Testard...concerning Predestination and the points which stem from it)* (Amsterdam, 1638). Translated and cited in Platt, *Reformed Thought*, 191–192. In a later work, De Courcelles wrote: “God does not allow those to whom the Gospel has never been announced to be entirely destitute of those means by which they can believe in Him and by faith show obedience and subjection to Him . . . For it would be absurd to think that those who truly believe in God the Lord of the world should undergo that dreadful penalty because they did not believe in Christ; granted that they did not refrain from doing this, nor were they able to because it was not revealed to them.” Etienne De Courcelles, “Tertia Dissertatio Theologica: de Necessitate Cognitionis Christi ad Salutem” in *Quaternio dissertationum theologicarum adversus Sam. Maresium [Four Theological Dissertations Against Samuel Maresius]* (Amsterdam, 1659, translated and reprinted in Van Limborch’s edition of De Courcelle’s *Opera Theologica*, Amsterdam, 1675), 925. Daniel D. Whedon (1808–1885) praised this work of Courcelles: “Perhaps the ablest and fullest discussion on the Arminian side is the treatise of Curcellaeus, *De*



Significantly, in his later writings De Courcelles expressed the belief that it was by reason alone (unaided by grace) that man is able to acquire a knowledge of God through natural revelation. Platt states: “What is so significant here is that De Courcelles clearly indentifies (sic) the means by which the natural man is able to make use of the revelation made to him by God in nature as ‘reason with which all are equipped’. Thus, for the first time in the course of this protracted controversy reason is given an essential role in a sphere which the earlier Arminians felt obliged to assign to the operation of grace.”<sup>217</sup>

Philip Limborch (1633–1712) was the next in line as a leading Remonstrant theologian. He stated that God at times withholds the gospel from people, not because of any divine reprobation, but because they have forfeited the right to receive it. He states: “It is possible, that God will not expressly send the Ministers of his Word to some, there being some weighty Reasons on Mens (sic) part which may obstruct this Divine Mission: For ‘tis certain God never denies the Communication of his Grace, but upon the account

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*Necessitate Cognitionis Christi ad Salutem*, written in reply to Maresius, who took the high Calvinian ground of the universal damnation of all not possessing actual faith in Christ.” D. D. Whedon, *The Freedom of the Will as a Basis of Human Responsibility and a Divine Government* (New York: Carlton & Lanaman, 1864), 344.

<sup>217</sup> Platt, *Reformed Thought*: 196. Platt (on pp. 195–196) provides his own translation of several citations from De Courcelles’ “Tertia Dissertatio Theologica.” “For the works which God produces through His ordinary servant nature and which strike our senses at every moment, afford the fullest evidence of the divine omnipotence, goodness and wisdom: therefore they who have them have been furnished with sufficient means by which they can believe in God and worship Him.” Etienne De Courcelles, “Tertia Dissertatio Theologica,” 925. Cited in Platt, *Reformed Thought*, 195–96. “(I)t is obvious that reason, with which all are equipped, sufficiently indicates that the finest worship of God is a pious and honest life by which He is better pleased than by any gifts.” De Courcelles, “Tertia Dissertatio Theologica,” 925. Cited in Platt, *Reformed Thought*, 195–196.

of the Demerits of Men.”<sup>218</sup> He also acknowledges that the “ordinary method of Conversion is by the Word of the Gospel, whether preached or written.”<sup>219</sup> But he also believed that there are those who are ignorant of the gospel “not through any Fault of their own” who may be saved if they live “agreeably to the Law of Nature.”<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Philip Limborch, *A Complete System, or Body of Divinity, both Speculative and Practical, founded on Scripture and Reason: Written Originally in Latin, By Philip Limborch, Professor of Divinity. With Improvements from Bishop Wilkins, Archbishop Tillotson, Dr. Scott, and several other Divines of the Church of England. In Two Volumes. By William Jones, a Presbyter of the same Church. The Second Edition Corrected* (London: John Darby, 1713), 1:364.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:465.

<sup>220</sup> Limborch writes: “No man is oblig’d to know those things, which God has not, or will not reveal to him, nor will any Man be damn’d for the want of such a Knowledg (sic) . . . . However no Man will be sav’d, but by Redemption in the Blood of Christ: Which as it was available to those who liv’d before Christ, tho they either did not know him, or only obscurely by Types and Figures; so nothing hinders, but that it also may be imputed to those, who after he was preach’d to the World are ignorant of him, not through any Fault of their own, not indeed by virtue of any Divine Promise, but out of the boundless Mercy of God . . . . The Places cited treat only of those who through Unbelief reject Christ when preach’d to them: to such there is no Salvation . . . . God indeed no where promises Salvation to them, who without Faith in Christ live agreeably to the Law of Nature; yet this is no Bar, but that out of his abundant Grace he may perform more than he has promis’d, yet always with respect had to Christ, so that whatever Salvation they may have the Benefit of, it shall be given them for the sake of Christ . . . . An Author of our own, who maintains that no Man shall be sav’d but who believes in Jesus Christ, yet thinks it hard that the *Gentiles* and those who never heard of Christ should be damn’d for what they cannot help, has therefore advanc’d a favourable Hypothesis in their behalf: He supposes that they who before or after the Coming of Christ, never heard of him or his Doctrine, shall before the general Resurrection be rais’d again; that then the Gospel and the Terms of it shall be propos’d to them, and that if they hearken to the one, and live up to the other, they likewise shall be sav’d by Faith in Christ; but if they reject those gracious Overtures of Reconciliation, they shall finally be rejected by God, and damn’d justly for their Obstinacy and Unbelief, the Blame only chargeable upon themselves. Now tho this be but an Hypothesis, not prov’d directly by any plain, but some mystical Places of Scripture, and consequently nothing of Certainty can be built upon it; yet as it is highly charitable, so is it very agreeable to the Notions we have of the Divine Perfections of Justice, Wisdom and Goodness. Upon the whole, let not us who enjoy the Light of the Gospel and so clear a Revelation, enquire what God can, may, or will do with those who have been and are as yet debar’d of those Privileges; let us rather, as it more immediately concerns us, enquire whether we have liv’d up to the Terms of the Gospel reveal’d to us: If we have, when we come to Heaven we shall have no occasion to complain, let God be

Likewise, the Remonstrant theologian Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736) in his comments on Acts 4:12 stated:

This is rightly interpreted . . . that *Jesus* is the only Mediator by whom we can have access or admission to *God*, and that *God* has sent no other; from which it is consequent that those must fall short of Salvation, who rejecting him, betake themselves to any other Mediator, as the *Jews* did who placed their Confidence in *Moses*. But this is nothing at all to the Heathens, who have neither ever heard any thing of *Christ*, nor ever cast him off to substitute any Mediator in his room. If *God* will think fit to pardon some of them who live the most agreeably to right Reason, and confer upon them some measure of Happiness out of mere Grace and Mercy; do we think that *Christ* will intercede that he may not? Sure he will not; and I do not see why we silly Mortals should set bounds to God's Mercy.<sup>221</sup>

#### Later Arminians

A significant Arminian work of this era was *The Pagans Debt and Dowry*, published in 1651 by the British minister John Goodwin (1594?–1665).<sup>222</sup> Ellen More characterizes Goodwin's theology:

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as gracious and extend his Mercy to the *Gentiles* in what Measure and Method he thinks fit." Limborch, *A Complete System, or Body of Divinity* 1:365–366. Limborch's reference is to the work by Thomas Staynoe (d. 1708), *Salvation by Christ Alone: agreeable to the rules of reason and the laws of justice: to which is added a short inquiry into the state of those men in a future life who never heard of Jesus Christ the Saviour in This Life*, (London: Printed for Benjamin Tooke, 1700). Mention is made also of the view proposed by Staynoe in the work by Thomas Stackhouse (1677–1752), *A Compleat Body of Divinity, Speculative & Practical*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: T. Cox, 1743), 535.

<sup>221</sup> Jean LeClerc, *A supplement to Dr. Hammond's paraphrase and annotations on the New Testament* (London: Printed for Sam. Buckley, 1699), 218.

<sup>222</sup> John Goodwin, *The Pagans Debt, and Dowry; or, A brief Discussion of these Questions, Whether, How far, and in what Sence (sic), such Persons of Mankind amongst whom the Letter of the Gospel never came, are notwithstanding bound to Believe on Jesus Christ, (with some other particulars relating hereunto). Returned by way of Answer to a Discourse in Writing, lately sent without Name, (together with a Letter, subscribed only, T.S.) unto Mr. John Goodwin; the Author as yet being unknown to him, yet (as*

His theology centered on the belief that God intended to save all men; that Scripture and nature both displayed all doctrines necessary for salvation; and that all men possessed the means of acquiring this crucial knowledge. Arminianism and rationalism merged in a coherent system . . . . Even ‘those many millions of all ages who never heard the Gospel,’ could know its message of hope through the operation of their reason and senses. All men and women had this capacity.<sup>223</sup>

Goodwin wrote: “For God being by the light of nature known, or at least . . . knowable, to be infinitely just, infinitely bent in hatred against sin; when notwithstanding he shall express himself in goodness and patience and bountifulness towards those who know themselves to be sinners, hereby he sufficiently testifieth and declareth unto them that his justice and severity against sin have been . . . satisfied.”<sup>224</sup> In discussing the statement that God “now commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30) Goodwin contended that this implied that “the Repentance here mentioned, and commanded by God unto *all Men everywhere*, includeth, or presupposeth, Faith in *Christ*,

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*appears by the said Discourse) a Person of worth, and learning, and (as he supposeth) a Minister of the Gospel. By the said John Goodwin, Minister of the Gospel* (London: Printed by J. Macock for H. Cripps and L. Lloyd, 1651).

<sup>223</sup> Ellen More, “John Goodwin and the Origins of the New Arminianism,” *The Journal of British Studies* 22.1 (Fall 1982), 68–69. Concerning Goodwin’s conception of the capacity of human reason, she says: “Such an assertion goes well beyond what Arminius would have claimed for man’s natural capacity . . . .” Ibid., 69 n.82. For an analysis of Goodwin’s theology, see also Ellen Singer More, *The New Arminians: John Goodwin and His Coleman Street Congregation in Cromwellian England*, Ph.D. Dissertation (The University of Rochester, New York, 1979). For the relationship between the rationalism of the Cambridge Platonists and the theology of the Arminians, see Rosalie L. Colie, *Light and Enlightenment: A Study of the Cambridge Platonists and the Dutch Arminians* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1957).

<sup>224</sup> Goodwin, *The Pagans Debt and Dowry*, 9.

and that no *Repentance* whatsoever, is, or can be, actually saving, but onely such, which is influenced or raised by Faith in *Christ*, of one kind or other, either formal and explicate, or else consequential, implicate and interpretative.”<sup>225</sup> In other words, Goodwin viewed implicit faith as effective for the unevangelized, as explicit faith is for those who hear the gospel (the view also espoused by Roman Catholic theologians of this era).

Another writer who argued for the possibility of salvation being extended to those who were as yet ignorant of the gospel was the British theologian (and mathematician) Isaac Barrow (1630–1677). He will be quoted at some length here, since his views would prove to be very influential in the development of Arminian theology regarding the unevangelized. He expressed his beliefs in a series of four sermons on “Universal Redemption.”<sup>226</sup> In the third sermon, he argues that the gospel is normally disclosed to those who have shown themselves worthy of it by responding to God’s universal grace.

That God doth commonly observe this method (plainly sutable [sic] to divine justice, wisdom [sic] and goodness) to dispense the revelation of his truth according to mens (sic) disposition to receive it, and aptness to make a fruitful and worthy use of it, *to bring forth fruits worthy of repentance*, as Saint *John Baptist* spake; and to withhold it from those who are indisposed to admit it, or unfit to profit by it: we may from divers express passages and notable instances (beside many probable intimations) of *Scripture* learn . . . . (W)e may . . .

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 62. Speaking of the salvation of Jews before the coming of Christ, Goodwin says: “Now then if such a Faith, which had *Jesus Christ* onely virtually and interpretatively in it, and none but God himself explicitly, and directly, was notwithstanding available to the Justification of the *Jews*, who had better opportunities of means for an explicate Knowledge of him, than the *Gentiles*; much more reasonable it is to conceive that the like Faith will be accepted in the *Gentiles* to their Justification . . . .” Ibid., 48.

<sup>226</sup> *The Works of the Learned Isaac Barrow, D.D. Late Master of Trinity College in Cambridge*. Published by the Reverend Dr. Tillotson, Dean of Canterbury. 4 volumes (London: M Flesher, 1686–1687).

observe, how in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the *Holy Spirit* commonly directed the *Apostles* to such places, where a competent number of people were well disposed to receive the truth . . . . And on the other hand, that God withholds the special discoveries of his truth, upon account of mens indispositions and demerits, may likewise very plainly appear.<sup>227</sup>

In the previous sermon Barrow expressed his belief that God was graciously at work in people's lives long before they come to explicit faith in the gospel.

As there was of old an *Abimelech* among the *Philistines*, whom God by special warning deterr'd from commission of sin; a divine *Melchisedeck* among the *Canaanites*; a discreet and honest *Jethro* in *Madian*; a very religious and virtuous *Job* in *Arabia*; who by complying with God's grace did evidence the communication thereof in several Nations; so it is not unreasonable to suppose the like cause now, although we cannot by like attestation certify concerning the particular effects thereof. We may at least discern and shew very conspicuous footsteps of divine grace, working in part, and producing no despicable fruits of moral virtue . . . even among *Pagans*, which if we do not allow to have been in all respects so complete, as to instate the persons endowed with them, or practicers of them in God's favour, or to bring them to salvation; yet those qualities and actions (in degree, or in matter at least, so good, and so conformable to God's law) we can hardly deny to have been the gifts of God, and the effects of divine grace . . . . St. *Austin* himself . . . acknowledges those virtuous dispositions and deeds to be the gifts of God, to be laudable, to procure some reward, to avail so far, that they, because of them, shall receive a more tolerable and mild treatment from divine justice; which things considered, such persons do at least by virtue of grace imparted to them obtain some part of salvation, or an imperfect kind of salvation, which they owe to our Lord, and in regard whereto he may be called in a sort their *Saviour* . . . . The *Pagans* had the

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<sup>227</sup> Isaac Barrow. Sermon XLI "The Doctrine of Universal Redemption Asserted and Explained," in *Works*, 3:472–474.

means of knowing God, as St. *Paul* affirmeth, yet generally they grew vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened; from which like cases and examples we may infer, that divine grace might be really imparted, although no effect correspondent to its main design were produced. Neither, because we cannot alledge any evident instances of persons converted or saved by virtue of this grace . . . are we forced to grant there were none such: but as in *Israel* when *Elias* said the children of *Israel* have *forsaken God's Covenant* . . . ; there were in *Israel*, *living closely*, seven thousand knees, who had not bowed to Baal: so among the generations of men, commonly overgrown with ignorance and impiety, there might (for all that we can know) be divers persons, indiscernible to common view, who by complying with the influences of God's grace have obtained competently to know God, and to reverence him; sincerely to love goodness, and hate wickedness; with an honest heart, to observe the laws of reason and righteousness; in such a manner and degree, which God might accept; so that the grace afforded might not onely (sic) . . . *suffice to convince men* . . . but . . . *to correct and cure some* . . . . He *that* (as St. *Paul* saith) *giveth to all men life, breath and all things*, will he withhold from any that best of gifts, and most worthy of him to give, that grace, whereby he may be able to serve him, to praise him, to glorify him; yea to please and gratify him; to save a creature and subject of his; the thing wherein he so much delighteth? From hence also, that God hath vouchsafed general testimonies of his goodness, inducements to seek him, footsteps whereby he may be discovered and known, a light of reason and law of nature written upon mens hearts; attended with satisfactions, and checks of conscience; so many dispositions to knowledge and obedience (as St. *Paul* teacheth us) we may collect that he is not deficient in communicating interious assistences, promoting the good use and improvement of those talents; for that otherwise the bestowing them is frustraneous (sic) and useless; being able to produce no good effect; yea it rather is an argument of unkindness, being apt onely to produce an ill effect in those, upon whom it is conferr'd; an aggravation of sin, an accumulation of guilt and wrath upon them . . . . If it be said, that having such grace is inconsistent with the want of an explicit knowledge of *Christ*, and of

faith in him; why may not we say, that as probably . . . most good people before our Lord's coming received grace without any such knowledge or faith; that as to Idiots and Infants our Saviour's meritorious performances are applied (in a manner unknowable by us) without so much as a capacity to know or believe any thing; that so we (to whom God's judgments are inscrutable, and his ways uninvestigable) know not how grace may be communicated unto, and *Christ's* merits may avail for other ignorant persons? In respect to whom we may apply that of St. *John: The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not*. However that such persons may have a grace capacifying (sic) them to arrive to that knowledge and faith, to which fuller communications of grace are promised; so that in reasonable esteem . . . the revelation of Evangelical Truth and the gift of faith may be supposed to be conferred upon all men—so that we may apply to them that in the *Revelation: Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any man will hear my voice, and open the door, I will come unto him, and sup with him; and he with me* (that is; Behold I allure every man to the knowledge and embracing of Christianity: if any man will open his mind and heart; so as to comply with my solicitations, I am ready to bestow upon him the participation of Evangelical mercies and blessings) and to such persons those promises and rules in the *Gospel*, may appertain: *He that asketh receiveth, He that seeketh findeth; to him that knocketh it shall be opened: The heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him. He that is . . . (faithful in the use of the least grace)* shall be rewarded. And, *to him that hath* (or that diligently keepeth and husbandeth what he hath) *shall more be given . . .* And how God sometimes dealeth with such persons the eminent instances of St. *Paul* and *Cornelius* do shew . . . Since we are plainly taught, that our Lord is the Saviour of all men; and it is consequent thence that he hath procured grace sufficiently capacifying all men to obtain salvation; we need not perplex the business, or obscure so apparent a truth by debating how that grace is imparted; or by laboring overmuch in reconciling the dispensation thereof with other dispensations of providence.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Isaac Barrow, Sermon XL “The Doctrine of Universal Redemption Asserted and Explained,” in *Works*, 3:462–465. Barrow is quoted at length, as his exposition is one of



A similar, though perhaps more cautious, view was presented by John Sharp (1643–1714), Archbishop of York, in his sermon delivered before Queen Mary, August 30, 1691.<sup>229</sup> He concludes from the account of Cornelius (Acts 10):

(T)hat we have therein an illustrious instance of that important truth which it concerns all of us to remember, and often to think of, if we in good earnest design to lead such lives as we ought to do; and this is, that God is not wanting to any man's sincere endeavors, but is willing and ready to assist every one with his grace, and to add further means and helps as there is need of them. Whoever will faithfully do that which he can towards the serving God, tho' that which he can do but be little, such a man shall be carried further; and God will take care that at last he shall be put into such a condition, that he may walk acceptably before him. Cornelius was a stranger to the true religion; but so far as he knew his duty, he was honest and sincere in doing it. He knew by the Light of Nature that to pray to God, and to give alms, were probable means of gaining his favour; and therefore he accordingly took these methods. This now God accepted; and because of his sincerity in doing what he could he vouchsafed his special grace and assistance, whereby he was enabled to know, and to do those things which by nature he could not.<sup>230</sup>

He goes on, however, to state that:

(I)t is not enough to entitle any man to everlasting salvation, that he practiceth the duties of Natural Religion, unless he also believe and embrace that religion which God has revealed by Jesus Christ, supposing he has opportunities of coming to the knowledge of it . . . . (B)are morality or honesty of life, without a right faith, will not save a man's soul, supposing that the man hath opportunities

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the most thorough explanations of the Arminian perspective on the unevangelized . . . and his views were evidently quite influential.

<sup>229</sup> "Some Remarkable and Important Observations Upon the History of Cornelius, His Conversion to Faith," contained in *The Works of John Sharp*, 7 volumes (London: Printed for W. Parker, 1734–1738), 6:32–51.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:36.

of coming to the knowledge of that right faith, as Cornelius here had. And this consideration I seriously address to all those among us, who think it so indifferent a matter what religion or what faith they are of, provided they are but honest in their lives. They think nothing offends God but the open violation of those rules of morality which all the world must acknowledge themselves obliged to observe, and which it is scandalous not to observe. So that it is all one to a man's salvation, whether he be Turk, or Jew, or Heathen, or Christian, supposing he be but devout in his way, and have a regard in his dealings with others to the practice of that which is accounted fair, just and honourable amongst men. But this is a grievous mistake, and of most pernicious consequence. It is certain that where-ever God has revealed his will, and declared upon what terms he will bestow salvation upon mankind, there all men are, under pain of damnation, obliged to embrace his revelation, and to believe, and profess, and practice according to the doctrines of such revelation. And it is certainly likewise, that God hath fully and entirely revealed his will by Jesus Christ and his apostles in the New Testament; and so revealed it, as to exclude all men from the hopes of salvation, who, having opportunity of knowing Jesus Christ, and his doctrines, do not believe in him . . . . If they had been born and bred in an Heathen Country, where they had no opportunity of coming to the knowledge of God's revealed will, I know not how far their justice and temperance, and other good moral qualities, might avail them towards the procuring God's acceptance. But to live in a Christian Country, nay, and to be baptized into Christ's religion, and yet to be pagans as to their notions and opinions; not to believe in Jesus Christ, but to think to please God in the way of the Philosophers; there is nothing in the world to be said in their excuse for this . . . .<sup>231</sup>

He goes on to say that "God, even in the extraordinary expressions of his kindness to sinners, in such cases where he is pleased to work a man's conversion in a miraculous

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 6:43–46.

way, yet hath such a regard to the standing ordinary means of grace, as even in these cases to make use of them for bringing his work about.”<sup>232</sup> He proceeds then, to point out that even in extraordinary cases such as when God sent an angel to Cornelius, or when the Lord Jesus himself appeared to Paul, they did not declare the gospel to them, but directed them to human messengers by which the gospel was made known.<sup>233</sup> Bishop Sharp’s comments give us some indication of the influence of deism in the church of his time, and of distancing his own Arminian views from that system of thought.

A somewhat less cautious view is set forth by Timothy Nourse (c. 1636–1699) in *A Discourse of Natural and Reveal’d Religion in Several Essays: or, The Light of Nature, a Guide to Divine Truth*.<sup>234</sup> In this work, Nourse proposes that:

(The) (e)fficient or Meritorious Cause of procuring Salvation to Mankind, can be no other but Jesus Christ . . . . (Nonetheless) those who never . . . heard of Christ or his Gospel, and yet retain true Notions of the Nature, Power, and Justice of God, and live justly and conformably to that knowledge, retaining a disposition to receive farther Instruction with all propensity to Vertue; I cannot see but that they may justly be ranked with those great and wise Men amongst the Ancients, whether Philosophers or others, in whose Lives and Writings we find so many remains of the true apprehensions they had of a Deity, together with their great Pregnancy of Vertue . . . (and) are by the most impartial and learned Writers, held to be in a State of Salvation.<sup>235</sup>

After arguing at length from many scripture passages, as well as logical inferences which he believes supports his views, he concludes with these words: “The

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 6:46.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 6:47.

<sup>234</sup> Timothy Nourse, *A Discourse of Natural and Reveal’d Religion in Several Essays: or, The Light of Nature, a Guide to Divine Truth*. (London: Printed for John Newton: 1691).

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 22–26.

sum of what I have hitherto spoken upon this Argument does amount to this; That an explicate Belief of the Mysteries of the Christian Religion, accompanied with an Oral Confession . . . though they be . . . the only safe way to Man's Salvation, yet are they not so absolutely and indispensably necessary, but that 'tis possible, in some extraordinary cases, Salvation may be obtain'd where these are wanting.”<sup>236</sup>

In his sermon “Of the Necessity of Good Works,” John Tillotson (1630–94), Archbishop of Canterbury, states his belief that “virtuous heathen” such as Socrates and Epictetus . . .

were under a special care and providence of God, and not wholly destitute of divine assistance, no more than Job and his friends . . . and Cornelius . . . who surely were very good men, and accepted of God, though they were Gentiles, and ‘aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenant of promise’; but yet not excluded from the blessing of the Messias, though they were ignorant of him . . . nor from the benefit of that great propitiation, which ‘in the fullness of time,’ he was to make for the sins of the whole world . . . . And good men in all ages and nations . . . such as ‘feared God and wrought righteousness,’ were accepted of him ‘in that name,’ and by the meritorious sacrifice of ‘that Lamb of God,’ which, in respect of the virtue and efficacy of it, is said to have been ‘slain from the foundation of the world.’<sup>237</sup>

The Anglican Daniel Whitby (1638–1726) was an outspoken opponent of Calvinism (and of Jonathan Edwards), and expressed views concerning the unevangelized that were very similar to Barrow's. He acknowledged that the heathen

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>237</sup> *The Works of the Reverend John Tillotson, Late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury. In Ten Volumes* (Edinburgh: Wal. Ruddiman & Co. and A. Murray and J. Cochran, 1772), 9:71–72.

world had often corrupted the light of nature.<sup>238</sup> Nonetheless, he argued strongly that this light was sufficient to lead those who were without the gospel to a saving knowledge of God.<sup>239</sup> In his comments on Acts 4:12, he states:

(T)he disputes of the schools from this place concerning the salvation of the gentiles, have been impertinent . . . . (It) must . . . be acknowledged, that God is ‘no respecter of persons,’ as to their spiritual and eternal interests, but ‘in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him’ Acts X. 34, 35 (see the note there and that God would have all men diligently to seek, and to come to him with a firm belief that he is ‘a rewarder’ of them that do so Heb. IX. 6), and that he hath not suspended that reward on an impossible condition, though he will only give it with respect to what our Lord Jesus hath done or suffered for them: that he hath not ‘left himself without witness’ of his goodness to the heathen world, not only by doing good to their bodies without regard to their souls . . . .<sup>240</sup>

From the natural blessings referred to in Acts 14:16–17, Whitby draws the conclusion that they are . . .

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<sup>238</sup> Whitby describes in detail the religious and moral corruptions of the heathen world in, *A Discourse of the Necessity and Usefulness of the Christian Revelation; by reason of the corruptions of the principles of natural religion among Jews and heathens* (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1705).

<sup>239</sup> Whitby gives his most thorough defense of his views on the “heathen” in Chapter II of Discourse VI in Daniel Whitby, D.D., *Six Discourses, Concerning I. Election and Reprobation. II. Extent of Christ’s Redemption. III. The Grace of God. IV. Liberty of the Will. V. Defectibility of the Saints. VI. Answers to Three Objections*. First American edition (Worcester, Massachusetts: Isaiah Thomas, 1801), 367–392. His views can also be found in his contribution to Patrick, Lowth, Arnald, Whitby, Lowman, and Pitman, *A Critical Commentary and Paraphrase on the Old and New Testament and the Apocrypha*. A new edition, with the text printed at large, in four volumes. (Philadelphia: James L. Gihon, 1854). Whitby provided the commentary on all of the New Testament Gospels and Epistles. His views may be found in his comments on Acts 4:12; 10:34; 14:17; 18:27–30; Romans 2:14–16; 10:17.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:434.

a clear testimony of his goodness to them, and therefore an assurance that if they, knowing him by these means to be God, would turn from their dumb idols, and worship him as God, they might find grace and favor in his eyes, who was so good to them even whilst they did continue to provoke him. Now the knowledge of that God who made heaven and earth as the only true God who is to be worshipped, and whose providence affords us all the blessings we enjoy, and the belief that he is well inclined to shew mercy to all that thus turn to him, and to reward all that thus fear him, and are thankful to him, seems to be all that God expected from the Gentiles, as may be gathered from Rom. 1. 20, 21.<sup>241</sup>

As the Church of England became more inclined toward Arminian theology, the statements in the 39 Articles concerning the unevangelized were reinterpreted by many church leaders.<sup>242</sup> This can be seen for example, in the comments of Bishop Gilbert Burnet (1643–1715) on the thirteenth article concerning “Works Before Justification” and on the eighteenth article concerning “Obtaining Eternal Salvation only by the Name of Christ.” The thirteenth article states that “Works done before the grace of Christ, and the inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God; forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the School-Authors say) deserve grace of congruity: Yea rather, for that they are not done as God hath commanded and willed them to be done, we doubt not but that they have the nature of

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<sup>241</sup> Whitby, *Six Discourses*, 374–375.

<sup>242</sup> For a discussion of the decline of Calvinism within the Church of England, and the ascendancy of Arminianism, see Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., *Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology, 1525–1695* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982). He discusses the decline of Calvinism after 1660, and the growth of natural theology on p. 159.

sin.”<sup>243</sup> Though Burnet acknowledges that no works of man are free from sin, he nevertheless states:

By all this we do not pretend to say, that a man in that state can do nothing; or that he has no use of his faculties: he can certainly restrain himself on many occasions; he can do many good works, and avoid many bad ones; he can raise his understanding to know and consider things according to the light that he has; he can put himself in good methods and good circumstances; he can pray, and do many acts of devotion, which thought they are all very imperfect, yet none of them will be lost in the sight of God, who certainly will never be wanting to those who are doing what in them lies, to make themselves the proper objects of his mercy, and fit subjects for his grace to work upon. Therefore this Article is not to be made use of to discourage men’s endeavors, but only to increase their humility; to teach them not to think of themselves above measure, but soberly; to depend always on the mercy of God, and ever to fly to it.<sup>244</sup>

Here, contrary to the Calvinist understanding, Burnet is making room for a person’s improving on what grace he is afforded, to prepare himself for being granted the greater grace of salvation.

In his discussion of the eighteenth article, he postulates a difference between being saved “by the Law or Sect” which a person professes, and being saved “in the Law or Sect” he professes. He agrees that no one can be saved “by” any other religion, but he contends that one may be saved “in” other religions. “(T)o be *saved in a Law or Sect*,

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<sup>243</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England*, 178.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

imports only, that God may extend his compassions to men that are engaged in false religions.”<sup>245</sup> He continues:

As to such to whom the Christian religion is revealed, there no question can be made, for it is certain they are under an indispensable obligation to obey and follow that which is so graciously revealed to them . . . . The only difficulty remaining, is concerning those who never heard of this religion, whether, or how can they be saved? St. *Paul* having divided the world into Jews and Gentiles, called by him those who were in the Law, and who were without the Law; he says, those ‘who sinned without Law’, that is, out of the Mosaical dispensation, ‘shall be judged without Law,’ that is, upon another foot. For he adds when ‘the Gentiles which have not the Law, do by nature the things contained in the Law,’ (that is, the Moral parts of it) ‘these having not the Law, are a Law unto themselves;’ (that is, their Consciences are to them instead of a Written Law); ‘which shew the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.’ This implies that there are either seeds of knowledge and virtue laid in the nature of man, or that such notions pass among them, as are carried down by tradition. The same St. Paul says, ‘How can they call on him in whom they have not believed; and how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard; and how can they hear without a Preacher?’ Which seems plainly to intimate, that men cannot be bound to believe, and by consequence cannot be punished for not believing, unless the Gospel is preached to them. St. Peter said to Cornelius, ‘Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him.’ Those places seem to import, that those who make the best use they can of that small measure of light that is given them, shall be judged according to it; and that God will not require more of them than he has given them. This also agrees to well with the ideas which we have both of justice and goodness, that this opinion wants not special colours (sic) to make it look well. But on the other hand, the pardon of sin, and

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 236.



the favour of God, are so positively limited to the believing in Christ Jesus, and it is so expressly said, That ‘there is no salvation in any other;’ and that ‘there is none other name (or authority) under Heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved;’ that the distinction which can only be made in this matter, is this, that it is only on the account, and in consideration of the death of Christ, that sin is pardoned, and men are saved . . . . This is the only sacrifice in the sight of God; so that whosoever are received into mercy, have it through Christ as the channel and conveyance of it. But it is not so plainly said that no man can be saved, unless he has an explicit knowledge of this, together with a belief in it. Few in the old dispensation could have that: infants, and innocents, or idiots have it not, and yet it were a bold thing to say that they may not be saved by it. So it does not appear to be clearly revealed, that none shall be saved by the death of Christ, unless they do explicitly both know it, and believe in it.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 237–238. Burnet does qualify his statement: “Instead of stretching the severity of justice by an inference, we may rather venture to stretch the mercy of God, since that is the attribute which of all others is the most magnificently spoken of in the Scriptures: so that we ought to think of it in the largest and most comprehensive manner. But indeed the most proper way is, for us to stop where the revelation of God stops: and not to be wise beyond what is written; but to leave the secrets of God as mysteries too far above us to examine, or to sound their depth. We do certainly know on what terms we our selves (sic) shall be saved or damned: and we ought to be contented with that, and rather ‘study to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling,’ than to let our minds run out into uncertain speculations concerning the measures and the conditions of God’s uncovenanted mercies: we ought to take all possible care that we our selves come not into condemnation, rather than to define positively of others, who must, or who must not, be condemned . . . . So in a word, all that are saved, are saved through Christ; but whether all these shall be called to the explicit knowledge of him, is more than we have any good ground to affirm. Nor are we to go into that other question; whether any that are only in a state of nature, live fully up to its light? This is that about which we can have no certainty, no more than whether there may be a common grace given to them all, proportioned to their state, and to the obligations of it. This in general may be safely believed, that God will never be wanting to such as do their utmost endeavors in order to the saving of their souls: but that as in the case of Cornelius, an angel will be sent, and a miracle be wrought, rather than that such a person shall be left to perish. But whether any of them do ever arrive at that state, is more than we can determine, and it is a vain attempt for us to endeavor to find it out.” Ibid., 239–240.

Similar interpretations of the Eighteenth Article may be found in other Anglican expositors, including for example R. W. Jelf (1798–1871), Principal of Kings College London, who wrote concerning this article: “This is so worded, that it is quite consistent with the assertion of this proposition to hope that a virtuous heathen, who never had an opportunity of embracing the Gospel, is capable of salvation . . . . There is a distinction to be drawn between a man being saved *in* a law or sect, and *by* a law or sect . . . . The meaning is obviously admissible, that a man *may* be saved in an imperfect religion by God’s mercy and Christ’s merits, though not in virtue of his being a faithful member of that sect.”<sup>247</sup>

The same sentiment is also voiced by the Anglican W. H. Griffith Thomas (1861–1924), who wrote:

The title of the Article both in Latin and in English shows that there is no reference whatever to the heathen, but only to those who are acquainted with the Christian religion. Luther is known to have held charitable views on the subject of the heathen, and our Reformers never seem to have stated positively their position . . . . (I)t is evident that the reference can only be to those who have heard of Him . . . . Nothing is said about being saved ‘in the Law or Sect,’ and therefore the view condemned and the opposite view inculcated cannot refer to any but those who deliberately and willfully set aside the manifest Christian teaching concerning our Lord Jesus Christ . . . . Men may be saved *in* their own religion, though not *by* it, and it is the latter opinion alone which the Article condemns, because it would destroy vital Christianity.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> R. W. Jelf, *The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England Explained in a Series of Lectures*, ed. J. R. King (London, Oxford & Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1873), 230.

<sup>248</sup> W. H. Griffith Thomas, D.D., *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles*. (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green & Co., 1930), 259–260.

These views were at odds with those of Thomas Cranmer, who directed the writing of the Forty-Two Articles, upon which the Thirty-Nine Articles were based.<sup>249</sup>

Cranmer had written: “To that eternal salvation cometh no man but he that hath the Head Christ. Yea, and no man can have the Head Christ which is not in His Body the Church.”<sup>250</sup>

There were, as well, other Anglican bishops of Calvinist persuasion, who did not embrace Burnet’s views, such as Bishop William Beveridge (1637–1708), who in commenting on the eighteenth article wrote:

Now seeing it is only by Christ our transgressions can be pardoned, and only by Christ our corruptions can be conquered, it must needs be only by Christ our souls can be saved; and if it be only by Christ we can be saved, without him we cannot but be damned. And therefore, let a man be of what religion he please, and as strict in that religion as he can, unless Christ be his, and he be Christ’s, his religion is in vain; he may be strict in his profession of it, but it will never bring any happiness to him. No, it is Christ, and Christ alone we are to expect salvation from.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> In fact, the eighteenth article is taken over from the same article in the Forty-Two Articles: “They also are accursed and abhorred who presume to state, that every man shall be saved by the Lawe or Secte which he profeseth, so that he be diligente to frame his life according to that Lawe and the Lighte of Nature: for holie Scripture doth sette out unto us onely the name of Jesus Christ, whereby which menne must be saved.” *Articles Agreed on by the Bishoppes and other learned Menne in the Synode at London, in the yere of our Lorde Godde M.D.L.I.I. for the avoiding of controversie in opinions, and the establishment of a godlie concorde, in certeine matters of Religion*. Published by the kings Majesties commandement in the Moneth of Maie. Anno Domini. 1553: Article 18.

<sup>250</sup> This quote is from his “Confutation of Unwritten Verities,” cited in Edward Harold Browne, D.D., *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles: Historical & Doctrinal*, ed. with notes by Rev. J. Williams, D.D. (New York: E. P Dutton & Co., 1895), 447 n.3.

<sup>251</sup> William Beveridge, D.D., Lord Bishop of St. Asaph, *Ecclesia Anglicana Ecclesia Catholica*, 2:94. Stephen Hampton has shown that there remained a vocal Calvinist segment within the Anglican Church even after the ascendancy of Arminian theology, in his book, *Anti-Arminians: The Anglican Reformed Tradition from Charles II to George I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

The Anglican minister William Sherlock (1641–1707), who was a theological opponent of John Owen, advocated views on the unevangelized similar to Burnet's:

For I cannot think, that God in judging the world, will deal more rigorously and severely with heathens, than he will with Christians; that he will demand most where he has given least, which is contrary to our savior's rule of judgment: and therefore I cannot but hope, that Christ in judging of their works, will make the same favourable allowances to them, which the gospel makes to those who do believe in Christ: that is to say, that he will allow of the repentance of the heathen, if it were sincere and hearty, and did reform his life, as well as of the repentance of a Christian; that he will overlook the same defects and imperfections in the good actions of the heathens, who lived virtuous lives, who worshipped the one true God, and observed the natural rules of sobriety, justice and righteousness, that he will in the actions of Christians. That if any heathen should be found equally virtuous with the meanest Christian, who shall be finally saved, that heathen at least will not be damned; and indeed would seem to have reason to complain of unequal usage, if he should . . . . (I)t is to be hoped, that many thousands will be saved by Christ at the day of judgment, who never had any explicite (sic) knowledge or faith in him.<sup>252</sup>

### John Wesley and the Wesleyans

From the mid-seventeenth century on, those of Arminian persuasion generally held views similar to those voiced by Barrow, Burnet and Sherlock. This can be particularly seen in the views of John Wesley (1703–1791).

As is well known, John Wesley believed in a universal prevenient grace granted to all men. In his sermon on "The Scripture Way of Salvation" he says:

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<sup>252</sup> William Sherlock, D.D., Dean of St. Paul's, Master of the Temple, and Chaplain in Ordinary to His Majesty, *A Practical Discourse Concerning a Future Judgment*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Printed by R. R. for W. Rogers, 1699), 359–362.

The salvation which is here spoken of [Eph. 2:8—‘Ye are saved through faith’] might be extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory. If we take this in its utmost extent, it will include all that is wrought in the soul by what is frequently termed *natural conscience*, but more properly, *preventing grace*: all the drawings of the Father—the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more: all that *light* wherewith the Son of God *enlighteneth everyone that cometh into the world—showing every man to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God*: all the *convictions* which His Spirit, from time to time, works in every child of man. Although it is true, the generality of men stifle them as soon as possible, and after a while forget, or at least deny, that they ever had them at all.<sup>253</sup>

In his sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” he says: “Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) *preventing grace*; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God.”<sup>254</sup> It is clear that Wesley believed that this grace is operative in all men (not only in those who hear the gospel), and that salvation is a process that potentially begins and progresses by “degrees” long before one might hear the gospel.

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<sup>253</sup> John Wesley, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: A Sermon on Ephesians ii. 8* (London: Printed by G. Paramore, 1791), 5–6.

<sup>254</sup> John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume X* (London: Printed at the Conference-Office by Thomas Cordeux, 1811), 10:79.

Wesley's attitude toward the possibility of salvation for the unevangelized may be gleaned from the following statements. In his sermon "On Charity" he commented:

But it may be asked: 'If there be no true love of our neighbor but that which springs from the love of God; and if the love of God flows from no other fountain than faith in the Son of God; does it not follow that the whole heathen world is excluded from all possibility of salvation? Seeing they are cut off from faith; for faith cometh by hearing. And how shall they hear without a preacher?' I answer, St. Paul's words, spoken on another occasion, are applicable to this: 'What the law speaketh, it speaketh to them that are under the law.' Accordingly that sentence, 'He that believeth not shall be damned,' is spoken of them to whom the gospel is preached. Others it does not concern; and we are not required to determine anything touching their final state. How it will please God, the Judge of all, to deal with *them*, we may leave to God himself. But this we know, that he is not the God of the Christians only, but the God of the heathens also; that he is 'rich in mercy to all that call upon him', 'according to the light they have'; and that 'in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him.'<sup>255</sup>

In his comments on Acts 10:35, Wesley states:

*But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness.* He that first reverences God, as great, wise, good; the Cause, End, and Governor of all things; and secondly, from this awful regard to him, not only avoids all known evil, but endeavors, according to the best light he has, to do all things well. *Is accepted of him.* Through Christ, though he knows him not. The assertion is express, and admits of no exception. He is in the favour of God, whether enjoying his written word and ordinances or not. Nevertheless, the addition of these is an unspeakable

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<sup>255</sup> John Wesley, "On Charity," in *Sermons on Several Occasions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), 875–876.  
[www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons/sermons.i.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons/sermons.i.html) (Accessed October 8, 2020.)

blessing to those who were before, in some measure, accepted. Otherwise God would never have sent an angel from heaven to direct Cornelius to Peter.<sup>256</sup>

In his sermon “On Faith” Wesley comments:

The next sort of faith is the faith of *heathens*, with which I join that of Mahometans (sic). I cannot but prefer this before the faith of the deists; because, though it embraces nearly the same objects, yet they are rather to be pitied than blamed for the narrowness of their faith. And their not believing the whole truth is not owing to want of sincerity, but merely to want of light. When one asked Chicali, an old Indian chief, ‘Why do not you *red* men know as much as us *white* men?’ he readily answered, ‘Because you have *the Great Word*, and we have not . . . .’ It cannot be doubted but this plea will avail for millions of modern ‘heathens’. Inasmuch as to them little is given, of them little will be required. As to the ancient heathens, millions of them likewise were savages. No more, therefore, will be expected of them than the living up to the light they had. But many of them, especially in the civilized nations, we have great reason to hope, although they lived among heathens, yet were quite of another spirit; being taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion.<sup>257</sup>

Concerning saving faith, Wesley states:

But what is faith which is properly saving; which brings eternal salvation to all those who keep it to the end? It is such a divine conviction of God, and the things of God, as, even in its infant state enables everyone who possesses it to ‘fear God and work righteousness.’ And whosoever, in every nation, believes thus far, the Apostle declares, is ‘accepted of him.’ He actually is, at that very moment, in a state of acceptance. But he is at present only a *servant* of God, not properly a *son*.

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<sup>256</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, New Edition*, ed. George Peck (New York: Published by G. Lane and C. B. Tippet, 1845), 176.

<sup>257</sup> John Wesley, “On Faith,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, 7 volumes (New York, Cincinnati: The Methodist Book Concern, n.d.), 2:384.

Meantime, let it well be observed, that the wrath of God no longer ‘abideth on him.’ . . . . And indeed, unless the servants of God halt by the way, they will receive the adoption of sons. They will receive the *faith* of the children of God, by his *revealing* his only begotten Son in their hearts. Thus, the faith of a child is, properly and directly, a divine conviction, whereby every child of God is able to testify, ‘The life that I now live by faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.’ And whosoever hath this, the Spirit of God witnesseth with his spirit, that he is a child of God . . . . This the servant hath not. Yet let no man discourage him; rather, lovingly exhort him to expect it every moment!<sup>258</sup>

Wesley thus saw a difference between the faith of the as yet unevangelized, which he characterized as the faith of a “servant,” and the faith of a Christian believer, which he characterized as the faith of a “son.” Though the “servant” is accepted by God, and no longer under his wrath, only the “son” has the inner assurance of his salvation.

In his sermon “On Living Without God,” Wesley states:

(N)or do I conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation. It is far better to leave them to him that made them, and who is ‘the Father of the spirits of all flesh’; who is the God of the heathens as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made . . . . Perhaps there may be some well-meaning persons who . . . aver that whatever change is wrought in men, whether in their hearts or lives, yet if they have not clear views of those capital doctrines, the fall of man, justification by faith, and of the atonement made by the death of Christ, and of his righteousness transferred to them, they can have no benefit from his death. I dare in no wise affirm this. Indeed I do not believe it. I believe the merciful God regards the lives and tempers of men more than their ideas. I believe he respects the goodness of the heart rather than the clearness of the head; and that if the heart of a man be filled (by the grace of God, and the power of his Spirit) with the humble, gentle, patient love of God

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 385–386.



and man, God will not cast him into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels because his ideas are not clear, or because his conceptions are confused. Without holiness, I own, no man shall see the Lord; but I dare not add, or clear ideas.<sup>259</sup>

In the minutes of a conversation on August 2, 1745, Wesley records the following question and answer: “Q. 2. What will become of a Heathen, a Papist, a Church-of-England man, if he dies without being thus sanctified? A. He cannot see the Lord. But none who seeks it sincerely shall or can die without it: though possibly he may not attain it till the very article of death.”<sup>260</sup>

Wesley’s convictions on this matter were reflected in the fact that when he sent Articles of Religion to the American Methodists, he removed Article XVIII, “Of Obtaining Eternal Salvation Only by the Name of Christ” (along with other Calvinistic articles) from the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> John Wesley, “On Living Without God,” in *ibid.*, 485.

<sup>260</sup> John Wesley, “Minutes of some late conversations between the Rev. Messrs. Wesley and others,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, in 7 volumes, Third and Complete American Standard Edition* (New York: Eaton & Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings & Pye, n.d.), Miscellaneous, 1:201. It is noteworthy here, that Wesley also contemplates the possibility that some may attain sanctification (and thus, salvation) at the moment of death.

<sup>261</sup> Randy L. Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation Through Other Religions,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 27.1 & 2 (Spring & Fall 1992), 17. In this article (p. 28, n.69), Maddox suggests that Wesley may have become increasingly optimistic in his later years concerning the salvation of “heathens” due to the influence of the series of sermons by Isaac Barrow on “The Doctrine of Universal Redemption.” (See above). In addition to Maddox’ article, I have been helped in this section on Wesley’s theology by the following articles: M. Elton Hendricks, “John Wesley and Natural Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 18.2 (Fall 1983), 7–17; Philip R. Meadows, “‘candidates for Heaven’ Wesleyan Resources for a Theology of Religions,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 35.1 (Spring 2000), 99–129; Michael Hurley, S.J., “Salvation Today and Wesley Today,” in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Kenneth E. Rowe (Metuchen NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1976), 94–116; Mark Royster, *John Wesley’s Doctrine of Prevenient Grace in Missiological Perspective*, D.Miss. Dissertation,

In February 1779, an article by the eighteenth century Remonstrant John Plaifere was published in *The Arminian Magazine*, entitled “Concerning the Salvability of the Heathen.”<sup>262</sup> In the article, Plaifere argues “(t)hat God, for the merit of Christ will accept of the sincere endeavours of all men who live according to their best abilities, though he was not pleased to bless all with the light of Revelation . . . .”<sup>263</sup> The publication of this article reflects the prevailing convictions of Arminians of this era.

John Fletcher (1729–1785) emerged as the systematizer of Wesley’s theology. In his works, he vigorously defends Wesley’s teachings regarding the salvation of the “heathen.” In his essay “The Doctrines of Grace and Justice” he states: “‘Preach the Gospel. He that believeth [in the light of his dispensation, supposing he does it ‘*with the heart unto righteousness*’] shall be saved’ according to the privileges of his dispensation.”<sup>264</sup> Fletcher proposes that there are four dispensations under which men may live. The first he defines as: “Gentilism, which is frequently called *natural religion*, and might with propriety be called, *the Gospel of Gentiles*: Gentilism, I say, is a dispensation of grace and justice, which St. Peter preaches and describes in these words:—‘In every nation he that feareth God, and worketh righteousness [according to his light] is accepted of him.’”<sup>265</sup> The second dispensation is . . .

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(Asbury Theological Seminary, 1989); Thomas R. Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense,” in *The Grace of God and the Bondage of the Will*, 2 volumes, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 2:365–382.

<sup>262</sup> *The Arminian Magazine*, February 1779. Vol. II, no. 2, 49–60.

<sup>263</sup> John Plaifere, “Concerning the Salvability of the Heathen,” *The Arminian Magazine* (February, 1779), 49.

<sup>264</sup> John Fletcher, “The Doctrines of Grace and Justice,” in *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher, Late Vicar of Madeley in Four volumes* (New York: T. Mason & G. Lane, 1836), 2:261.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:262.

Judaism, which is frequently called the *Mosaic dispensation*, or the law, (that is, according to the first meaning of the Hebrew word torah, *the doctrine*, or *the instruction*,) and which might with propriety be called the Jewish Gospel:

Judaism, I say, is that particular display of the doctrines of grace and justice, which was chiefly calculated for the meridian of Canaan, and is contained in the Old Testament; but especially in the five books of Moses. The Prophet Samuel sums it all up in these words:—‘Only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth with all your heart, [according to the law, i.e. doctrine of Moses,] for consider how great things he hath done for you, [his peculiar people:] but if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed,’ 1 Sam. xii, 24.<sup>266</sup>

The third dispensation is . . .

The Gospel, of John the Baptist, which is commonly called the baptism of John, in connection with *the Gospel*, or baptism, which the apostles preached, before Christ opened the glorious baptism of his own Spirit on the day of Pentecost; this Gospel dispensation, I saw is the Jewish Gospel improved into *infant Christianity* . . . . It clearly points out the person of Christ, and . . . . Displays, with increasing light, (1.) The doctrines of *grace*, which kindly call the chief of sinners to eternal salvation through the practicable means of repentance, faith, and obedience. And, (2.) The doctrines of *justice*, which awfully threatens sinners with destruction, if they finally neglect to repent, believe, and obey.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 2:262.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 2:262.

The fourth dispensation is, “*The perfect Gospel of Christ* [which] is frequently called the Gospel only, on account of its fullness, and because it contains whatever is excellent in the above-described Gospel dispensations.”<sup>268</sup>

In his “First Check to Antinomianism” Fletcher responds to a number of objections to the idea that the person who has never heard of Christ may be accepted by God if he “feareth God and worketh righteousness, according to the light he has.”<sup>269</sup> In his defense, he states:

Whenever a heathen is accepted, it is merely through the merits of Christ; although it is in consequence of his *fearing God and working righteousness* . . . . All is therefore of grace; the light, the works of righteousness done by that light, and acceptance in consequence of them . . . . Is it not possible that heathens should by grace, reap some blessings through the second Adam, though they know nothing of his name and obedience unto death; when they, by nature, reap so many curses through Adam the first; to whose name and disobedience they are equally strangers? . . . . For Christ, the Light of men, visits all, though in a variety of degrees and dispensations . . . . All the heathens that are saved are then saved by a lively faith in Jesus ‘the Light of the world;’ or to use our Lord’s own words, by ‘believing in the light’ of their dispensation . . . .<sup>270</sup>

In response to the question why there is any need, then, of the Christian dispensation, Fletcher says:

(T)hough a heathen may be saved in his low dispensation, and attain unto a low degree of glory . . . it is an unspeakable advantage to be saved from the darkness attending his uncomfortable dispensation, into the full enjoyment of the ‘life and immortality brought to light by the *explicit* Gospel.’ Well might then the angel say

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 2:263.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 1:39.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 1:40–41.

to Cornelius, who was already accepted according to his dispensation, that Peter should ‘tell him words whereby he should be saved;’ saved from the weakness, darkness, bondage, and tormenting fears attending his present state, into that blessed state of light, comfort, liberty, power, and glorious joy . . . .<sup>271</sup>

He goes on to say: “Only ‘*faith in Christ*’ for Christians, and ‘*faith in the light* of their dispensation’ for heathens, is necessary in order to acceptance.”<sup>272</sup>

In his “Essay on Truth” he says: “No adult heathen was ever saved without the repentance of the contrite publican. ‘I am a guilty, helpless sinner, totally undone, if the mercy of Him that made me do not extend itself to me. Great Author of my existence, pity, pardon, and save me for they mercy’s sake’ . . . . The heathens, who were saved without the explicit knowledge of Christ, far from despising it . . . implicitly desired it; and those that were blessed with a ray of it, rejoiced in it like Abraham.”<sup>273</sup>

The doctrines put forth by Wesley and Fletcher concerning the salvation of the unevangelized have been generally embraced by most of those who claim the name “Arminian” down to the present day.

Isaac Watts (1674–1748), for example, stated:

It is true, their light is but dim, and their means of grace very low; yet if there shall be found among these persons or nations, any, *who fear God and work righteousness*, who repent of sin, and hope in a merciful God, we believe they shall be accepted of him, through an unknown Mediator . . . . As for those persons, those nations or ages, that have so far lost all the revelations and dispensations of grace, that they know nothing of their own duty, or of the grace of God, but what the light of nature teaches them, they shall be judged according

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 1:41.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 1:43.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 1:566.

to those teachings of the light of nature, or that knowledge of God, of his law and his government, of his grace and their duty, which they might have arrived at by the right exercise of their conscience and reasoning powers . . . . But how far divine compassion shall exercise itself further in unpromised ways towards any of those persons or nations, who by the negligence and iniquity of their parents, had lost all the revelations of grace, is to be left to the wise, the righteous and the merciful Judge of all men.<sup>274</sup>

Anglican Bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752) wrote: “All shadow of injustice, and indeed all harsh appearances, in this various economy of Providence, would be lost, if we would keep in mind, that every merciful allowance should be made, and no more required of anyone, than what might have been equitably expected of him, from the circumstances in which he was placed; . . . that every man shall be ‘accepted according to what he had, not according to what he had not.’”<sup>275</sup>

Anglican George Pretyman (1750–1827) wrote: “The merits of his death are not limited to those who call upon his name . . . . (However, it does not follow) that the benefits, which the virtuous heathen will derive from the incarnation of Christ, will be equal to those of the sincere Christian.”<sup>276</sup> His comments reflect the idea commonly held by Arminians that salvation may be experienced “by degrees.”

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<sup>274</sup> *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D. in seven volumes* (Leeds: Edwards Baines, 1800), 2:658–659. See also 2:584–585, 589, 592–599.

<sup>275</sup> Joseph Butler, LL.D., Late Lord Bishop of Durham, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*. Fourteenth edition (New York: Dayton & Newman, 1843), 275.

<sup>276</sup> George Pretyman, Bishop of Lincoln, *Elements of Christian Theology, in 2 volumes*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Luke Hansard, 1799), 320–22. Later in life, Pretyman changed his name to Tomline. See his work: George Tomline, D.D., *A Refutation of Calvinism*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies; Rivingtons; White & Co.; Hatchard; Deighton, and Parker, 1811), 199f.

Anglican Philip Doddridge (1702–1751) wrote: “The truth seems to be this, that none of the Heathens will be condemned for not believing the gospel, but they are liable to God’s condemnation for the breach of God’s natural law: nevertheless, if there be any of them in whom there is a prevailing love to the divine being, and care in the practice of virtue, there seems reason to believe, that for the sake of Christ, though to them unknown, they may be accepted by God.”<sup>277</sup>

Anglican Thomas William Stackhouse (1677–1752) wrote:

In General . . . we may observe, that in most of the Countries, hitherto discovered, the belief of a God, and obligation to worship him; the Belief of a future State, and Necessity of Virtue to Prepare men for it; Sorrow for Sin, and the Invention of many Rites to expiate it, have been the known Principles of the Heathen Religion: But whether these Principles, loaded as they are with all the Superstitions abovementioned, the Worship of Idols, the Sacrifice of humane Blood, the Adoration of Devils, and other such Impieties, as the divine Nature cannot but detest, will be available to their Salvation, is a Question neither so easy, nor so safe to be resolv’d. This only we may say (without intruding into the Counsels, which God has hid in his own Breast), that, as Ignorance of Duty, the Prevalence of Custom, and the Power of Prepossession plead strongly in the Mitigation of any Fault; so has the Heathen World, not only these Apologies to produce, but some Declarations likewise in Holy Writ, which seem to have their particular Case under Consideration. For if (*h*) as St. *Paul* tells the *Athenians*, a people *wholly given to Idolatry*, *God winked at their former Times of Ignorance*; if, (*i*) as our Saviour tells the *Pharisees*, *such as are blind*, i.e. with a competent Knowledge of their Duty, *have no Sin*, at least, not in so great a Measure; (*k*) and

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<sup>277</sup> From “Whether Faith be a Condition of Salvation—Law and Gospel—How Faith is imputed for Righteousness—What Articles of Faith are Fundamental,” in *The Works of Rev. P. Doddridge, D.D.* (Leeds: Edward Baines, 1804), 5:226. He lists Romans 2:10ff, 26; Acts 10:34–35; Mt. 8:11–12; I John 2:2 and John 1:29 in support. He also compares the state of those who are “invincibly ignorant” of the gospel to that of infants. *Ibid.*, 5:224.

if, as he tells his Disciples, *Moses*, the Lawgiver of God, suffer'd the *Israelites* to do *Things*, which were not directly right, *for the Hardness of their Hearts*, (l) i.e. because of the Imperfections of his Revelation wanted proper Efficacy to work their Hearts to a greater Softness; then have we sufficient Reason to suppose that the same Connivance and kind Construction of Faults will be granted to the *present*, that was to the Generations of *old*: Tho', when we consider farther, that there is (m) *no Communion between Light and Darkness no Concord Between Christ and Belial, no agreement between the Temple of God and Idols*, in what Method this Grace will be extended, and the divine Attributes remain unblemished, is a Mystery past our Comprehension. This only we know farther, that, as the Merits of Christ, whereby alone we obtain Salvation, are imputable to the *Gentile*, as well as the *Christian* world . . . (n) *in his interceding to God, and offering Sacrifice for Sin, he can* (as the Apostle assures us) *have Compassion on the Ignorant, and such as are out of the way*, since their Error is involuntary, and their Ignorance no Part of their Crime; for *how can they call on him* (as (o) he argues in another Place) *in whom they have not believed? How can they believe in him, of whom they have not heard? and how can they hear without a Preacher?*<sup>278</sup>

The Methodist Richard Watson (1732–1816) wrote: “The actual state of pagan nations is affectingly bad; but nothing can be deduced from what they are in fact against their salvability; for although there is no ground to hope for the salvation of great numbers of them, actual salvation is one thing, and possible salvation is another . . . . The dispensation of religion under which all those nations are to whom the Gospel has never been sent, continues to be the patriarchal dispensation.”<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Thomas Stackhouse, *A Complete Body of Divinity* (London: J. Batley & T. Cox, 1729), 531.

<sup>279</sup> Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, 2 volumes (New York: G. Lane & C.B. Tippet, 1840, 1848), 2:444–446.



The Anglican Charles Henry Hall (1763–1827) wrote: “(W)e have been taught that every allowance will be made for involuntary ignorance; that a ‘man is accepted according to that he hath, not according to that he hath not . . . .’”<sup>280</sup>

The Episcopalian Bishop William White (1748–1836) wrote: “It is not rare to find respectable and learned ministers of the Gospel expressing the hope, that God extends his mercy to the virtuous heathen . . . . The Object of this appendix is to prove, that it is a conspicuous truth of Holy Scripture.”<sup>281</sup>

Edward William Grinfield (1785–1864) published an exhaustive (461 pages), and spirited defense of the notion that the “heathen” may be saved apart from explicit faith in Christ in *The Nature and Extent of the Christian Dispensation, with reference to the Salvability of the Heathen*.<sup>282</sup>

Methodist theologian John Miley (1813–1895) wrote: “It is also a significant fact . . . that faith in Christ, and as the redeeming Christ, is the true and necessary condition of forgiveness and salvation. The application is to those who have the Gospel. This

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<sup>280</sup> Rev. Charles Henry Hall, B.D. Chaplain to the Lord Bishop of Exeter. *Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford, at St. Mary’s Church, in the Year MDCCXCVIII, at the Lecture founded by The Rev. John Bampton, M.A.* (Oxford: The University Press, 1799), 25. See also pp. 259–260.

<sup>281</sup> William White, D.D. Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, “Appendix. On the Case of the Heathen,” in *Comparative Views of the Controversy between the Calvinists and the Arminians*, In two volumes (Philadelphia: M. Thomas, 1817), 1:106.

<sup>282</sup> Edward William Grinfield, M.A., *The Nature and Extent of the Christian Dispensation, with reference to the Salvability of the Heathen* (London: C. & J. Rivingtons, 1827). His work was reviewed in *The British Critic, Quarterly Theological Review and Ecclesiastical Record* 3.VI (April, 1828): 326–363. He responded to this review with his publication: “*The Nature and Extent of the Christian Dispensation With Reference to the Salvability of the Heathen?*” in *Reply to an Article in the Sixth Number of the British Critic and Quarterly Theological Review*, Edward William Grinfield, M.A. London: C. & J. Rivingtons, 1828. Grinfield’s work was also critiqued in *The Eclectic Review* vol. xxix. (January–June, 1828): 361–376.

condition cannot be required of those who have not the Gospel. We doubt not the possibility of their salvation; but their only salvation is in Christ; and for them God has his own method in his own wisdom and grace.”<sup>283</sup>

Anglican Edward H. Plumptre (1821–1891), commenting on Acts 10:35 (“but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him”) stated:

It applies, not to those only who know the name of Christ and believe on Him when He is preached to them, but to all who in all ages and countries ‘fear God’ according to the measure of their knowledge, and ‘work righteousness’ according to their belief and opportunities . . . . What such men gain by conversion is a fuller knowledge of the Truth, and therefore a clearer faith, a fuller justification, and a higher blessedness, but as this history distinctly teaches, they are already accepted by God.<sup>284</sup>

Methodist Thomas N. Ralston (1806–91) wrote: “God will require of men according to what they have, and not according to what they have not.”<sup>285</sup>

Anglican E. B. Pusey (1800–82) wrote: “God the Holy Ghost (it is matter of faith) visits and has visited every soul of man whom God has made, and those who heard His voice and obeyed it, as far as they knew, belonged to Christ, and were saved for His merits, Whom, had they known, they would have obeyed and loved.”<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> John Miley, *The Atonement in Christ* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1879), 30–31.

<sup>284</sup> Edward H. Plumptre, “Commentary on Acts of the Apostles,” in *A Bible Commentary for Bible Students by Various Writers*, 8 volumes, ed. Charles John Ellicott. Vol. VII, “Acts to Galatians” (London & Edinburgh: Marshall Bros., n.d.), 69.

<sup>285</sup> Thomas Ralston, *Elements of Divinity* (Louisville, KY: Published by E. Stevenson, for the Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1851), 227.

<sup>286</sup> E. B. Pusey, D.D., *What is of Faith as to Everlasting Punishment? In Reply to Dr. Farrar’s Challenge in his ‘Eternal Hope,’ 1879*, Third edition (London: James Parker & Rivingtons, 1880), 8.

Methodist Daniel D. Whedon (1808–1885), stated: “He is a saved heathen who lives as nearly up to the light he has, as does the Christian who is finally saved to the light he has.”<sup>287</sup> Methodist Thomas O. Summers (1812–1882) stated:

If, under the rubbish which has accumulated on the minds of these poor creatures, God sees the germ of goodness, a concurrence with preventing grace which is given to every child of man, through the merciful economy of redemption, what hinders that they should be placed in some low condition in heaven, corresponding to their moral and intellectual *status*? And what hinders that they should begin instantly to develop in that land where ‘everlasting spring abides,’ a genial clime, where the merest germ will soon expand, and the smallest bud will soon burst into beauty and send forth its fragrance on the paradisaic air!<sup>288</sup>

Anglican Richard Chenevix Trench (1807–1886) wrote: “(T)here will mingle in these studies thoughts and feelings of a liveliest thankfulness to God, as amid the great shipwreck of the Gentile world, we recognize the planks by which one and another attained, as we trust safely, and through the mercy of a Saviour whom as yet he did not know, to the shore of everlasting life . . . .”<sup>289</sup>

The Swiss evangelical Frederic L. Godet (1812–1900) wrote in his comments on Romans 2:7–8: “The desire of goodness is the acceptance of the gospel by anticipation.

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<sup>287</sup> D. D. Whedon, *The Freedom of the Will as a Basis of Human Responsibility and a Divine Government*, (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, 1864), 351. See also pp. 343–360. See as well his comments in D. D. Whedon, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 5 volumes (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, 1860–1880), Vol. III “Acts – Romans” (1871): 57–58, 135–136, 303–304.

<sup>288</sup> Thomas O. Summers, *Systematic Theology: a complete body of Wesleyan Arminian divinity, consisting of lectures on the twenty-five articles of religion*, 2 volumes (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1888), 2:342.

<sup>289</sup> Richard Chevenix Trench, M.A., *Christ the Desire of All Nations, or the Unconscious Prophecies of Heathendom. Being The Hulsean Lectures for MDCCCXLVI* (Cambridge: Macmillan, Barclay, and Macmillan; London: John W. Parker, 1846), 169.

The natural corollary of these premises is the thought expressed by Peter: the preaching of the gospel before the judgment to every human soul, either in this life or in the next (I Pet. iii. 19, 20, iv. 6).”<sup>290</sup>

The Methodist Episcopal Bishop Randolph S. Foster (1820–1903), objecting to the notion that the unevangelized are inevitably lost, wrote:

It is contrary to the principle laid down in the parable of the talents, ‘where no law is, there is no transgression.’ (Rom. iv. 15.) ‘Sin is not imputed where there is no law.’ (Rom. v. 13.) . . . . Are they to be damned because they were never favored with the light of revelation? . . . . Are they to be damned because they did not exercise faith in the Son of God? Could they exercise faith in a being of whom they had never heard? . . . . If for none of these, for what are the heathen necessarily damned? Because they did not live up to the light they had? But can this be shown, that no heathen ever acted according to his best light?<sup>291</sup>

Methodist theologian William Burt Pope (1822–1903), objecting to the idea that the Holy Spirit is limited to the written or spoken word in his saving work, wrote:

(W)e are bound to believe that the whole world, directly or indirectly, sooner or later, must receive the glad tidings of the Gospel . . . . The direct Call through the Word . . . . The indirect call . . . . The Universal Call . . . is that by which the Holy Spirit has moved upon the . . . nations through a secret influence . . . . (T)he world has been under the secret and mysterious attraction of grace from the beginning, over and above the interior *Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world* . . . . Now the call through the Gospel is not limited either to the oral or to the written announcement. It is a silent effectual voice accompanying the truth,

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<sup>290</sup> It is evident from these comments that Godet believed in a probation after death. Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on Romans*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1977, originally published 1883), 119.

<sup>291</sup> Rev. R. S. Foster, *Objections to Calvinism as it is, in a series of letters addressed to the Rev. N. L. Rice, D.D.* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1849), 204–205.

wherever the truth is . . . . It is the truth which He uses as his instrument . . . . Not indeed that the Holy Spirit is, or has ever been, absolutely bound to human instrumentality.<sup>292</sup>

Anglican Edward Arthur Litton (1813–1897) wrote: “(B)ut if the death of Christ placed the race in a new relation towards God, it may, in some manner unknown to us, benefit those who never heard of Him. And it were unduly to limit the most High to suppose that He has no other means of bringing men to Himself than by *explicit* faith in a preached Gospel.”<sup>293</sup> American Methodist theologian Olin Alfred Curtis (1850–1918) wrote:

(A) man is not saved by opinion, not lost by opinion; the ultimate test is in the person’s moral meaning. Surely the historical Christ may, as a rule, be the immediate test, but this is so for a moral reason, namely, because the man has in conscience come to feel a moral obligation toward Jesus Christ . . . . The true Christian view, as I apprehend it, is essentially this: First, the entire possibility of personal salvation is based upon the atonement of Jesus Christ. Second, the actual Christian experience, in its definiteness and fullness, does involve the necessity of belief, a mental attitude toward both the work of our Lord and his person. Third, but *final salvation* is a matter of personal moral bearing, a bearing which is manifest in repentance and faith under a supreme moral ideal. Fourth, thus every

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<sup>292</sup> William Burt Pope, D.D., *A Compendium of Christian Theology: being analytical outlines of a course of theological study, biblical, dogmatic, historical*, 3 volumes. Second edition, revised and enlarged (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1880), 2:336–342.

<sup>293</sup> Edward Arthur Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. First edition published 1892, ed. Philip E. Hughes (London: James Clarke, 1960), 236. Litton also posits a probation after death: 566–573.

person with a conscience has in this life a fair, full probation; for he has a fair, full test of moral intention.<sup>294</sup>

Methodist theologian Wilbur F. Tillett (1854–1936) wrote: “All will be held responsible for their opportunities and judged in the light of those opportunities. Even the heathen are on probation, and will be saved or lost according as they shall be found at the last day, in the just judgment of Christ, to have lived up to the light which they had.” Quoting Rom. 2:12–15 and Luke 12:47–48, he states: “These passages teach plainly the possibility of heathen salvation, and reveal something of the law of probation by which they will be tried. God has never created a human being that could not be saved. But let no one conclude from the possibility of heathen salvation that there is a probability of their being saved, and think it a matter of indifference whether the gospel is speedily sent to them or not. The gospel not only brings more light, but more help to live up to that light.”<sup>295</sup>

Episcopalian theologian Francis J. Hall (1857–1933) discussed at some length the condition and fate of the unevangelized. He basically concludes that people who have responded to the light they have in this life will be given opportunity after death for further moral and spiritual advancement along the same trajectory that their life was moving in during this life: “The inference is reasonable that, since the heathen and invincibly ignorant do not receive the knowledge of salvation in this world, God will

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<sup>294</sup> Olin Alfred Curtis, Professor of Systematic Theology in the Drew Theological Seminary, *The Christian Faith: Personally Given in a System of Doctrine* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1905), 400–401.

<sup>295</sup> Wilbur F. Tillett, D.D., Dean of the theological faculty and professor of systematic Theology in Vanderbilt University, *Personal Salvation: Studies in Christian Doctrine Pertaining to the Spiritual Life* (Nashville, Dallas: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1902), 55–57.

somehow afford to them a way of escape from doom, if the fundamental disposition which they develop in their earthly probation has not nullified the moral possibility of their benefiting by it. Their salvation, like our own, will be based upon Christ's death, of course, for, according to Scripture, no other basis is available."<sup>296</sup>

One would be remiss if mention was not made of a series of sermons preached by the Anglican Frederic Farrar (1831–1903) in 1877 and published in his book *Eternal Hope*.<sup>297</sup> While denying that he espoused universalism, Farrar argued that the opportunity for repentance and salvation is not limited to this lifetime. His influence should not be underestimated.

The degree to which the views expressed above were widely held in the Church of England is illustrated by the fact that in 1866 the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his "Charge to the Clergy of the Diocese of London," repudiated the idea set forth by a Christian missionary, that missionary activity should be motivated by the belief that "at every ticking of the clock, in every four-and-twenty hours, from month to month and year to year, God sends a heathen straight to never ending misery."<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Francis J. Hall, *Dogmatic Theology*, 10 volumes (New York: Longmans, Green, 1908–22), 10:50. See his entire discussion of the unevangelized: 7:158–163; 10:47–57, 180–192. He also suggests the possibility of eternal destinies for individuals which are somewhere between "heaven and hell." Ibid., 7:163; 10:54–57.

<sup>297</sup> F. W. Farrar, *Eternal Hope: Five Sermons* (London & New York: Macmillan, 1878). See also his book, *Mercy and Judgment: Last Words on Christian Eschatology With Reference to Dr. Pusey's "What is of Faith?"* Second edition (London: Macmillan & Co., 1882).

<sup>298</sup> E. H. Plumptre, *The Spirits in Prison, and Other Studies on the Life After Death* (London: William Isbister, 1884), 184.

## Probation After Death

There were some among the Arminians who favored the idea of a probation after death for those who had not been granted a sufficient opportunity in this life to make a decision for or against the gospel. One of the foremost advocates of this view was the Anglican Canon, Herbert M. Luckock (1833–1909). Luckock did not believe that the unevangelized could attain salvation on the basis of their good works.<sup>299</sup> But he did believe that those who had not been afforded a fair probation in this life would be granted one in the next: “We cannot doubt that the offer of salvation in and through the Name of Jesus Christ will be made to them in the Intermediate State.”<sup>300</sup> Furthermore, he believed that not only the “heathen” in foreign lands, but also “the vast multitudes of men and women who have lived Pagan lives in Christian lands, not from willful resistance to proffered grace, but from simple ignorance of a better way” would also be granted a probation after death.<sup>301</sup> He wrote:

(A)sk any priest in charge of a town parish, say of 20,000 souls, whether, even in this age of unequalled parochial activity and organization, he can conscientiously say, that the choice between God and Satan has been put before them in anything

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<sup>299</sup> “What is to become of the masses of heathen who, while fulfilling the laws of Paganism, violate the laws of purity and holiness? Can they possibly earn salvation as the reward for their deeds? The salvation of the soul means the entrance of the soul upon that state in which it will enjoy the Vision of God. Now Scripture has laid down very clearly what the qualification is for this fruition. It is holiness; ‘Without holiness no man shall see the Lord.’ It is purity: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God . . . . It is inconceivable that a probation, under which the lives of such heathen, no matter how deep the natural ignorance in which they have been sunk, is passed on earth, can satisfy the all-holy God, or that the way in which they have yielded obedience to Pagan laws of right and wrong can possibly give them that reward of salvation which God has fenced and guarded from the least touch of impurity.” Herbert Mortimer Luckock, MA., *The Intermediate State Between Death and Judgment* (London: Longmans, Greens, and Co., 1892), 175–176.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.



like an adequate manner; ask him whether the powers that have been brought to bear upon the masses to persuade them to all that is pure and holy, that is just and true, can be compared for one instant to the forces which are constantly driving them with an overpowering influence to the opposite? If not, then justice demands that they should be placed in the same category with the heathen; and if not in this life, yet in the next they should have a proper trial, and at least a free choice for the acceptance or rejection of what is the highest good.<sup>302</sup>

The twentieth century Wesleyan theologian John Lawson (1909–2003) also held a similar view. In his book *Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, he states:

We suggest that the Christian teacher who follows the doctrine and spirit of Christ will warn men that there is a most dreadful judgment awaiting the morally and spiritually careless, but he will also allow himself to hope that the very rude awakening of the unseen world may quite possibly be the occasion of an awakening of many to penitence, faith, and righteousness. This is not the doctrine of ‘a second chance.’ There appears to be no basis for this hope either in Scripture or in logic. There is no ground for supposing that those who have deliberately turned away from Christ in this life will be able to turn to him in the next . . . . Yet this is not really the problem . . . . The number of those is small who, like Judas, have clearly faced Christ, and then unaccountably turned from Him in deliberate apostasy. The burden upon Christian thought is the vast company of those who have apparently passed through life without ever making a clear decision, for Christ or against. Many of these are perhaps Church members and Church attenders of a sort, through social habit or a vague instinct that this is ‘right.’ They are the multitudes of kindly, decent folk, who have sincerely intended to stand for the right, yet who by preoccupation, confusion, or apathy have failed effectually

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 188–189. Luckock believed that everyone was due a “fair chance under favourable conditions.” Ibid., 189. And he believed that the influences in the intermediate state “in favour of accepting his will (will be) more winning and powerful: the inducements to resist it proportionately weaker.” Ibid., 192.

so to do. Here is the real moral and spiritual problem of the world, for most of the human race is in this condition . . . . When these souls pass into the clearer vision of the life beyond, there will be stripped from them all those preoccupations which have enabled them so easily to shuffle through their days on earth without ever making a decision. Then there will surely be a rude awakening indeed, and pangs of remorse! And it is by no means inconceivable that many of these will then discover, in that remorse, that passing gleams of Christian truth which they had before accepted, and faint kindlings of Christian resolve which they had entertained, will have some degree of hold upon them. This may very well be the beginning of spiritual discipline and of spiritual development. It would seem that this may be a reasonable view of the destiny of most ordinary folk after death. Perhaps their immediate lot is neither that highest bliss which will be the reward of those who on earth have made it their joy to love and serve Christ, nor the pains of everlasting damnation, but a state of growth.<sup>303</sup>

### Contemporary Arminians

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the views which characterized Arminian theology have been widely disseminated by numerous evangelical writers.

These views have been espoused by writers such as Clark Pinnock,<sup>304</sup> John Sanders,<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> John Lawson, *Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury Publishing, 1980), 262–263.

<sup>304</sup> Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). I am indebted in this discussion of Pinnock's views to the excellent summary found in the book by Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelized: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2001), chapters 4–5.

<sup>305</sup> John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992).

and Veli-Matti Karkkainen.<sup>306</sup> While they have popularized these views to a broad reading public, they have essentially endorsed views long held by Arminian writers of the past four centuries. Pinnock's views, however, deserve special attention.

Pinnock believes that the Holy Spirit is reaching out to every person through God's natural revelation. He writes: "There is no general revelation or natural knowledge of God that is not at the same time gracious revelation and a potentially saving knowledge. All revealing and reaching out are rooted in God's grace and are aimed at bringing sinners home."<sup>307</sup> Furthermore, he states: "The Spirit embodies the prevenient grace of God and puts into effect that universal drawing presence of Jesus Christ. The world is the arena of God's presence, and the Spirit knocks on every human heart, preparing people for the coming of Christ; the Spirit is ever working to realize the saving thrust of God's promise to the world. From the Spirit flows that universal gracing that seeks to lead people into fuller light and love."<sup>308</sup> He believes that salvation can come to people through one of three means: "through the cosmic covenant established with Noah, through the old covenant made with Abraham, and through the new covenant ratified by Jesus."<sup>309</sup> He acknowledges that there is "more complete saving knowledge of God" in the new covenant than in the old, and in the old than in the cosmic covenant.<sup>310</sup> But there

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<sup>306</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

<sup>307</sup> Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 187.

<sup>308</sup> Clark Pinnock, "An Inclusivist View," in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 104.

<sup>309</sup> Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 105.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

is salvation through all three covenants. Under all three covenants, the condition for salvation is faith in God.<sup>311</sup> He states: “By faith, one receives the prevenient grace of God on the basis of an honest search for God and obedience to God’s word as heard in heart and conscience . . . . There is no time or space where he is not free to move or where a person cannot call on God for mercy.”<sup>312</sup>

Pinnock elaborates on the nature of a faith response to general revelation by noting Peter’s words concerning Cornelius: “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him” (Acts 10:34–35). Pinnock holds that this statement defines a faith response to general revelation as consisting of a cognitive element (fearing God) as well as an ethical element (doing what is right).<sup>313</sup> In fact, he states that an ethical response is just as valid as a cognitive response to God: “(N)oncognitive responses to God count as much as cognitive responses do . . . . Serving the poor embodies what the love of God himself is, and is accepted as the equivalent of faith.”<sup>314</sup> He even states: “Someone might be an atheist because he or she does not understand who God is, and still have faith.”<sup>315</sup> He states: “By faith, one receives the prevenient grace of God on the basis of an honest search for God and obedience to God’s word as heard in the heart and conscience. A premessianic believer is, one might say, latently a member of Christ’s

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>312</sup> Clark Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View,” 117.

<sup>313</sup> Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 96–98.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>315</sup> Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View,” 118.

body and destined to receive the grace of conversion and explicit knowledge of Jesus Christ at a later date, whether in this life or after death.”<sup>316</sup>

John Sanders has also been a major proponent of the inclusivist view. He states: “Anyone who believes God will respond benevolently to those who seek him thereby gives evidence of trusting God and thus possesses saving faith.”<sup>317</sup>

### Impact of Inclusivism on the Christian Mission

We should not end this chapter without noting the effect which inclusivism had on the Christian mission, even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is of some interest that an editorial appeared in the January 1887 edition of the *Methodist Review* entitled “Why Should We Seek to Christianize the Heathen?”<sup>318</sup> In this editorial, the writer lists several schools of thought which, in his view, had dampened the sense of urgency with regard to Christian missions. In fairness, we should acknowledge that one of the schools of thought which in his view discouraged the mission of the church was Calvinism. But of interest is the fact that, he included also those who promoted the idea that many might be saved apart from explicit faith in Christ:

Another class of theological specialists assume, that after all that has been said about it the heathen are not in a very desperate condition; that probably as large a proportion of the inhabitants of heathen as of nominally Christian lands will

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 117. Interestingly, Pinnock does believe that once a person understands the gospel, salvation becomes contingent on explicit faith in Christ. “Pre-Christian faith is valid up until that moment when Christ is preached, but not afterwards.” Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 168. He believes that if a person rejects Christ after hearing the gospel, “it would prove that they had not been favorably disposed to God prior to that time, since Jesus is the culmination of divine revelation.” Ibid., 168.

<sup>317</sup> John Sanders, *No Other Name*, 228.

<sup>318</sup> “Why Should We Seek to Christianize the Heathen?” *Methodist Review*, January 1887, 114–122.

‘somehow’ find salvation . . . . That notion—it can scarcely be called an opinion—is very wide-spread and effectively operative. We occasionally notice the recognition of distinctions in the forms of faith, with the inference that there may be a real saving faith exercised by those who have never heard of the ‘historical’ Christ. But if this supposed possibility should be granted as a bare possibility, the appreciable number of the ungodly heathen show in their lives and characters that they have the *substance* of the faith, which, if it is unto salvation, must also ‘work by love and purify the heart?’ . . . . We are, therefore, less concerned to ask whether any of these *can* be saved, according to the provisions of the Gospel, than we are to ascertain whether any appreciable number of them appear to have been saved, and are showing forth to any hopeful extent the fruits of righteousness? And if it should be found that a very few, one of a million, or even of a thousand, give some little ground for hope, what must be said of the almost absolutely unbroken multitude that is sweeping onward, with the volume of a Niagara, to the certain destiny of the wicked and abominable? May it not be that a preached Gospel would rescue some of these? And if so, we have the answer to the question at the head of this paper . . . . St. Paul himself (Rom. x, 14, 15) indicates the necessity for the preached Gospel, in order to men’s salvation, by a very simple array of gospel axioms: Salvation is by faith, faith comes by hearing (the word), and the word can be heard only where there is a preacher. This is God’s usual method for saving men. Perhaps it does not absolutely exclude every other way in any possible case; but if there be any other way it is not hinted at, nor are we at liberty to trust any other, either for ourselves or others . . . . On this important passage Olshausen remarks: ‘Preaching is the only way by which the Gospel is propagated among mankind. It cannot be produced by some immediate operation of the Spirit, scattered as seeds here and there, but in order to its propagation there is constantly required an imparting from the central point of the Church . . . . The action of the Holy Spirit in the world, according to Christ’s promise (John xiv, 26), is of the nature of a prompter of the memory as to what Christ himself had spoken and men had heard. He will ‘guide them into all the truth’ (John xvi, 13), but ‘he shall not speak from himself;

but what things he shall hear, these shall he speak.’ The lesson here taught seems to be that the efficiency of the Spirit is conditioned on, and only follows after, the preaching of the Gospel; and both the promises of the Scriptures and the facts of experience agree to show, that if there is a universal diffusion of the power of the Holy Ghost among men it almost never germinates into spiritual life, except as stimulated and made fruitful by the word of God, and that, also with very few exceptions, by the word delivered by the living preacher. It is true that the Scriptures do not very definitely inform us what will be the destiny of those who die in their sins without having heard of Christ and his salvation; but every intimation given implies for them the most horrible ruin and hopelessness. Saved by faith they cannot be, for ‘how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?’ and if a salvation through moral fitness might be thought available for those so situated, which, and how many of them, could claim eternal blessedness on that condition?<sup>319</sup>

The significance of these words stems from the fact that they were written by the editor of a leading Arminian publication, grieving over the implications of views held by most of his theological brethren.

Interestingly, this same journal published an article in the January 1889 issue entitled “The Atonement and the Heathen” in which George W. King argued in behalf of the view that the “heathen” may be saved apart from the gospel: “Now, may it not be that the principle of religious faith is the same every-where, no matter what the object, if it is coupled with sincerity and earnest striving to the degree of the light possessed? And on this condition may not God extend the benefits of the atonement in justification to millions of the heathen . . . .”<sup>320</sup> At one point in the article, King stated his view that “it is

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<sup>319</sup> “Why Should We Seek to Christianize the Heathen?” 117–118.

<sup>320</sup> George W. King, “The Atonement and the Heathen.” *Methodist Review*, January, 1889, 86.

possible . . . for the heathen to be justified, perhaps regenerate, sons of God, while the moral life is not only not up to Christian standards, but even not up to the standard of the light of nature” (a view which the editor noted was in his opinion “contrary to an orthodox conception of the Scriptures”).<sup>321</sup>

In the May edition that same year, a symposium on views regarding the “heathen” was published. In this symposium, three segments appeared. The first was that of the Methodist theologian Milton S. Terry: that the “heathen” may be saved by responding to “that measure of light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”<sup>322</sup> The second was that of the Presbyterian William G. T. Shedd: refuting the idea that there is a probation after death, but that God can regenerate the unevangelized apart from the gospel, and that “although the Redeemer has not been presented historically and personally to him, yet he has the cordial and longing *disposition* to believe in him.”<sup>323</sup> The third segment, written by James M. King, focused on “The Mission of the Church.” In this segment, King completely ignored discussion of whether the “heathen” can be saved apart from the gospel, but simply wrote:

The heathen being salvable, and the Scriptures giving us no saving gospel for souls beyond one probation, the mission of the Church is to *now* bring the Gospel into contact with living heathen . . . . The mission of the Church to the heathen is its chief mission. The one object of the coming of Christ and of the founding of the Church bearing his name is to bring the world out of heathenism. Christ’s command is, ‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature.’ This alone defines duty so simply that there can be no misunderstanding and no

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>322</sup> Milton S. Terry, “Salvation of the Heathen,” in “The Heathen: A Symposium,” *Methodist Review* 71 May 1889, 364.

<sup>323</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, “The Second Probation Dogma,” in *ibid.*, 370.



rational debate. Hesitation about obedience is nothing less than disloyalty, and deprives the individual Christian and the Church of any claim to ‘Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.’<sup>324</sup>

These articles illustrate the diverse sentiments even within Methodism regarding beliefs about the salvability of the unevangelized, and the impact of these beliefs on the mission of the church at that time.

Before closing out this chapter, it is enlightening to read excerpts of three sermons, including a couple by those who believed some of the unevangelized might be saved, promoting Christian missions in the nineteenth century. They do provide evidence that those who embraced an inclusivist view were not necessarily kept from obedience to the Great Commission. Excerpts will be provided here of sermons by preachers from both Congregational and Baptist backgrounds.

The first is that given by Jacob Norton (1764–1858), Pastor of the First Church in Weymouth, MA. Note Norton’s argument:

Although we would not peremptorily decide that none will be saved, who do not enjoy the gospel, and in a *direct* manner believe on the Son of God; yet we do not hesitate to avow the belief, that if any among the Jews, Mahometans and Pagans, are saved, the number is comparatively very small; and, indeed, that none among them will be saved. Unless they be possessed of the temper of heart, which is implied in ‘the faith of God’s elect’ . . . . In the view of this discourse, does it not evidently appear, that the sentiment advocated by not a few, at the present day, that it is of but little importance what scheme of religion a man embraces, originates from gross blindness of the heart? How can that religion be ‘just to God, or safe for man,’ which opposes the character exhibited by Christ, during his

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<sup>324</sup> James M. King, “The Mission of the Church,” in *ibid.*, 371–373.

public ministry on earth, and which rejects the doctrines he taught and inculcated? How can the religion, which venerates a vile and shameless impostor, as the true prophet of God, and which cherishes the desire and expectation of a future reward, consisting in voluptuousness the most selfish and alluring to the unholy mind, conduct to the pure regions of endless life? . . . And to what source is that latitudinarian doctrine to be traced, which removes these obstacles to salvation, but to an evil heart of unbelief, which darkens and perverts the understanding? . . . We are sometimes told, indeed, that God delights no less in variety, with respect to religion, than with respect to his works; that variety in religious opinion, like the collision of flint and steel, elicits the sparks of truth; that it is conducive to much good, and therefore, that this variety, in none of its parts, can be destructive to the souls of men. However specious this reasoning, it is, we are persuaded, radically unsound, and dangerously delusive . . . The truth is, that erroneous doctrines in religion, whether they exist among Jews, Mahometans, Pagans, or *Christians*, are as really opposed to the revealed will, or command of God, as overt acts of wickedness . . . Does it not appear from what has been advanced in this discourse, that the subjects of saving faith must be engaged in deeds of active and diffusive benevolence? Not only do they wish peace on earth, and exercise good will towards men; but to promote their best interest, is the object of their actual pursuit. Vain and dead is that faith, which worketh not by love; and vain and useless is that love, which delighteth not to 'do good and communicate.' The faith of the gospel will not fail to manifest itself by *visible* acts, in doing good to all within the reach of its benign influence . . . (M)ust we not, my brethren, cheerfully exert ourselves to meliorate the condition of our suffering fellow beings, with respect to this world, and especially, to secure their everlasting happiness in the world to come?<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Jacob Norton, *A Sermon Delivered Before the Massachusetts Missionary Society, at their Eleventh Annual Meeting, in Boston, May 29, 1810* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1810), 20–21. Norton did become a Unitarian and a Universalist later in his life. "First Church (Weymouth, Mass.) Records." [www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fa0038](http://www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fa0038) (Accessed December 7, 2020.)

Though Norton believes that some might be saved apart from explicit faith in Christ, he is quick to distance himself from those who believe that one's religious beliefs are matters of indifference. And he suggests that there were many in his day (apparently among professing Christians) who held this "latitudinarian" view. Furthermore, he believes that those among the as yet unconverted who do possess the grace of Christ will exhibit it in a godly life.

A second sermon is that by Frances Wayland (1796–1865), pastor of the First Baptist Church in Boston. Wayland also became President of Brown University. In this sermon, Wayland states:

Here you will observe the question with us is not, whether a heathen, unlearned in the gospel, can be saved. We are willing to admit that he may. But if he be saved, he must possess holiness of heart; for without holiness no man shall see the Lord. And where shall we find holy heathen? Where is there the vestige of purity of heart among unevangelized nations? It is in vain to talk about the innocence of these children of nature. It is in vain to tell us of their graceful mythology. Their gods are such as lust makes welcome. Of their very religious services, it is a shame even to speak. To settle the question concerning their future destiny, it would only seem necessary to ask, What would be the character of that future state, in which those principles of heart which the whole history of the heathen world develops, were suffered to operate in their unrestrained malignity? No! solemn as is the thought, we do believe, that dying in their present state, they will be exposed to all that is awful in the wrath of Almighty God. And we do believe that God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Our object is to convey to those who are perishing the news of this salvation. It is to furnish every family upon the face of the whole earth with the word of God written in its own language, and to send to every neighbourhood a preacher of the cross of Christ. Our object will not be accomplished until every idol temple shall have been

utterly abolished, and a temple to Jehovah erected in its room; until this earth, instead of being a theatre on which immortal beings are preparing by crime for eternal condemnation, shall become one universal temple, in which the children of men are learning the anthems of the blessed above, and becoming meet to join the general assembly and church of the first born, whose names are written in heaven.<sup>326</sup>

Though Wayland acknowledges that some of the “heathen” may be saved apart from explicit faith, he voices his conviction that this cannot be apart from the evidence of a holy life. Believing that there are few among the “heathen” who evidence such a work of grace, he believes strongly in the necessity of the evangelization of the nations.

A third sermon is that delivered by Edward Abiel Stevens (1814–1886), Baptist Missionary to the Burmese. After delineating the fact that the Buddhists of Burma know the law of God in their hearts, and that they fall short of this law, Stevens concludes:

In reflecting on this subject, it is very important, that we clearly distinguish between ignorance of the *law*, and ignorance of the *gospel*. The heathen are indeed ignorant of the gospel, but we have seen, that they are not ignorant of the law. Now it is not the gospel, but the law which acquaints us with our *duty* to God. The gospel is a special provision of pardon and salvation made for those who have broken the law and are therefore exposed to its penalty. As the heathen are acquainted with the law of God, and yet have not kept it, their guilt is clearly determined, though they may never hear of the provision of pardon which has been made for them. For what advocate would think of pleading in behalf of a

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<sup>326</sup> Frances Wayland, *The Moral Dignity of the Missionary Enterprise. A Sermon Delivered Before the Boston Baptist Foreign Mission Society on the Evening of October 26, and Before The Salem Bible Translation Society on the Evening of November 4, 1823*. Third Edition (Boston: James Loring, 1824), 12–13.

criminal undergoing his trial, that, although he clearly is guilty of breaking the statute, knowingly and deliberately, nevertheless, in as much as he was ignorant of the fact, that pardon is possible for such an offender, therefore it would be unjust to condemn him? Yet this is just the reasoning of those, who contend that the heathen shall not perish, because they are ignorant of the gospel. Such reasoning is clearly confounding the law with the gospel. Let us then make the distinction, and remember that the heathen will be judged and their final eternal state determined by the law, and not by the gospel. It is those only who have heard and have rejected or slighted the gospel, who shall be judged by that . . . . Let us recognize *our duty* with respect to the heathen . . . . This duty is based on two grounds, *sympathy* and the *command of Christ* . . . . We know of the remedy, which God has graciously provided for our ruined world; that in Christ Jesus may be obtained forgiveness and eternal life, that this provision of salvation is made for the whole race. How can we reconcile it to our consciences then, to sit down at our ease to enjoy the blessings of the Gospel, as though they were provided for ourselves only, and make no effort to communicate them to our brethren of the human family, that they might share these benefits as well as ourselves? What would be thought of a man possessed in abundance of a sovereign remedy for the pestilence, which was spreading death and desolation all around him, yet concerned himself not to use it, except for himself and his immediate relatives? Yet such is the conduct of those, only incomparably worse, who, provided with the gospel, are satisfied to be saved by it themselves, and make no effort for the perishing heathen . . . . But how much is the guilt of such conduct aggravated, when it is remembered, that those who are saved by the gospel are entrusted with it, as *stewards* for dispensing it to all the race, by the special command of the benevolent Saviour in his last commission, ‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature?’ If benevolence and compassion to our fellow-men supply not motives sufficient to lead us to special efforts in behalf of the heathen, surely a regard for the authority of Christ, the great Deliverer, and a solemn sense of responsibility to him, for the faithful exercise of our stewardship, and gratitude for the salvation experienced at his hand, ought to move us to do all in our power

for the fulfillment of his will . . . . In view, therefore, Beloved Friends, of the perishing condition of the heathen around us, and of our duty to them, and to our blessed Redeemer, allow me to commend to you the Burmah Bible and Tract Society, for whose aid your contributions are now solicited . . . . It is a society which has been formed expressly to aid in spreading abroad among the various tribes of this country the knowledge of the word of God, and especially of that rich and abundant provision, which is therein revealed for the salvation of our guilty world. This precious boon freely received, freely also let us give.<sup>327</sup>

Stevens believes that the unevangelized do have the moral law (which they possess in their heart and conscience). Yet he believes that far from being a means of their salvation, it is the basis of their condemnation. Salvation and deliverance from God's judgment comes only through hearing and believing the gospel. He therefore strongly urges his listeners to make every effort to spread the saving message of the gospel—both out of compassion for the lost, and out of obedience to Christ.

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<sup>327</sup> Edward Abiel Stevens, *The Inexcusableness of the Heathen: A Discourse Preached in the Baptist Chapel, on behalf of the Burmah Bible and Tract Society, Rangoon, August 1862* (Rangoon: American Mission Press, 1862), 18–21.

## Chapter 5

### *The Lutheran Views*

This chapter will present the views of those who are considered the theological heirs of Martin Luther, and who have adhered to the tenets of the Lutheran confessions.<sup>328</sup> Since its inception, Lutheranism has gone through many theological changes. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries it was impacted by both rationalism and pietism. The former exalted reason over divine revelation. And the latter promoted personal piety over intellectualism (whether orthodox or heterodox). To the degree that Lutheran theologians embraced rationalism, they strayed from the teachings of scripture and the traditional Lutheran orthodoxy.<sup>329</sup> Differing views on the subject of the unevangelized may therefore be found among members of the broader Lutheran communion.

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<sup>328</sup> Orthodox Lutherans base their theology on the Augsburg Confession (1530) and the Formula of Concord (1580), as well as Martin Luther's Small and Large Catechisms.

<sup>329</sup> The history of Lutheran theology may be found in many sources, including the following: Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); Charles P. Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and its Theology: As Represented in the Augsburg Confession, and in the History and Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1875); Adolf Hoenecke (1835–1908), *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 4 volumes, trans. James Langebartels, Heinrich Vogel, Richard A. Krause, Joel Fredrich, Paul Prange, & Bill Trackmier (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999–2009); Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism: The Theology and Philosophy of Life of Lutheranism Especially in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Walter A. Hansen. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003); Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2 volumes (St. Louis & London: Concordia Publishing House, 1970, 1972).

## Orthodox Lutherans

Those Lutherans who would be considered orthodox adhered to the conviction that salvation comes only through hearing the gospel. Speaking of the post-reformation era, Robert D. Preus says: “Can one be saved who does not know Christ and the Gospel? With one voice Lutheran orthodoxy answers in the negative.”<sup>330</sup> He quotes Abraham Calov (1612–1686):

The Gospel sets forth those things that are sufficient to believe for salvation. The Gospel and faith are related and belong together. In the Gospel the proper object of faith is revealed, and there can be no knowledge of this object and thus no faith that applies this knowledge . . . apart from the Gospel. Only the Gospel brings . . . Christ to us, the Christ in whom we are to believe and in whom alone we have life eternal . . . . Apart from the revelation of the Gospel there is no knowledge of Christ . . . . Because the Gospel is the means that has been divinely ordained to incite faith, it is called the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes . . . . Through the Word of the Gospel faith is born (Rom. 10:17).<sup>331</sup>

Likewise, Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) said: “God saveth all those and onely those that with perseverance believe on Christ in time . . . . And inasmuch as it (the gospel) pronounceth that salvation is to be sought for onely in Christ, it presupposeth that without Christ all is concluded under sinne.”<sup>332</sup> Also, Martin Chemnitz (1522–1586) said: “Therefore we should know that the church of God is the assembly which is bound to the

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<sup>330</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:211.

<sup>331</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 1:178.

<sup>332</sup> Johann Gerhard, *A Golden Chaine of Divine Aphorismes*, trans. Ralph Winterton (Cambridge: Printed by the printers to the Universitie, 1632), 88, 170.



voice of the ministration of the Gospel. And outside of this assembly, where there is no voice of the Gospel and no invocation of Christ, there are no heirs of eternal life.”<sup>333</sup>

With regard to natural revelation, Preus states: “(T)here was complete agreement among all the Lutherans that natural theology is never sufficient for salvation.”<sup>334</sup> Rather, there developed a general consensus that God used natural revelation to prepare people for the gospel.

Gerhard wrote:

That there is a God, even the book of nature sheweth . . . . But there is a more certain, evident, and perspicuous knowledge to be fetcht out of the book of holy scripture . . . . The eyes of our understanding are blinded by our fall: and from these it is that we cannot so readily make progresse and proficiency in the book of nature . . . . The end of that Natural knowledge of God is according to the Apostle, To ‘seek the Lord,’ Acts 17.27 . . . . Nature herself confesseth that her book is imperfect: and therefore she must, as it were, leade us by the hand, to finde out a more perfect revelation in the Church.<sup>335</sup>

He is stating that God may use natural revelation to awaken a search for God.

Chemnitz similarly comments:

Why has God revealed this natural knowledge of Himself to the gentiles? It was not revealed . . . in such a way that they might have fulfilled, with their good works, the righteousness of God insofar as it was known to them, and in this way be saved without Christ. For Christ specifically says in John 14:6, ‘No one comes to the Father but by Me.’ But there are other reasons why God has bestowed this external knowledge of Himself upon the minds of men. In the first place, He has

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<sup>333</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*. 2 volumes, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989, originally published 1591), 2:686.

<sup>334</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:178.

<sup>335</sup> Gerhard, *A Golden Chaine*, 18–19.

done so for the sake of the external discipline which God wants all men to observe, even the unregenerate. Paul explains the second reason in Acts 17:27 with the words ‘to seek the Lord.’ This expression has been placed in the causal construction, ‘because of or on account of our deficiency.’ Thus there is absolutely no doubt that this knowledge has been revealed so that we will seek God . . . . Since all men by nature acknowledge that there is a God and that He is to be glorified as God, and at the same time they are compelled to confess that they do not know how He is to be worshiped, God has ingrafted into them this knowledge, so that they may seek the proclamation of divine revelation in the church. And in order to give this proclamation great visibility, He has made this teaching so conspicuous throughout the whole world that all nations can clearly see the light of the heavenly teaching, not hidden under a bushel but placed high on a candlestick. But the same thing has happened to mankind as befalls bats who are blinded by the brilliant splendor of the sun. These people have become so darkened in their mind and their understanding that they become more blinded to the clear light of the divine Word. To this the Holy Scriptures bear witness concerning even the wisest of the heathen, such as Galen, Plato, and others.<sup>336</sup>

Franz Pieper (1852–1931) summarizes the orthodox Lutheran perspective:

As to the practical result of the natural knowledge of God, Scripture teaches two things . . . . In man’s present condition the natural knowledge of God is entirely insufficient to attain salvation. It arouses the conscience of man, but it cannot quiet the awakened conscience; it shows man that there is a God and a divine Law, but it does not enable man to keep this Law. The natural knowledge of God leaves man with an evil conscience and under the curse (Rom. 1:19, 21; 1:32; 2:14–15). Without faith in the Gospel, man remains *extra ecclesiam Dei* and in a state of hopelessness and despair (Eph. 2:12: ‘Being strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world’) . . . . Nevertheless the natural knowledge of God has a positive value. First, it is the foundation of civil

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<sup>336</sup> Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, 2:53.

righteousness . . . . The natural knowledge of God is of value also for the Church. For one thing, the Church has its temporary home in the body politic; and civil righteousness, which maintains order and peace, thus serves the Church indirectly . . . . Furthermore, the Law written into the heart of man serves as the point of contact when the Church preaches the Law . . . . Our Lutheran theologians are very careful when they discuss the natural knowledge of God. On the one hand, they set forth its value in great detail; on the other hand, they stress its inadequacy and utter insufficiency in bringing man to salvation. They condemn those who deny that there is a natural knowledge of God as well as the great number of those who admit men to heaven on the basis of their natural knowledge of God. And in this criticism they spare neither friend nor foe.<sup>337</sup>

Notice his comment that “a great number” did believe in the salvific efficacy of natural revelation in his day.

Lutherans sometimes speak of God’s “indirect” or “general and pedagogic” call through nature. David Hollaz (1648–1713) spoke of it in these terms:

It is that by which God more obscurely and as it were from afar invites and brings to the gate of the Church, sinners who are outside of the Church so that they are thereby led to seek for the true worship of God and His Church. This He does (a) *objectively*, by the revelation of His government and by the divine beneficence towards His creatures; (b) *effectively*, by an efficacious influence and divine impulse by which alike from innate theoretical and practical ideas and from the tokens of divine beneficence, practical suggestions and conclusions are aroused in the minds of the unbelieving, though in an unequal degree, so that they search out the true worship of God; (c) *cumulatively*, by the growing report concerning the Church which is spread throughout the whole world.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 volumes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950–1957), 1:374–376.

<sup>338</sup> Quoted by Reverend Franklin Weidner, D.D., LL.D., *Pneumatology, or The Doctrine of the Work of the Holy Spirit: Outline notes based on Luthardt and Krauth* (Chicago:

Adolf Hoenecke describes the relationship between the natural and special revelation of God in these terms: “The natural knowledge, according to Scripture, should indeed lead one to seek God. The supernatural knowledge should certainly lead one to find God in his true essence. Thus, the effect of the natural knowledge is, at best, great unrest of conscience; the effect of the supernatural knowledge is peace and bliss in God (Jn 17:3).”<sup>339</sup> Notice his distinction between the role of conscience in bringing conviction of sin, and of the gospel in bringing peace of heart.

As Lutherans believe that God wills all to be saved, they often speak of the “universal call of God” through the gospel. They speak of the call as universal in three senses: it is “serious, . . . efficacious, . . . and universal (meant for all).”<sup>340</sup> It is serious in that “it arises out of the deepest purpose and good pleasure of God who seriously desires the saving illumination and conversion of all men.”<sup>341</sup> It is efficacious in that “(i)t is accompanied by an actual divine working sufficient in itself to its ends. Power goes with the Word.”<sup>342</sup> Orthodox Lutherans believe that God’s efficacious grace always accompanies the proclamation of his word. The only reason that this efficacious power is not realized is because the individual resists God’s grace. As Weidner puts it: “Although

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Wartburg Publishing House, 1915), 32–33. The author adds his own comments following: “By this indirect vocation is excited a certain penitence and aversion towards sin, which though in no degree a substitute for grace, prepares the mind of man for a higher degree of it.” Ibid., 33.

<sup>339</sup> Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 2:17.

<sup>340</sup> Weidner, *Pneumatology*, 34.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 34.

it falls short of its effects, it is hindered by men presenting an obstacle, and thus becomes inefficacious by fault of the evil and obstinate will of man.”<sup>343</sup>

It is common also to find Lutherans holding that God’s call through the gospel can come in either an “ordinary” or “extraordinary” way. Weidner says: “The ordinary is through the preaching and teaching of the divine word. The extraordinary is that which departs from the ordinary means, and is divided by the old divines into *immediate* and *mediate*. The immediate is that in which God calls men without means, in His own immediate person, as He called Abraham and Paul. The *mediate* is that in which he employs extraordinary media or means such as miracles and similar modes of reaching man, as the appearing of Jonah to the Ninevites, the star which called and guided the Magi.”<sup>344</sup>

J. A. Quenstedt (1617–1688), however, expressed skepticism concerning the continued use of the extraordinary call: “The extraordinary call is special and very rare: formerly, indeed, under the Old Testament and in the commencement of the New, it occurred; but now, since the Gospel has been universally preached and the Church planted by the apostles, it has clearly ceased.”<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 35. Unlike the Arminians, Lutherans are not “synergistic” in the sense of believing that man’s will “cooperates” with God’s grace. But unlike the Calvinists, they believe that man’s will can resist God’s grace. God’s grace is efficacious, but not irresistible. See Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, volume 3.

<sup>344</sup> Weidner, *Pneumatology*, 33.

<sup>345</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 447.

The gospel is usually conceived as having been universally proclaimed at three times in history: first, after the fall; second, after the flood; and third, during the time of the apostles.<sup>346</sup>

As to why there remain nations and peoples that seem to be destitute of a gospel witness, the response of Schmid is not uncommon: “If then, in the course of time, some people be found who are entirely ignorant of the preaching of the Gospel, this does not militate against the *universality of the call*, but arises from this, that these people did not faithfully preserve the truth preached to them or did not lay it to heart, in consequence of

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<sup>346</sup> Weidner, *Pneumatology*, 36. Some 17<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran writers believed there were some remnants of a prior proclamation of the gospel in America in their day. Concerning the Americas, August Pfeiffer (1640–1698) wrote: “Nevertheless, we can not (sic) wholly reject what some travelers, especially Gottfried in his ‘*Historia Antipodum*,’ remark concerning some vestiges of divine truth found among them; as, for example, that the Harames could relate something of the story of Joseph; that the Souricasians used the word halleluiah in their songs; that the Mexicans had various Jewish ceremonies; that the inhabitants of Yucatan circumcised their children, etc.” August Pfeiffer, *Anti-Calvinism*, trans. Edward Pfeiffer (Columbus, OH: Printing House of the Joint Synod of Ohio, 1881), 148–149. He quotes Chamier, a Reformed writer, in a footnote: “And what if some lately discovered regions of the earth had not obtained so great a favor? They simply do not belong to those who shall obey His voice, of whom Christ spake. This, however, is nothing more than a conjecture, and a ridiculous one at that. Bellarmin says that there is no knowledge whatever of the Gospel among them, and that no traces of it can be found in their writings. But if from this it is concluded that therefore the Gospel could never have reached them, it may likewise be inferred that Adam’s posterity never came into those parts, which is an absurdity. Those who have been among them say that they tell something of a certain foreigner, who for many months came to them and preached something quite similar to what they had heard of us.” Ibid., 149. Stephen Neill comments in this regard: “In the seventeenth century the negative view was set forth . . . by Johann Gerhard (d. 1637). Gerhard’s point of view was that the command of Christ to preach the Gospel to all the world ceased with the apostles. In their day the offer of salvation had been made to all the nations; there was no need for the offer to be made a second time to those who had already refused it. This kind of judgement was frequently repeated . . .” Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, revised by Owen Chadwick (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986), 189.

which their posterity have to suffer. It is through their guilt that the *call* which God designed to be *universal* became *particular*.”<sup>347</sup>

Hollaz stated:

That nations formerly and yet in our own day and many people, are destitute of the preaching of the Word, *is their own fault*, not the fault of a fixed will or counsel of God, absolutely denying them the light of the Gospel; for 1) these nations despise and maliciously reject the Word of God; 2) that vocation and idea concerning Christian doctrine and ceremonies, in general, which through report is at this day universal, they neglect; 3) the pedagogic effective vocation (by this he means natural revelation) they do not employ to its proper use,—to search out the true worship and the true Church of God; wherefore they deprive themselves, by their own fault, of this salutary vocation which is through the preaching of the Gospel.<sup>348</sup>

Quenstedt, echoing a Calvinist perspective however, sees the source of these distinctions in the sovereign pleasure of God: “That God bestows the light of the Gospel upon one nation, while another is neglected; that some Turks, Americans, and other barbarians are converted to the faith, others who are their equals are left in their unbelief—this must also be ascribed to the hidden and unsearchable judgment of God. It must be acknowledged that God does some things in regard to the order, mode, time, and degree of the call according to His sovereign pleasure.”<sup>349</sup> Others, such as Gerhard, are more cautious: “But let us admit, that in these and similar special cases, we cannot find out and explain exactly the causes of the divine counsels; nevertheless we must by no

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<sup>347</sup> Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 443.

<sup>348</sup> David Hollaz quoted in Weidner, *Pneumatology*, 38–39.

<sup>349</sup> J. A. Quenstedt quoted in Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 450.

means have recourse to the absolute decree of reprobation, but *adhere firmly to those asserted general statements*, I Ti. 2:4; Ez. 33:11.”<sup>350</sup>

The discussion of August Pfeiffer (1640–1698) is particularly noteworthy:

God is no more bound to send apostles for all times, especially where He knows that His call will be rejected, than he was in the time of the Jews to promulgate the law always in that solemn manner. But just as the divine law imposed the duty on parents to instruct and establish their children in the law, so was it the duty of those before the flood who received instructions from Adam, of those who had been taught by Noah, and of those American tribes and all the heathen nations to whom the apostles preached, to proclaim to their posterity the gracious call of God, as they had received it for themselves and for the descendants. But since they themselves despised the call and permitted their descendants to grow up wild, their damnation is perfectly just and God is not to be blamed, since He does not deprive them of His gracious call absolutely, but according to the desert of their wickedness. If a ruler should bestow a rich manor on one of his knights, and the latter should forthwith begin to manage things carelessly, and his heirs should be more extravagant still, until finally the family should lose the manor, who could find fault with the ruler for not giving them another? . . . Furthermore, they say that the descendants can not be blamed that their ancestors despised the grace of God; for the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father or be responsible for his carelessness, thanklessness, and wickedness . . . But to this, too, we reply that the descendants are not without blame; for they should have asked their parents for information, not followed them blindly in their wickedness. Besides, God’s all-seeing eye saw full well that these very descendants would not only walk in the perverse footsteps of their parents, but also add still more wantonness to their inherited wickedness . . . Then they allege that in America certainly no knowledge was ever obtained as to where the true Church is to be found. To prove this, however, they must show that the American tribes at no time had either the

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<sup>350</sup> John Gerhard quoted in *ibid.*, 450.



actual information or any opportunity to obtain it. For aught that we know some men driven out of their course may have landed there, who never returned to their own country, and of whom those barbarous races can give no account. It is not at all impossible that in this way they may have obtained both information as to the true Church, and the fundamental knowledge of the Christian religion; but if they wantonly destroyed such men, they would again have all the blame for their own destruction. Truly, God's sincere mercy and unceasing faithfulness is so great that we can boldly say that He would have omitted nothing by which such sinners might have been converted to the Lord, if they had given the least ground for hope and the confirmed wickedness and extreme hatred of such men against the Word of grace had not rather been known to divine omniscience long ago. This is certainly the only way to account for the various vestiges of the knowledge of God, of heaven and hell, of forgiveness of sin, etc., which, as certain writers inform us, are found among the inhabitants of the New World. Now, that information in regard to the Church as well as actual preaching of the Word would have been of no avail among this people we can infer with much probability. For we find implanted in all men such a knowledge of God as can be obtained by the light of nature, namely, that a God must exist, and that we are in duty bound to honor Him; that we are not permitted to serve Him according to our own fancies, but are held to obey His own command; and that this must be specially revealed. Such natural knowledge, I say, dwells in all men alike, and was therefore also found among those American tribes. Nevertheless, they have by their wicked and wanton life suppressed and extinguished even this spark of knowledge. Therefore they are without excuse and must confess that their damnation is just; 'because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations and their foolish heart was darkened.' Rom. 1, 21. No one could accuse a father of injustice, who, if he should see his son wasting a dime that he had given him, should hesitate to give him a dollar. Since, therefore, these nations thus abused the natural light that was given them, God has a righteous cause for not giving them the supernatural light, inasmuch as they have thereby shown that they would also

despise the latter. For as Christ also says: 'He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much; and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.' Luke 16, 10. And to apply the immediately subsequent words of the Lord to those perverse nations we might say: If, therefore, ye have not dealt faithfully with the light of nature, 'who will commit to your trust the true riches?' But suppose some one should offer this case: An American Indian or other barbarian makes the proper use of his natural knowledge and learns from it that God must in a certain way have revealed to men how He would have them honor and worship Him, and resolves to gain further information on the subject, but is in the midst of such thoughts and endeavors taken away by death. How will you harmonize this with your doctrine? We reply that such a person we must consign to the grace of God and suppose rather too much in his favor than too little. For as God is not bound in all cases to His general means, He can easily in an extraordinary manner bestow the saving knowledge on a person in this state, who does not wantonly resist . . . . Our opponents say that God would be acting in a very partial manner if He should let the light of the Gospel shine brightly in one place notwithstanding the wickedness of the inhabitants, and yet require others to strive for that which was offered to the former in vain. For it is very probable that, if the Gospel were proclaimed as richly and extensively in some places as in others where it is but lightly esteemed, it would effect more good than in some of these latter places . . . . To this we reply that it is sufficient for us to know that God gives every man enough assistance and opportunity to come to the saving knowledge of the truth. For God does not owe it to any one; on the contrary, every one has it only by grace, through which sufficient occasion is given to all, that they might seek the Lord where He may be found. Now, what more could a man, who with humble heart follows such divine guidance and permits God to lead him, desire than through such a proffered opportunity to attain to salvation? It can not be denied, indeed, that God does not dispense His favors to all men in one and the same way, but that He grants such opportunities oftener and more richly to certain men. In the first place, however, He has His holy and hidden reasons for such a course. We the same thing, too, in the ordinary gifts of body and soul. For God has His

own holy purpose in giving to one man great understanding, to another feeble powers of mind; to one a healthy body, to another all kinds of infirmities; to one riches, to another poverty: much less can our feeble reason set bounds to divine omnipotence in its disposition of spiritual gifts. In the second place, men have no ground to murmur against God either for debarring them from heaven and His grace, for He gives them all sufficient opportunity to come to the knowledge of the truth; or for giving more spiritual gifts to one than to another, for this He owes no one; for ‘who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?’ Rom. 11, 35. ‘Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?’ saith the Lord, Matt. 20, 15 . . . . If an earthly father has a number of sons whom he loves equally well and whose welfare he seeks to promote, he is certainly not required to spend precisely as much on one as on another, but only to give them all sufficient support and assistance. Thus no one would expect him to spend as much money on a son employed in learning a trade as on one engaged in studying under great expense; he has done his duty when he bestows so much on all his children as is sufficient for their care and training. In the same way God gives to all men sufficient means for their eternal welfare, though He does not bestow them in equal measure upon all, and no one can require more of His goodness and mercy.<sup>351</sup>

It is especially noteworthy that he suggests the probability that God would in an extraordinary way reveal the truth of the gospel to a sincerely seeking person during whose lifetime the gospel never came.

#### Lutheran Rationalists and Pietists

As Lutheranism became more and more influenced by the rise of rationalism, views on the unevangelized changed as well. John Pye Smith (1774–1851), an English

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<sup>351</sup> Pfeiffer, *Anti-Calvinism*, 150–156.

Calvinist, made the following comments: “The modern Lutherans generally hold, either that the light of nature is not only hypothetically sufficient, but actively effective, for the salvation of men; or that, in the state after death and until the final judgment, the calls of the Gospel and other means of grace are continued.”<sup>352</sup>

Luther believed that God could be known through his general revelation. In fact, he believed that had people responded appropriately to natural revelation, they would have been saved. He wrote concerning those who might respond properly to natural revelation:

If they had . . . said: ‘Look, we know this: Whoever this God, or this Divinity, may be whose nature is to be immortal and powerful and able to hear those who call upon Him, let us worship and adore Him, let us not call Him Jupiter and say that He is like this or that image, but let us simply worship Him, no matter who He is (for He must have being),’ then without a doubt they would have been saved, even though they had not recognized Him as the Creator of heaven and earth or taken note of any other specific work of His hands.<sup>353</sup>

However, because of man’s sin, Luther believed natural revelation is of limited value.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> John Pye Smith, D.D., *First Lines of Christian Theology, in the form of a syllabus. Edited from the author’s manuscripts, with additional notes and references and copious indexes*, by William Farrer, LL.B. (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1854), 552. Smith expresses his own view: “That the notifications of God and moral responsibility made to men by the works of creation and his visible providence, are not indeed to be confounded with the annunciation and invitation of the Gospel; but yet they are mercies and advantages of unspeakable value. They supply to the reason and conscience abundant evidence, which ought to be and might be received and improved to a very valuable extent of moral conviction of some principal truths on which religion is built. If, in any case, real holiness exist in the heart of any heathen; that must be an effect of Divine grace, and will certainly lead to eternal salvation. But we have no evidence of the existence of such an instance.” Ibid., 552. When Smith says that this will “lead to eternal salvation” he no doubt implies that God will see that the gospel is sent to this person.

<sup>353</sup> *Luther’s Works*, 25:158.

<sup>354</sup> Paul Althaus summarizes Luther’s view: “‘the natural light of reason is strong enough to regard God as good, gracious, merciful, and generous; that is a strong light.’ But this knowledge of God has a twofold limit. First, although reason knows all this about God, it

A greater openness to the role of reason and natural revelation can be seen, however, during the seventeenth century in for example, John Gerhard (1582–1637) and Johannes Musaeus (1630–1681). Concerning Gerhard, Walter Hansen comments:

It is true that in the writings of the dogmaticians of the seventeenth century one will not find such a break with the basic assumptions of Luther's theology. In the case of some of them—Leonhard Hutter, for example—natural theology plays no role at all worth mentioning. But it is all the more important that in the doctrinal tradition established by Johann Gerhard the clear-cut break between man's natural relationship to God and his faith relationship to Him, as it existed in Luther, is constantly weakened more and more, yes, obliterated.<sup>355</sup>

Concerning Musaeus he says: "(T)he last representatives of orthodoxy, like Johann Musaeus, fought against adherents of the enlightenment, such as Herbert von Cherbury, with blunted weapons when they undertook to prove to them the 'insufficiency' of the natural knowledge of God. Musaeus indeed was not wrong in stating that it depended on

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cannot produce the certainty that God really wants to help *me*. The experiences of life repeatedly speak against this possibility; and since the mere thought of God cannot assert itself against this experience, a man's actual situation is always one of doubt. A man may really believe that God is ready to help others—but the same man does not dare to believe that God will help him. Second, although reason has the idea of God, it lacks practical experience of him. It knows *that* God is; but it does not know *who* God is. On the contrary, it always applies the idea of God to something that isn't God at all. It 'plays blindman's buff (sic) with God,' reaches out to grab him but misses him, and grasps not the true God but idols, either the devil, or a wish-fulfillment dream of the human soul—and such a dream also comes from the devil. Human reason does not know who the real God is. That knowledge is taught only by the Holy Spirit." Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 16. Bruce Demarest wrote: "(I)n his reaction against the Thomistic nature-grace schema, whereby grace perfects nature, Luther failed to explicate adequately the propaedeutic foundation of the general knowledge of God. That is, he did not sufficiently unfold the positive service general revelation provides by laying the foundation for God's saving Word of address in the gospel." Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*, 50.

<sup>355</sup> Walter Hansen, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 55.

whether the natural knowledge of God was sufficient ‘for salvation’—which must be denied. But he did not draw the necessary conclusion: that for this reason it could lead only to ‘damnation’ . . . .”<sup>356</sup>

Dorner describes Musaeus’ conception of the relationship between natural and revealed theology as being complementary in nature:

(H)e regards the connection existing between natural reason and positive revelation, with all their diversity, to be similar to that between a vital need and its supply . . . . Man’s conscience finds, he says, in Christianity the satisfaction of its wants, and nature and grace enter into a fruitful alliance in the reason that is enlightened by the truths of Christianity . . . . If the distinction between reason and revelation is chiefly that they are but different sources of the same knowledge, theology would have placed itself in a difficult position by conceding to reason an independent knowledge . . . .<sup>357</sup>

He attributes to Musaeus the idea that natural man still has “vague longings for salvation.”<sup>358</sup>

Hansen summarizes his view of the ensuing course of German theology: “The development of ‘natural theology’ is the march of history from Luther’s primal experience . . . up to the Enlightenment. It ended with the ominous error that Christian faith in God and ‘natural knowledge of God’ are essentially identical.”<sup>359</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to find over the course of the development of Lutheran theology, an

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 56. For a discussion of the theology of Johann Musaeus, see Carl Strange, *Die Systematischen Principien in Der Theologie des Johann Musaeus: Inaugural-Dissertation*. (Halle: E. Karras, 1895).

<sup>357</sup> I. A. Dorner, *History of Protestant Theology*, trans. George Robson and Sophia Taylor, 2 volumes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 2:117–118.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 2:147.

<sup>359</sup> Walter Hansen, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 57.

increasing openness to a salvific role for natural revelation. Hansen's comments have particularly in view the rise of purely rationalist theology in Germany. But many who considered themselves orthodox or evangelical were also influenced by the rationalist environment in which they lived.<sup>360</sup>

We find for example, in Gottingen Professor, and biblical theologian Gotthilf Traugott Zacharia (1729–1777) sentiments similar to those of Musaeus:

(I)f one refers to a very generalized calling of the people, one distinguishes the direct, proper and immediate calling from the indirect and remote calling. The former takes place with those people who are being taught directly through the Christian religion, and have opportunity to get to know it from close up, as for instance the non-believers that live among Christians; the latter takes place when people do not know anything about the Christian religion, but have acquired from nature some general knowledge of God and of our natural relationship to Him, or who have the capacity to develop an understanding by observing nature through the right use of their faculties. Through this latter knowledge they will not immediately and directly be led to a state of blessedness, but they will be made desirous to learn more of the deeper truths such as are contained in the Christian teachings . . . . Therefore, through availing themselves of the Christian teachings directly, the former will be led to blessedness and to the order of salvation connected with it, the latter will be called to the Christian religion in order to be guided by it to the state of blessedness. Therefore the possibility of recognizing God in nature, the true awareness of God through nature, the possibility to be awakened to a desire for a better religion through such recognition and consequently the search until finding the Christian religion, and the true recognition of the divine intention to lead all people into a state of

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<sup>360</sup> For a discussion of the influence of rationalism on German theology, see Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 1:312ff.

blessedness through Christ, all these things are interpreted as ‘calling.’ Thus we speak of a remote and an immediate calling.<sup>361</sup>

We see in Zacharia a positive conception of the role of natural revelation and reason in preparing the unconverted for the gospel, by instilling in them a hunger and desire for salvation.

Leipzig Professor Samuel Frederick Morus (1736–92), however, is an example of a Lutheran theologian who went much further than Zacharia. In his *Epitome Theologiae Christianae* he wrote:

Will there be . . . a decree against those men as regards their future happiness, against those who were ignorant through no fault of their own? Will there be a decree against them because they were ignorant? Without a doubt, God will judge no one in accordance with knowledge he did not have, but rather He will judge them in accordance with that which he did have. And as for those who have lived honestly in accordance with natural religion, will it profit them absolutely nothing for the time to come to have lived honestly, because they were nevertheless ignorant of our religion? Indeed it will profit them, as Paul teaches: for it will be harmful to some if they have neglected natural religion. And if God now in this world approves of a pagan man who using his own knowledge lives honestly and piously, i.e., if God bestows his benefits on the man who has been zealous to act rightly according to the measure of his own knowledge: will God, then, in the time to come, simply sentence him to misery, because he was ignorant of our religion, even though he lived honestly? Indeed the sacred books teach that they to whom the Christian religion has become known and who have made use of it, will be raised to the particular level of heavenly happiness which is proper to

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<sup>361</sup> Gotthilf Traugot Zacharia, *Biblischer Theologie: oder Untersuchung des biblischen Grundes der vornehmsten theologischen Lehren* (Biblical Theology: or Investigation of the Biblical Basis of the Chief Theological Teachings), 5 volumes (Gottingen: V. Bossiegel, 1771–1786), 4:68–69. Translation from the old German by Christl Davenport, a German teacher in Dallas, TX.



them; but at the same time, they teach that God will be a most just judge of others, considering their knowledge and their deeds. Let us wait therefore for the future.<sup>362</sup>

Morus' view was identical to that espoused by most Arminians.

Gottlob Christian Storr (1746–1805) and Karl Christian Flatt (1772–1843) were conservative Lutheran theologians who also espoused views favorable to the salvation of the unevangelized.<sup>363</sup> They stated their position in the following comments:

The condition, on which adults or those who have attained the use of reason, obtain the salvation purchased by Christ, is faithful obedience to the voice of conscience. (Rom. 2:12–15.) Conscience urges them to reverence for an invisible Judge, whose being and attributes they can learn from his visible works, with a clearness proportionate to the degree in which they cherish and obey her monitions. These are moreover, occasionally, in the providence of God, excited to the highest degree of sensibility by external circumstances, such as blessings or misfortunes of unusual magnitude . . . . Those also who lived before Christ, (or since that time,) and yet knew nothing of a Redeemer, will doubtless partake of that salvation purchased for every individual of the human family, if they have only cherished a faith in God as far as their circumstances rendered it possible, and acted in obedience to the dictates of this faith. Nor will the fact that they knew nothing of this atonement prevent its application to them<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> D. Sam. Frid. Nathan Morus, Theol. Professor in Acad. Lips. (Professor in the Academy of Leipsig), *Epitome Theologiae Christianae* (Epitome of Christian Theology). Editio Quarta Passim Aucta (Fourth expanded edition) ( Lipsiae: E. B. Schwicker, 1794), 128–129. Translation from the Latin by David Thomas West, Latin tutor at University of Dallas, TX.

<sup>363</sup> Storr led a conservative theological movement at the University of Tübingen. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gottlob\\_Christian\\_Storr](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gottlob_Christian_Storr) (Accessed January 4, 2012.) Flatt was one of his disciples.

<sup>364</sup> *An Elementary Course of Biblical Theology, Translated from the work of Professors Storr and Flatt, with additions by S. S. Schmucker, D.D.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Andover: Gould & Newman, 1836), 395–396.

Under the heading “Salvation may for Christ’s sake, be extended to those also who are not acquainted with Revelation,” they stated:

The reasons why, before the time of Christ, as well as since his resurrection, so many nations were not favoured with that revelation which was given to the Jews and also to other nations after the ascension of the Redeemer, are as little known to us, as the reasons of many other things which are under the guidance of divine Providence (Rom. 11:33). But this we know, that only from him shall much be required, to whom much has been entrusted; and that to entertain a different opinion concerning the dealings of God, would be irreverent. Hence we know that those who have enjoyed but few means and helps to piety and virtue, though they will not, if disobedient, escape punishment shall be ‘beaten with fewer stripes’ than those who had been favoured with more and better means of grace and incitements to piety, and who yet neglected them; and on the contrary, that those who have been faithful in little, will hereafter partake of the qualifications which they have here attained.<sup>365</sup>

Concerning those who do not have the gospel, Storr and Flatt stated:

It is not incredible that the sensibility of conscience may also be awakened and rendered more acute by the internal influence of the omnipresent God, upon the souls of those who are obedient to her first emotions; as well as by the contemplation of the works of creation, and by the strong impression made upon them by some important occurrences in their lives. And the feelings of gratitude to God, of reverence for him, of confidence in him, and of longing for him, can rise beyond the sphere of distinct knowledge: for the Spirit helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Rom. 8:26. Nor is it at all unworthy the Redeemer of men (I Tim. 2:3) to give additional knowledge by immediate communication to such conscientious (Acts 10:35) individuals as have

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 398.

faithfully improved the knowledge possessed by them; if such additional knowledge is necessary to the tranquility of their minds and to their stability in the course of virtue and religions. Mark 4:24, unto you that hear shall more be given; for he that hath, to him shall be given.<sup>366</sup>

The fact that Storr and Flatt were counted among the champions of “orthodoxy” suggests that these views were widely accepted, not only among the more liberal rationalists, but also among conservative Lutherans of their time.

George Christian Knapp (1753–1825) was a pietist who taught theology at the University of Halle. He likewise shared similar views regarding the unevangelized.<sup>367</sup> In his *Lectures on Christian Theology* he wrote:

When treating of the conditions of salvation established in the Christian scheme, we speak in reference to Christians—i.e., those who have opportunity and capacity to become acquainted with Christianity, and to convince themselves of its truth, without undertaking to say what means for attaining salvation God may give those who are ignorant of Christianity, or who remain unconvinced of its truth through unintentional mistake, and without criminality on their part. God is not limited to one single method, which he is compelled to employ equally at all times and among all men The Bible says, indeed, that God will punish the heathen on account of their sins; not, however, because they did not believe in Jesus Christ, if this was not their fault, but because they did not act agreeably to the

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 400–401.

<sup>367</sup> Adolf Hoenecke makes a significant comment about the impact of pietism on Lutheran theology: “By emphasizing the Christian life rather than Christian doctrine, Pietism has brought about the decline of Lutheran dogmatics. Without intending to do so, Philipp Jakob Spener, the father of Pietism (born 1635 . . . died 1705), began to wear down the structure of Lutheran orthodoxy by destroying the confidence in it, which also led to laxity toward heterodoxy. Neither Spener nor Francke produced dogmatic works.” Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 1:311. Hoenecke might have been wise to have said that Spener’s fault was in *only* emphasizing the Christian life, to the neglect of theology—not that he emphasized it at all.

knowledge which they possessed, and the law of nature with which they were acquainted; Rom. i. 21, seq.; Ephes. ii. 1, 2. The holy scriptures, therefore, never regard the heathen merely as such, as excluded from salvation. Such passages as Mark xvi. 16 do not relate to the heathen who are innocently ignorant of the gospel. The word *apistein* does not signify *not to believe*, but to *DISbelieve*, and always implies guilt . . . . No one will ever be condemned for guiltless ignorance, or for unintentional and innocent mistake; but only for guilty rejection and contempt of the truth, or for living contrary to the truth when once known . . . .

God has not seen good as yet to bring all nations to the knowledge of Christianity. And, little capable as we are of understanding the plan of God in this respect, we ought not to conclude from this circumstance that the Christian revelation is unnecessary and may easily be dispensed with. It has pleased God to leave many nations for thousands of years in a barbarous and savage state. But can we conclude from this fact that intellectual cultivation and moral improvement are superfluous and useless, and therefore missions are unnecessary? Nor, on the other hand, can we conclude . . . that God cannot save the heathen, because they have not enjoyed the light of Christian revelation . . . . But it is expressly asserted, that God does not demand more from any one, than he is able, with his knowledge and abilities, to perform, Luke 12:48, seq.; and also, that he who faithfully serves God according to the knowledge and means which he enjoys, and does what he considers to be his duty, is acceptable to him, Acts 10:35 . . . . According to the testimony of the Holy Scriptures, God will have reference in determining the character and conditions of men to the knowledge they have had, the dispositions they have cherished, and the actions they have performed. We may confidently expect from the goodness of God, that since he has heretofore given to so many nations only the light of nature, he will not make them miserable for the want of that higher knowledge of which they are innocently destitute. And since there is a future life, we may trust that he will there lead them to that higher degree of happiness and clearness of knowledge which they did not attain in this life, because, without fault of their own, they were here incapable of receiving it. To such a dispensation in the future world there is at least an allusion in Rev. xxii. 2,

*in the tree of life, by the river of life, whose leaves serve for the healing of the nations . . . .* Many modern writers have treated this subject in such a way as to lead to a feeling of indifference towards Christianity; but this result need not be feared from the scriptural representation here given.<sup>368</sup>

Johann Christian von Hofmann (1810–1877), was professor of theology at Erlangen. In his work *Der Schriftbeweis*, he voiced similar views. He believed that Paul, in Romans 2:14 “holds out the prospect that the thoughts prompted by the testimony of conscience may perhaps lead the heathen to justify themselves before God on judgment day, and that this self-justification can be graciously accepted . . . . This may, however, result in behavior on the part of the heathen whom God will reward with eternal life on the day of that judgment John saw after the resurrection of the believers.”<sup>369</sup>

August Tholuck (1799–1877) was professor of theology at University of Halle. He was considered orthodox, but was influenced both by rationalism and pietism.<sup>370</sup> His views regarding the unevangelized are evident in his commentaries on John and Romans. In his comments on John 3:21 (“But he who practices the truth comes to the light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God”), Tholuck remarks: “En theo, that is, so that the works have God as their source. It is in John we find direct expressions, according to which even those not yet converted can stand in a fellowship

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<sup>368</sup> George Christian Knapp, *Lectures on Christian Theology*, trans. Leonard Woods, Jun., 2<sup>nd</sup> American edition (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1850), 421–423.

<sup>369</sup> Dr. J. Chr. K. von Hofmann, *Der Schriftbeweis: Ein Theologischer Versuch* (“Scripture Proof: A Theological Test”) 3 volumes, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Nordlingen: C. h. Bed’schen Buchhanblung, 1857–1860), 1:569, 572. Quoted in Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 4:354.

<sup>370</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August\\_Tholuck](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_Tholuck) (Accessed January 5, 2012.)

with God, (viii. 47, xviii. 37.)”<sup>371</sup> The two later texts in John which he references describe those who are “of God” (8:47) or “of the truth” (18:37) as hearing the words of God (8:47) or hearing the voice of Jesus (18:37). In other words, Tholuck interprets these texts as implying that people are in fellowship with God prior to hearing the gospel. On John 10:16 (“I have other sheep who are not of this fold”) he says: “Many of the Gentiles also, are ‘children of God,’ (xi. 52,) in virtue of that internal sympathy with Christ, by which they will be enabled to know his ‘voice.’”<sup>372</sup> On John 14:6 (“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me’”), Tholuck says: “De Wette, not improperly, adds: ‘The particularistic principle, that no man cometh to the Father but through Christ, in its bearing on those who have never known him as an historical personage, is softened by the fact that he is also the Eternal (ideal) Logos.’”<sup>373</sup>

In his commentary on Romans 2:6 (“who will render to each person according to his deeds”), Tholuck says:

The erga of a man, are the manifestation of his disposition. His disposition cannot be sanctified otherwise than by his being filled with the Love of God, and that can only take place when he is penetrated with the belief of things divine. Hence, the text in which salvation is made dependent upon works, do not stand in contradiction to those, where it is made to depend upon religious faith. In a certain degree, even the morality of the heathen may rest upon religious faith, and in so far be pure.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> August Tholuck, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Charles P. Krauth (Philadelphia: Smith, English & Co., 1859), 124.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>374</sup> Tholuck, *Romans*, 96.

## Views on Future Probation

Milton Valentine (1825–1906) taught theology at Gettysburg Seminary. In his *Christian Theology*, he rejects the idea of a probation after death. But in speaking of this idea, he writes:

A further check to over-confidence in the theory (of probation after death) is the fact that the Scriptures seem to teach that the heathen, as well as others, will be judged according to the religious light they have had; so that on the basis of an actual atonement in Christ for the sins of the whole world, there will be not only a just but a merciful judgment which may accept even such as know Him not according to the gospel, if they have lived according to the light afforded them. Indications pointing to the salvation of some heathen may be traced as follows: (a) We start with a concession of advantage in the possession of the gospel—‘much every way’ (Rom. iii. 1–2). The Jews had much light; the Gentiles little. But advantage as to salvation has no logic for utter exclusion of all without it. (b) Such little light puts the heathen under moral responsibility and opens possibilities of *some* obedience to God. (c) Obedience to given light may show the obedient receptivity, under the Spirit of truth, ready to move into the higher obedience of faith, as and when truth comes. Such reciprocity has thus, in a measure, the nature of implicit, though not explicit, faith . . . . (d) God’s acceptance of such seems to be clearly asserted, *e. g.*, Acts x. 34–35. In these words of Peter a general principle is clearly drawn from a particular case, the heathen centurion, Cornelius. St. Paul elaborates the logic of the situation (Rom. ii. 6–26), and opens to view a vision of the universal judgment which exhibits divine recognition of the sincere endeavor of pagan piety. (e) And linked with this view, illustrative examples are on divine record: *e. g.*, Abraham himself, as reaching a divine acceptance of faith while yet in his uncircumcision (Rom. iv. 9–11); Job (Ezek. Xiv. 14; Jas. V. 11); Melchizedek (Heb. Vii. 1–4). These were without the gospel and the Bible, but not without God, even in their gentile privation. (f) The atoning value of Christ’s humiliation and cross extends to ‘the whole world.’ ‘He tasted death for every man.’ The world is under a mediatorial

probation, and all humanity sustains a different, and it may be open, relation to forgiveness and healing grace. Let it be distinctly understood that such heathen are not to be thought of as saved on the ground of their own virtue, merit, or righteousness; but because Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the world, such as have not heard of Him, yet ‘feel after Him that they may find Him’ are counted as His . . . .<sup>375</sup>

Others believed that there would be an opportunity to embrace the gospel after death. The British Methodist theologian John S. Banks (1835–1917) said that, “*Probation after death* for the heathen, and for those in Christian lands who have had no adequate means of knowledge in this life, is held by Lutheran divines and by many in this country and America.”<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Milton Valentine, *Christian Theology*, 2 volumes (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1906), 2:405–7. Valentine quotes Dr. Theodore Christlieb (1833–1889), professor of theology at University of Bonn, on p. 407: “Scripture nowhere teaches that all who die without knowledge of the revelation of God in Christ are irretrievably lost. It is one thing innocently not to *know*; it is quite another thing willfully to *reject*. The express doctrine of Scripture is that men will be judged hereafter ‘according to their works,’ and that the measure of such judgment will be the degree of revelation, supernatural and natural, vouchsafed to them in the present life.” Theodore Christlieb, D.D., *Modern Doubt and Christian Belief: A Series of Apologetic Lectures Addressed to Earnest Seekers After Truth*, trans. chiefly by the Rev. H. U. Weitbrecht, Ph.D., ed. Rev. T. L. Kingsbury, M.A. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874), 115.

<sup>376</sup> John S. Banks, *A Manual of Christian Doctrine*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1904), 308. Theodore Engelder, Professor of Dogmatics at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, wrote a series of articles refuting the idea of a probation after death as espoused by a number of Lutheran theologians. Theodore Engelder, “The Hades Gospel,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XVI, No. 5, May, 1945, 293-300; Theodore Engelder, “The Argument in Support of the Hades Gospel,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XVI, No. 6, June, 1945, 374-96; Theodore Engelder, “The Evil of the Hades Gospel,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XVI, No. 9, Sept., 1945, 591-615; “Some Remarks on the Question of the Salvation of the Heathen,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XVI, No. 12, Dec., 1945, 823-42.



German theologian Isaac Dorner (1809–1884) characterized nineteenth century German theology in these words:

The assumption that the termination of the earthly life is, in every case, the termination of the Day of Grace, has been pretty generally given up, on account of non-Christians who, never having heard of the Gospel, cannot be ripe for judgment. This has been a step towards naturalizing an alteration in the Reformation doctrine held concerning the *intermediate state*—an alteration which teaches that, even in the other world, a spiritual development, nay, probably a process of conversion, is conceivable . . . .<sup>377</sup>

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Yale professor George P. Fisher (1827–1909) stated the idea was to be “found among the German evangelical theologians” that “an opportunity of hearing the Gospel, (is) to be granted, beyond the bounds of this life, and prior to the last judgment, to those who have not heard of Christ here, or have imperfectly apprehended his Gospel.”<sup>378</sup> George A. Lindbeck (1923-2018) states: “The great majority of Protestant exegetes since the middle of the nineteenth century have held that the obscure passage in which Christ is said to have preached to the spirits in prison (I Pt. 3:19, cf. 4:6) reflects a belief in the early church that those who die in sin will still, in the mercy of God, have a chance to respond to the gospel.”<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Dr. I. A. Dorner, *History of Protestant Theology*, 2:462. Bo Reicke provides an account and list of defenders of this view, both in Europe and America, in his book, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism: A Study of I Pet. III. 19 and its Context* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1946), 47–49.

<sup>378</sup> George P. Fisher, *Discussions in History and Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1880), 421.

<sup>379</sup> George A. Lindbeck, “*Fides ex auditu* and the Salvation of Non-Christians,” in *The Gospel and the Ambiguity of the Church*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 96.

German theologian Julius Muller (1801–1878) advocated this view: “The way of return to God is closed against no one who does not close it against himself; therefore, those who have not yet closed it against themselves, in that the means of salvation, the Redemption of Christ, has not yet been offered to them, will indisputably hereafter, when beyond the limits of this earthly life, be placed in a condition to enter upon this way of return to God if they choose.”<sup>380</sup>

Theologian August Hermann Cremer (1834–1903), who studied under Tholuck, was another advocate of a post-mortem probation. In his book *Beyond the Grave*, he wrote:

But there are so many who here below have not had the opportunity of deciding for or against God, because they do not know him and the provisions and works of his redeeming love. They belong partly to the remote heathen nations; or the influences and tendency of their education, or their position in life, has at best brought them into contact with only the extremest wave-circle of God’s word and of Christian spirit and life. Relations that have become historical, the environment into which they were born are largely to have brought the gospel near to such, are themselves to blame, or at least are sharers in the blame of their repugnance to it. And then so many must die before they have opportunity to know the gospel and become aware of the grace of the calling . . . . Therefore it is scriptural, and not contrary to Scripture, to believe in the possibility of conversion in the realm of death . . . .<sup>381</sup>

Dorner himself was a chief proponent of this view. In his book *On the Future State*, he states concerning the view that the opportunity for salvation ends at death:

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<sup>380</sup> Julius Muller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, 2 volumes (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1885), 483.

<sup>381</sup> Dr. Hermann Cremer, *Beyond the Grave*, trans. The Rev. Samuel T. Lowrie, D.D. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1886), 104–5, 108.

(T)his view is impracticable, and that even on moral grounds. Not only would nothing of essential importance remain for the judgment, if every one entered the place of his eternal destiny directly after death; but in that case, also, no room would be left for a progress of believers, who, however, are not yet sinless at the moment of death. If they are conceived as holy directly after death, sanctification would be effected by the separation from the body; the seat, therefore, of evil must be found in the body, and sanctification would be realized through a mere suffering, namely, of death in a physical process, instead of through the will. Moreover, the absoluteness of Christianity demands that no one be judged before Christianity has been made accessible and brought near to him. But that is not the case in this life with millions of human beings. Nay, even within the church there are periods and circles where the Gospel does not really approach men as that which it is. Moreover, those dying in childhood have not been able to decide personally for Christianity. Nor is the former view tenable exegetically. As to the Old Testament, it does not teach that all men enter directly after death into blessedness or damnation. They rather enter Sheol, which is described as an abode of the departed who are without power and true life. The pious and godless are not thought of as separated therein. This agrees with the statement that Christ first prepared the place of blessedness, to which belonged his person and work . . . . Further, we may apply here what was said . . . respecting the descent into Hades which implies that a salvation through knowledge of the Gospel is possible also to the departed. Christian grace is designed for human beings, not for inhabitants of earth. It is not said: He that hears not shall be damned; but he that believes not. Jesus seeks the lost: lost may be sought also in the kingdom of the dead. The opposite view leads to an absolute decree of rejection for all who have died and die as heathen, whereas Christian grace is universal. A proof that, according to the New Testament, the time of grace does not by a universal law expire with death, is found in Christ's raisings of the dead, *e.g.*, the youth at Nain received by being raised from the dead a prolonged term of grace, through which Christ's love became first known to him. And if Tyre and Sidon had seen what the Jews saw, and had repented in sackcloth and ashes, they would have been saved; which

therefore involves that if the term of grace expired for them with death, they would be damned, because, through no fault of their own, they had not seen and experienced Christ. When, further, Christ says of one sin that it is forgiven neither in this nor the next life, whereas other sins find forgiveness without restriction to this life, there is involved a testimony that other sins aside from the sin against the Holy Ghost may yet be forgiven in the next world. And how can the *place* of itself be expected to settle the question of moral worth and capacity for redemption? When the Epistle to the Hebrews says: ‘It is appointed to man once to die, and after this there awaits him krisis,’ we are not to understand with the old theology that the eternal salvation or woe of every one is decided immediately after death. As to the time of the final judgment, after death, the passage says nothing. Moreover, not only is the last judgment a crisis, but death also brings one in its own way. Of course the importance of the bodily life and the account to be given of it are taught in the New Testament. The passages quoted above, according to which the pious enter at once a better place, exclude a purgatory as a state of punishment or penance, but by no means exclude a growth in perfection and blessedness. Even the departed righteous are not entirely perfected before the resurrection, but their souls must still long for the dominion of Christ and the consummation of the kingdom of God. Thus there is yet a *status intermedius* even for believers, and not an immediate passage into perfect blessedness, whereby the value of the resurrection would be lost, which occurs only along with Christ’s second advent.<sup>382</sup>

Mention should also be made of the Danish theologian Hans Martensen, who also embraced Dorner’s view:

But here the old question returns, whether there be a *terminus peremptorius* for human conversion, *i.e.*, an utmost limit beyond which true repentance and

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<sup>382</sup> Dr. I. A. Dorner, *Dorner on the Future State: Being a Translation of the Section of his System of Christian Doctrine Comprising the Doctrine of the Last Things*, With an Introduction and Notes by Newman Smyth (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1883), 99–105.

conversion are no longer possible. But we dare not venture to fix this limit arbitrarily at any point within the course of time (*e.g.*, at the end of this life); but we are unconditionally compelled to fix it at the end of time and history; and this corresponds exactly with the idea of the final advent of the Lord. While time lasts conversion must be possible, for the Christian conception of time consists in this very thing, that it is a season of testing and grace; and so long as the sinner is in time he is the object of God's long-suffering.<sup>383</sup>

Interestingly, the Moravian theologian Augustus Schultze (1840-1918) also believed in evangelization after death. In his work on Christian doctrine, he states:

As to the *Heathen* and the many *nominal Christians* who depart this life without having gained a saving knowledge of Christ, we cannot believe, that the majority of all these die in a state of spiritual hardening and wickedness that would make their sin absolute and unpardonable. God 'would have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth' (I Tim. 2:4), and 'he is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him' (Acts 10:35). And yet 'in none other is there salvation, neither is there any other name under heaven, wherein we must be saved,' but the name of Jesus Christ. We have Christ's own promise, that the Gospel 'shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations' (Matt. 24:14), before the end comes. Does this not also include those in the world of departed spirits? It is admitted that the passages of Holy Scripture which may serve as proof-texts for this belief are few and of disputed application. However, they furnish sufficient ground for the hope that, before the judgment day, the salvation which is in Christ Jesus shall have been offered to all the *dead* as well as to all the *living*. Peter testifies: 'For unto this end was the gospel preached even to the dead, that they might be judged indeed according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit' (I Pet. 4:6). If Christ 'preached unto the spirits in prison, that

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<sup>383</sup> H. Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics: a Compendium of the Doctrines of Christianity*, trans. Rev. William Urwick, M.A. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874), 478.

aforetime were disobedient, when the long suffering of God waited in the days of Noah' (I Pet. 3:19), what hinders us to believe, that such preaching has been continued ever since, by the servants of Christ, to all those who have died before the joyful message of salvation reached them. For this means the great majority of the human race . . . . Some indeed consider this a dangerous doctrine, because they fear it might lessen the missionary zeal of saving the heathen, before they die and are lost, or because it admits a 'probation' or decision after death. They hold that the time of decision for all men must be in this life and that the heathen will be judged without reference to the Gospel, simply on the ground of their *works* and their *faithfulness*, with the light of knowledge which they had of God and of righteousness. (Rom. 2:6, 8, 'Who will render to every man according to his works: to them that by patience in well doing seek for glory and honor and incorruption, eternal life; but unto them that are factious and obey not the truth, but obey unrighteousness, shall be wrath and indignation.') But if the heathen could be saved without the gospel of Jesus Christ, his salvation, his suffering, death and resurrection would avail only for a small portion of humanity, instead of being the 'propitiation not for our sins only, but also for the *whole world*' (I John 2:2). Surely the declarations of Scripture, that men cannot be saved without faith in Christ and without his grace, are plain and emphatic (Acts 4:12; Mark 16:16, etc.) . . . . This fact does not conflict with the idea that the work of preparation for salvation ('prevenient grace') begins even with the heathen, in their earthly life and that the response to it marks the fundamental tendency of every man. In that sense, the decision is made here, without a knowledge of Christ: The heathen may have a saving faith and the grace of God working in him; only he needs to be brought to the light and to the personal knowledge of the Redeemer, before his faith can be perfected and his calling and salvation be made sure.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> Augustus Schultze, *Christian Doctrine and Systematic Theology* (Bethlehem, PA: Times Publishing Co., 1909), 238–240.

Under the heading “*Preparation outside of the Church*” Schultze says:

This class includes, besides the heathen, Mohammedans and other non-Christians, the millions of nominal Christians who, though born in a Christian country and perhaps baptized, grow up without the blessings of Christian precept and example. Such men often receive a *special* preparation for salvation by manifestations of divine help or of divine chastisement, which attract their attention. Certain experiences which they make, whether they be of a joyful or painful nature, awaken in them a longing for something better and higher than the natural life affords. Or they are furnished an opportunity to hear and read a testimony to the truth, by coming into contact with Christian men and women who can instruct them . . . . In some cases the *general* revelation of God, through nature, history and the inner voice of conscience, is employed to give men the preparation for the salvation to be offered to them. In other cases a direct testimony of revealed religion through a word of Scripture or of a Christian hymn which they hear, serves the purpose of making an impression or awakening an interest in spiritual matters.<sup>385</sup>

Concerning the gospel call, Schultze wrote:

Christ has promised that, before the close of this world-period, the Gospel shall have reached every tribe of men. As for those who died before the word of salvation in Christ could be proclaimed on earth, we may conclude from I Pet. 3:19 and 4:6, that this may have been done for them in the Spirit-world, and the same hope may be entertained with regard to the heathen who are now dying without having heard the Gospel.<sup>386</sup>

Likewise, the Lutheran Bishop Lars Nielsen Dahle (1843–1925) draws the same conclusion. On the basis of the fact that the New Testament speaks of people being

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 141.

judged due to their acceptance or rejection of Christ (cf. II Thess. 1:8), he says that, “the gospel, the message of salvation, testimony concerning Christ, must come to everyone before the final judgment can be passed upon him. If it does not reach him in this life, then we see no other conclusion than that it will come to him after death.”<sup>387</sup>

It is fitting to include here the response of the Presbyterian minister J. L. Withrow to the idea of a post-mortem probation. He wrote in an article rebutting this view:

Some while ago, when this hypothesis of the Gospel beyond the grave was theoretically limited to only the pagans, who had not rejected Christ, it seemed to us that a dead halt should be called to foreign missionary labors, if the theory as then presented were true. Because, at best, the faithful missionary knows how poorly he presents Christ. And taking the theory as it first came to us, the heathen were all saved, and sure of the Gospel in Hades, provided they had not rejected Jesus in this life. Then our thought was, that we should stop sending missionaries, lest they lead the pagan to reject Jesus here, and so lose them their opportunity over Jordan . . . . But since the theory has become so expanded, that no man ‘has the power or the right’ to say what measure of the knowledge of Christ misused in life will incur condemnation, there remains less reason for solicitude about the heathen, as also about anybody else. For, according to the latest and largest views of some teachers of this hypothesis, it is going to be *the very hardest thing in this universe for any soul to be lost*.<sup>388</sup>

His rejection of this view could not have been stated more forcefully.

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<sup>387</sup> Bishop Lars Neilsen Dahle, *Life After Death, and the Future of the Kingdom of God*, trans. Rev. John Beveridge, M.A. B.D. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1896), 187.

<sup>388</sup> J. L. Withrow, “Probation After Death,” *The Homiletic Review* vol. xi no. 6 (June, 1886): 469.



## The Modern Era

All of the views described above may be found among Lutherans living during the past century. Conservatives, such as Franz Pieper, hold to the traditional view that explicit faith in Christ is necessary for salvation during this lifetime. Pieper states this succinctly:

Not even the fact that not all nations on earth and not all individuals in any one nation have had the Gospel should move us to doubt the *gratia universalis et seria* which Scripture so clearly teaches. The judgments of God by which He punishes the rejection of the Gospel also in the descendants, are, as the Formula of Concord point out . . . , unsearchable. Rom. 11:33f.: ‘How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!’ In order to safeguard universal grace before the forum of human reason, some have thought that the heathen will be saved for Christ’s sake, without faith in the Gospel, merely on account of their moral striving . . . . Others have assumed that after this life an opportunity to hear the Gospel and to believe it will be offered . . . . But these are human speculations, without any foundation in Scripture. Scripture knows of no salvation for men without faith in the Gospel.<sup>389</sup>

Concerning Christ’s preaching the gospel to the dead (I Pet. 4:6), Pieper rejects the notion that “Christ preached salvation, or the Gospel, in hell either to all the godless,

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<sup>389</sup> Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:33. In the footnote to these comments, Pieper states: “Mark 16:15f.; John 3:16; etc. According to Scripture, the light of salvation comes to a country only with the preaching of the Gospel. Large Catechism: ‘For all outside of Christianity, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, although they believe in and worship only one true God, yet know not what His mind towards them is, and cannot expect any love or blessing from Him; therefore they abide in eternal wrath and damnation. For they have not the Lord Jesus Christ, and, besides, are not illumined and favored by any gifts of the Holy Ghost’ (*Trig.* 697, Large Catechism, Art. III, 66).”

as Marcion taught, or to the godless and the devils, as Origen taught, or at least to those who had no opportunity on earth to hear the Gospel.”<sup>390</sup>

Concerning natural revelation, and the need for the gospel, the conservative Lutheran Adolf Hoenecke states:

No matter how highly natural man may develop his knowledge of God, it is still never sufficient for him to attain eternal salvation. Despite all development, the heart of the natural man remains in total darkness as far as the knowledge of God in regard to eternal salvation (Eph. 4:18). Therefore, man is without God and without hope in this life (Eph. 2:2) [sic, he most certainly intended Eph. 2:12]. His works cannot justify him (Gal. 3:11), and the natural knowledge of God does not reveal any way to eternal salvation other than the way of works. Thus, the natural knowledge of God cannot help man attain eternal salvation. This fact is demonstrated by God directing that the saving gospel be preached to all people (Mk. 16:15; Ro 10:18; Mt 28:19). This command is the realization of his will to impart the knowledge of the truth necessary for salvation (Jn. 17:3; I Ti 2:4; cf. v. 7). God certainly would not have the gospel spread if the natural knowledge of God were sufficient to attain eternal life . . . . We dare not conclude that since the natural knowledge of God is insufficient for eternal salvation, that it, therefore, has no divine purpose at all. Rather, its very important divine purpose is to guide mankind to seek the true God (Ac 17:27). This is also referred to as the pedagogical purpose.<sup>391</sup>

After discussing the Scripture passages relevant to the matter of a probation after death, Hoenecke states: “All of the Scripture passages just treated, especially Hebrews 3:17–19, also condemn the teaching that salvation is offered again to the unconverted in

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 2:316.

<sup>391</sup> Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 2:11–12.

an intermediate condition after death.”<sup>392</sup> Though he does not believe that natural revelation is sufficient for salvation, he does see it has having a “pedagogical purpose” in that it can “guide mankind to seek the true God.” Concerning this role of natural revelation, Hoenecke further states: “In the stirring of the conscience, in the consideration of the universe, in the contemplation of the blessings and wisdom of God in his rule of the world, there can be a call to inquire about God (Ro 1:20; 2:14, 15; Ac 17:27) . . . . Through this kind of call, an obscure longing for the true salvation can be inspired but no more.”<sup>393</sup>

Joseph Stump (President of Northwestern Lutheran Theological Seminary in Minneapolis, 1920–1935) also represents a conservative Lutheran position:

The necessity of the means of grace is . . . evident. Take them away, and we know of no means through which God’s thoughts can be communicated from His mind to ours. Language, which is the communication of minds with one another through signs, is the one avenue of approach by one person to another; it is the one means of persuading another. Hence if men neglect the Word and the Sacraments, they close up the only avenue of approach to themselves. And if the Church fails to send the Word and Sacraments to heathen lands, it deprives the heathen of the only means known to us through which the Holy Spirit can work in them that ethical transformation whose essence is faith in Christ . . . . That God might in some way, purely spiritual, communicate His truth to men’s minds may be acknowledged, since He doubtless has some way of communicating with angels, who are pure spirits, and doubtless has some way of communicating with the sainted dead before the resurrection of their bodies. But in this world God chooses to convey His truth to men by those very means which men use in communicating with one another. He uses signs which represent conceptions and

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 3:248.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 3:229.

thoughts, and brings them home to men's minds without the use of the Means of Grace is not here the question. The fact is that He uses those means, and that we not only have no assurance that if they are neglected He will communicate His truth to any man directly, but we are told that without the Means of Grace the Holy Spirit will not produce His saving effects in the heart. We are bound to the Word and the Sacraments. God's gracious will is recorded in His Word and set forth in the Sacraments, and apart from them there is no saving knowledge of the truth and no saving work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>394</sup>

Note further his following statements. "So far as the plan of God is made known to us in His revelation, the salvation of men is completely dependent on the preaching of the Gospel. The measure, therefore, in which the Church lives up to the command of Christ to preach the Gospel to every creature is the measure of men's opportunity for salvation. For how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent? (Rom. 10:14, 15)"<sup>395</sup> He furthermore states: "Membership in the Church is necessary to salvation; and if the membership be enduring, it gives certainty of salvation. For to be a member of the Church means to be a believer in Christ; and to believe in Christ means to be saved. The membership here referred to is not that of an outward organization but of the spiritual fellowship of believers."<sup>396</sup>

In another place, he writes:

It is God's will that the Gospel shall actually reach every individual. He has laid upon the Church the obligation to make the call universal in the actual sense. She is to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. But only to the

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<sup>394</sup> Stump, *The Christian Faith*, 295–296.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 303–4.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

extent to which the Church performs her evangelistic duty will the call reach every individual of the race . . . . Why some nations and individuals are favored above others by the possession of the Gospel is a question which we cannot answer. But the fact that we are favored with the Gospel should be an incentive to do our utmost to bring the call to all men everywhere.<sup>397</sup>

Stump clearly emphasizes the indispensable nature of the human proclamation of the gospel.

Concerning the matter of the universality of the gospel proclamation, Stump offers the following observation:

Some of the old dogmaticians maintained the actual universality of the call on the basis of its supposed universality in Adam and Noah, and in the apostles' preaching of the Gospel. But the apostles did not actually present their message to every individual, nor penetrate to all parts of the whole world. And while the descendants of Adam and Noah failed by reason of sin to receive the call given through their ancestor, that does not alter the fact that many of those descendants actually lived and died in utter ignorance of God's gracious plan of redemption. To say that a man has actually received the call, when he has in fact never heard a word of the Gospel, is not a correct statement of the case.<sup>398</sup>

Regarding the possibility of a post-mortem probation, Stump states:

Another objection that is urged is that the lost might repent in hell if they had the opportunity, and that they will have the opportunity. Then, when they have repented, they will escape from hell. But how will they repent in hell? In this world men are brought to repentance by the grace of God, and not simply by experiencing the consequences of sin. And if in this world the grace of God has labored with men in vain, the same grace would fail to save them in the world to

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 241.

come. It will not be offered. But if it were, it would be rejected by the same obduracy which rejected it here.<sup>399</sup>

Other Lutherans, nonetheless, embrace broader views. Carl E. Braaten (1929-2023) was an influential American Lutheran theologian. Braaten did not believe there is salvation apart from Christ: “On the basis of salvation through ‘Christ alone’ and justification by ‘faith alone’, Lutheran theology has no certain grounds for teaching that the religions as such are ways of salvation and that people are saved through whatever the religion into which they happen to be born. Outside of Christ and apart from the preaching of the gospel, there are no known historical alternatives that may be theologically accepted as divinely authorized means of salvation.”<sup>400</sup> However, he does state: “Can we not conclude . . . that there are preparations for the Christian gospel in certain historical forms of religion, even though they might fall short of the full revelation of God in the personal sacrifice and cross of Jesus Christ? . . . Perhaps we can say about these religions of grace what Jesus said to the scribe in Mark 12:34: ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’”<sup>401</sup> He cites Paul Althaus in agreement concerning the necessity of faith in Christ: “Outside of Christ there is indeed a self-manifestation of God, and therefore knowledge of God, but it does not lead to salvation, to union between God and humankind.”<sup>402</sup> Though Braaten believes that there may be preparations for the gospel even in other religions, he holds firmly that salvation comes only through faith in Christ.

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 419.

<sup>400</sup> Carl E. Braaten, “Lutheran Theology and Religious Pluralism,” *Lutheran World Federation Report* 23/24 (Jan. 1988), 122.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 118.

It is partly because of his belief in the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation that Braaten believes that there must be an opportunity to believe in Christ after death:

“(I)nsofar as we confess Christ’s descent to hades as the realm of the dead, we are claiming that his work of salvation is universal and reaches beyond the limits of those who preach and hear the gospel in this life. Nations and generations of people who lived before the coming of Christ and who have never been confronted with the preaching of salvation in his name are not eternally lost. Christ goes even to the dead, so that he might be acclaimed the Lord of the living and the dead.”<sup>403</sup> Furthermore, Braaten holds out the hope that all people might one day be reconciled to God through Christ:

We would teach a highly nuanced and qualified evangelical Christocentric universal hope. It is not a dogma, not a piece of knowledge, not something to which humans have a right and a claim. Yet, it is something for which we may cautiously and distinctly pray and hope, that in spite of everything that seems to point conclusively in the opposite direction, God’s mercy will not cast off his world forever . . . . This does not lead to a dogmatic universalism. But it does mean that we leave open the possibility that within the power of God’s freedom and love, all people may indeed be saved in the end.<sup>404</sup>

Lutheran theologian George A. Lindbeck (1923–2018) held similar views:

We have noted that a part (sic) generation of dogmaticians such as Haring, Schlatter, R. Seeber, and, most recently, Althaus, basing themselves on such possible hints as I Pt. 3:19, broke through the limits of the old Protestant orthodoxy by no longer confining saving revelation to this life . . . . The final die is cast beyond our space and time, beyond empirical observation, beyond all idle

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<sup>403</sup> *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 volumes, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1:549.

<sup>404</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 137–138.

speculation about ‘good’ or ‘bad’ deaths, when a person loses his rootage in this world and passes into the inexpressible transcendence surpassing all words, images, and thoughts. We must trust and hope, though not know, that in this dreadful yet wondrous end and climax of life no one will be lost . . . . It is possible to be hopeful and trusting about the ultimate salvation of non-Christians no less than Christians even if one does not think of justifying grace as already at work apart from explicit faith.<sup>405</sup>

Wolfhart Pannenberg also voiced sympathy for this view:

It has often been asked: if God was revealed in Jesus for the first time, and if salvation for mankind only appeared in Jesus, what is to happen to the multitude who lived before Jesus’ ministry? And what will become of the many who never came into contact with the Christian message? What, finally, is to happen to the people who have certainly heard the message of Christ but who—perhaps through the fault of those very Christians who have been charged with its proclamation—have never come face to face with its truth? Are all these people delivered over to damnation? Do they remain shut out for ever from the presence of God which has been made accessible to mankind through Jesus? . . . The Christian faith can say ‘no’ to this urgent question. That is the meaning of the phrase about Christ’s descent into hell in the creed. We do not know whether it is the meaning intended by the men who included the formula in the creed. But it does in any event contain this meaning in the light of its New Testament origin: what took place for mankind in Jesus also applies to the people who either never came into contact with Jesus and the message about him, or who have never really caught sight of the truth of his person and his story. In a way that is hidden from us—and in a way hidden even from themselves—the lives of these people may yet be related to the revelation of God which appeared in Jesus . . . . We have, it is true, no guarantee of their salvation. Salvation is only guaranteed to the man who has definite communion with Jesus—and who has through this communion the hope

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<sup>405</sup> George A. Lindbeck, “*Fides ex auditu*,” 114–115.



of overcoming death with Jesus. But all other men, too, even those who died before Jesus' ministry, can achieve the salvation which appeared in him—even if in ways which are beyond our comprehension. The meaning of the Christian acknowledgment of the conquest of the kingdom of death and Jesus Christ's descent into hell lies in the universal scope of salvation.<sup>406</sup>

Though there were some among the Lutherans who espoused views on the unevangelized similar to that held by the Arminians (that they might be saved through their response to natural revelation), many Lutherans held fast to the conviction that explicit faith in Christ is necessary for salvation. Nonetheless, there were quite a number among these who believed that the opportunity for faith in Christ is not limited to this life.<sup>407</sup> And there are some who hold out the hope that all people may eventually come to faith in Christ, and thus to salvation.

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<sup>406</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 94–95.

<sup>407</sup> See the articles by Theodore Engelder, refuting the idea of a post-mortem opportunity for salvation, cited in note 376 above.



## Chapter 6

### *A Middle Knowledge Perspective*

A perspective on the unevangelized which does not fit neatly within one of the previous mentioned categories is that of middle knowledge. Belief in middle knowledge is sometimes called “Molinism,” due to the fact that it was articulated by the Jesuit, Luis de Molina (1535–1600). It was Molina’s contention that God knows not only everything that does or will happen, but also what any of his creatures *would* do in any given circumstance.<sup>408</sup> He thus is able to arrange human history in such a way that his purposes are fulfilled without violating human free will.

In his discussion of the middle knowledge perspective, Terrance Tiessen identifies two distinct approaches by adherents of this view to the problem of the unevangelized.<sup>409</sup> The first is the view proposed by Donald Lake, that “God knows who would, under ideal circumstances, believe the gospel, and on the basis of his foreknowledge, applies that gospel even if the person never hears the gospel during his lifetime.”<sup>410</sup> Tiessen also quotes Brethren evangelist George Goodman, who asks: “What if an omniscient God, seeing that (the unevangelized) take a true attitude to the light they have, is able to see that had the Greater Light, the True Light, been given to them, they would have rejoiced in the light?”

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<sup>408</sup> See “Molinism,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/molism> 1 December, 2020. (Accessed December 14, 2020.)

<sup>409</sup> I am relying in part on the discussion found in Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 158-63.

<sup>410</sup> Donald M. Lake, “He Died for All: The Universal Dimensions of the Atonement,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 43.

Does the fact that the light never reached them prevent the outflow of His grace to them?”<sup>411</sup>

A second approach is that of William Lane Craig, who summarizes his view in these words: “God in his providence so arranged the world that those who never in fact hear the gospel are persons who would not respond to it if they did hear it. God brings the gospel to all those who he knows will respond to it if they hear it.”<sup>412</sup> Craig expands on his view in another place:

Since Christ is God’s unique expiatory sacrifice for sin, salvation is only through Christ. Since Jesus and his work are historical in character, many persons as a result of historical and geographical accident will not be sufficiently well-informed concerning him and thus unable to respond to him in faith. Such persons who are not sufficiently well-informed about Christ’s person and work will be judged on the basis of their response to general revelation and the light that they do have. Perhaps some will be saved through such a response; but on the basis of Scripture we must say that such ‘anonymous Christians’ are relatively rare. Those who are judged and condemned on the basis of their failure to respond to the light of general revelation cannot legitimately complain of unfairness for their not also receiving the light of special revelation, since such persons would not have responded to special revelation had they received it. For God in His providence has so arranged the world that anyone who would receive Christ has the opportunity to do so. Since God loves all persons and desires the salvation of all, He supplies sufficient grace for salvation to every individual, and nobody who would receive Christ if he were to hear the gospel will be denied that opportunity.<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Quoted by J. Oswald Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?*, 62.

<sup>412</sup> William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1987), 150-51.

<sup>413</sup> William Lane Craig, “‘No other Name’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ,” *Faith and Philosophy* 6.2 (April 1989), 186.

He also states: “(I)t is our duty to proclaim the gospel to the whole world, trusting that God has so providentially ordered things that through us the good news will be brought to persons who God knew would respond if they heard it.”<sup>414</sup> In a sense, Craig seeks to reconcile both the Calvinist and Arminian approaches to the issues of divine sovereignty and free will, and to the problem of the unevangelized.

Tiessen objects to the view proposed by Lake and Goodman by noting that: “it requires no faith at all.” He thinks “that a synergist who wishes to appeal to middle knowledge would do better to posit that this group of the elect would have some form of faith proportional to the revelation they received.”<sup>415</sup>

He finds the fundamental problem with these proposals, however, in the fact that “knowing future counterfactuals of libertarian human freedom is impossible *for anyone*, including God.”<sup>416</sup> He contends that middle knowledge is only possible if people have “compatibilist freedom.” He states: “Only if some form of determinism is correct can God know what a person *would* do in a situation that never actually occurs, because he not only knows the situational factors completely, but he also knows the person so completely that her action is predictable . . . . It is because God know us so thoroughly in our inner being, what Scripture calls the ‘heart,’ that he can know what a person would do in a given situation. Within the context of God’s sovereign and unconditional elective grace, God chooses those to whom he gives faith. So the concept of his simply

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 186. William Hasker has attempted to rebut Craig’s case in his article “Middle Knowledge and the Damnation of the Heathen: A Response to William Craig,” *Faith and Philosophy* 8.3 (July 1991), 380–389. Hasker’s rebuttal is essentially based on his belief that God does not possess middle knowledge.

<sup>415</sup> Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 162.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 162-3.

foreknowing who *would not* believe is not useful to the discussion of the unevangelized; it does not make salvation more accessible.”<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 163.

## Chapter 7

### *Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Developments*

The discussion concerning the spiritual status of the unevangelized described in the previous pages continued unabated during the past century, in every wing of the Christian church. Not only in the Roman Catholic Church, but also among Protestants, the question of whether explicit faith in Christ is necessary for salvation has been thoroughly debated. This has been true both in the mainline Protestant denominations, as well as among evangelical groups.

The fact that Protestant Christians held divergent views regarding the status of the unevangelized became more and more evident through the series of conferences, beginning with the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910.<sup>418</sup> At this conference, though there was a strong emphasis on the continuity between Christian faith and other faiths, and on Christianity being a “fulfillment” of non-Christian religions, nonetheless, the uniqueness of Christianity was clearly expressed: “Christianity claims to be, for all ages and peoples, the all sufficient and the only sufficient religion. A moral obligation attaches itself to such a claim. If Christianity be the only sufficient religion for all the world, it should be given to all the world. Christ’s command also lays upon the Church an obligation for nothing less than a world-wide promulgation of the gospel.”<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> In this section I have been guided in great part by Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*: chapter 16.

<sup>419</sup> *World Missionary Conference, 1910, Report of Commission IV: The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions*. (New York: Revell, 1910), 268. Quoted in Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*, 153.

At the meeting of the International Missionary Council (IMC) in Jerusalem in 1928, Veli-Matti Karkkainen states that “(A) rift began to develop between the Continental thinking, which tended to be more conservative, and the American position, which tended to focus on the continuity between religions. The Continental view was influenced by the dialectical theology of Karl Barth and the conservative voice of Heindrick Kraemer (1888–1965) and others.”<sup>420</sup>

At the next meeting of the IMC in Tambaram, near Madras, in 1938, the split between these two groups became even more evident.

Two differing, even conflicting voices were heard. On the one hand, there was an openness to other religions as expressed in *Rethinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry*, a study conducted by the leading American pluralist William Ernest Hocking (1873–1966). On the other hand, there was the influential exclusivist voice of Kraemer, who criticized the conciliar mission thinking for its tendency toward syncretism and who issued a powerful call to reacknowledge the uniqueness of Christ.<sup>421</sup>

From this point on, the ecumenical movement has focused on the necessity for dialog between Christians and non-Christians, and on the continuities between Christianity and other faiths.<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*, 154. See Hendrik Kraemer, *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids: Published by Kregel Publications for the International Missionary Council, 1956; originally published 1938); Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957).

<sup>421</sup> Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*, 154. See William Ernest Hocking, *Rethinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after one hundred years, by the Commission of Appraisal*, William Ernest Hocking, Chairman (New York & London: Harper Bros., 1932); William Ernest Hocking, *Living Religions and a World Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1940).

<sup>422</sup> Perhaps the most influential writer among those espousing “religious pluralism” is John Hick. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); John Hick, *A Christian*



A full history of the developments over the latter half of the twentieth century is beyond the scope of this work. However, the statement by Karkkainen, at the conclusion of his survey of the attitudes of various Christian groups regarding non-Christian religions and the possibility of salvation outside the church, is worth noting:

What the survey clearly showed is that there is a bifurcation among Christian churches regarding the relation to other religions. An inclusivist view is by far the most widely held, ranging from Roman Catholics to Anglicans to mainline Protestants. Even with different nuances all the ‘mainline’ churches basically believe that while Christ is the theological norm as well as source of salvation, access to salvation is not limited to those who confess the name of Christ. Yet the church is to proclaim Christ as the Savior. The other main understanding among Christian churches is some kind of exclusivist interpretation that emphasizes the need for evangelization and mission in order to bring the people into saving faith. In fact, though this voice is heard much less in scholarly circles, the number of Christians adhering to this traditional view is surprisingly large in view of the fact that with the shift of Christianity to the southern hemisphere, the growth of Christianity is happening mainly in conservative churches. Interestingly, numerically there are two giants among ecclesiastical opinions: the Roman Catholic Church’s inclusivism and the quite exclusivistic stance held by evangelical, Pentecostal/Charismatic and (other) independent churches. Pluralism governs the academy, but in the pews these two other views predominate.<sup>423</sup>

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*Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*, (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995). It is Hick’s thesis that religions are human responses to the universal experience of the “transcendent.”

<sup>423</sup> Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*, 160. See Part Three of Karkkainen’s book (pp. 109–161) for a helpful overview of the history of approaches to this question among all the different ecclesiastical groups in the twentieth century: Roman Catholic, Anglican and Episcopalian, Mainline Protestant, Free Churches, Evangelical Churches, and the Ecumenical Movement.

A few statements representative of the views of the mainline denominations will give some perspective on this summary statement. Anglican theologian Peter Slater describes his perception of the prevailing attitude in his communion:

From our perspective, continuing the Jesus movement is the ordinary way ‘home.’ But *this does not preclude others having saving knowledge engendering ways which to us seem extraordinary. A ‘christomorphic’—as contrasted with a ‘christocentric’—sense of mission invites us to celebrate deeds done in a Christlike spirit, wherever and whenever we encounter them.* We do not use our traditions to build a fence around but to provide guidelines for discerning the disclosure of enlivening truth (italics in original).<sup>424</sup>

A similar statement appears in a document published by the General Synod of the Church of England: “We believe that God has chosen to provide the fullest revelation of himself in Christ, and the fullest revelation of his love for all humanity in the cross and resurrection. Hence we naturally pray that God will bring all people, including those of other faiths, to explicit faith in Christ and membership of his Church. This is not because we believe that the God revealed in Christ is unable to save them without this, but because Christ is the truest and fullest expression of his love, and we long for them to share it.”<sup>425</sup>

The “Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue” of the Presbyterian Church (USA) includes the following statements: “In our pluralistic world, we confess that Jesus

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<sup>424</sup> Peter Slater, “An Anglican Perspective on Our Interreligious Situation,” in *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. S. Mark Heim. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 152. Quoted in Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*, 122. (Italics in original.)

<sup>425</sup> *The Mystery of Salvation—The Story of God’s Gift: A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1995), 184.

is the truth and the way; through him God gives life. Jesus does not point to truth, but is the truth, in his person . . . . God's Spirit works in surprising places throughout creation and is found even among people who are unaware of the Spirit's presence . . . . We are called to work with others in our pluralistic societies for the well-being of our world and for justice, peace, and the sustainability of creation."<sup>426</sup> Concerning the possibility of salvation outside the church, Question 49 of the Study Catechism of the Presbyterian Church (USA) states: "The limits to salvation, whatever they may be, are known only to God. Three truths above all are certain. God is a holy God who is not to be trifled with. No one will be saved except by grace alone. And no judge could possibly be more gracious than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."<sup>427</sup>

Nehemiah Thompson characterizes the mainline Methodist perspective in this statement:

The realm of grace reaches to all people in all religions. This understanding has come to Christians because of Jesus Christ. Religions, including Christian faith, are preparations to receiving the gospel, and the partial light that exists in all religions is a sign of God's prevenient grace. This understanding must impel Methodist Christians to engage in dialogue with other faiths in order to determine how those lights in other faiths are significant, first, to the salvation of the adherents of those faiths, and secondly, to the full understanding of the gospel that has come to Christians through Jesus Christ.<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue (August 2003) <http://www.pcusa.org/pcusa/wmd/eir/principlesb.htm> Quoted in Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*, 130–131.

<sup>427</sup> The Study Catechism (August 2003) <http://www.pcusa.org/catech/studycat.htm> Quoted in Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*, 131.

<sup>428</sup> Nehemiah Thompson, "The Search for a Methodist Theology of Religious Pluralism," in *Grounds for Understanding Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. S. Mark Heim (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 93. Quoted in Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*, 133.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has for many years promoted an inclusivist view of soteriology. Karkkainen quotes the WCC “Statement on Religious Plurality” (1991): “We find ourselves recognizing a need to move beyond a theology which confines salvation to the explicit personal commitment to Jesus Christ.”<sup>429</sup> Karkkainen states: “(T)he most recent WCC affirmations concerning other religions are very close to the official standpoint of the Roman Catholic Church.”<sup>430</sup>

The evangelical movement has been associated with belief in the necessity of explicit faith in Christ for salvation. This was reflected in the Frankfurt Declaration of 1970, drafted primarily by German theologian, Peter Beyerhaus. It reads in part:

The offer of salvation in Christ is directed without exception to all men who are not yet bound to him in conscious faith. The adherents to the nonchristian (sic) religions and world views can receive this salvation only through participation in faith. They must let themselves be freed from their former ties and false hopes in order to be admitted by belief and baptism into the body of Christ. Israel, too, will find salvation in turning to Jesus Christ . . . . *We therefore reject* the false teaching that the nonchristian religions and world views are also ways of salvation similar to belief in Christ.<sup>431</sup>

A similar view was also expressed in the document drafted by the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne in 1974:

We affirm that there is only one Savior and only one gospel, although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognize that everyone has some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for people suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as

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<sup>429</sup> Quoted in Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*, 159.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>431</sup> *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, ed. John H. Leith, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 689.

derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and people. There is no other name by which we must be saved. All men and women are perishing because of sin, but God loves everyone, not wishing that any should perish but that all should repent. Yet those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God. To proclaim Jesus as ‘Savior of the world’ is not to affirm that all people are either automatically or ultimately saved, still less to affirm that all religions offer salvation in Christ. Rather it is to proclaim God’s love for a world of sinners and to invite everyone to respond to him as Savior and Lord in the wholehearted personal commitment of repentance and faith. Jesus Christ has been exalted above every other name; we long for the day when every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess him Lord.<sup>432</sup>

In 1989, at Lausanne II in Manila, a Manifesto was issued which included this affirmation: “We affirm that other religions and ideologies are not alternative paths to God, and that human spirituality, if unredeemed by Christ, leads not to God but to judgment, for Christ is the only way.”<sup>433</sup> The same sentiment was voiced in the Cape Town Commitment arising out of Lausanne III in 2010: “Solely through trusting in Christ alone, we are united with Christ through the Holy Spirit and are counted righteous in Christ before God.”<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> From “Lausanne Congress, 1974,” *Mission Trends No. 2: Evangelization*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist, 1975), 239–248. Quoted in Karkkainen, *A Theology of Religions*, 146.

<sup>433</sup> <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/manilamanifesto.htm> Affirmation no. 7. (Accessed October 27, 2020.)

<sup>434</sup> <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/ctcommitment.htm> Part I, 8. C. (Accessed October 27, 2020.)

Of interest regarding the views of evangelicals on this subject is the D.Miss. project presented to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School by Allen C. Tunberg in 1992. His project surveyed the views of church leaders within the Evangelical Free Church of America. Tunberg's survey revealed that while over 90% of the respondents personally embraced a particularist view, nearly 20% were at least open to ordaining persons for ministry in their denomination who believed that general revelation could be an avenue for saving faith for those who do not know of Christ.<sup>435</sup>

In 1992 a group of theologians under the sponsorship of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship met in Manila. They issued a proclamation which affirmed the uniqueness of Christ and his salvation: “(W)e affirm that God has acted decisively, supremely, and normatively in the historic Jesus of Nazareth. In his person and work, Jesus is unique such that no one comes to the Father except through him. All salvation in the biblical sense of eternal life, life in the kingdom, reconciliation with God and forgiveness of sins comes solely from the person and work of Jesus Christ.”<sup>436</sup> However, the proclamation also contains this statement regarding the possible salvation of the unevangelized: “Is it possible that others also might find salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ although they do not consciously know the name of Jesus? We did not achieve a consensus on how to answer this question. More study is needed.”<sup>437</sup> As can be seen, there is ongoing debate among contemporary

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<sup>435</sup> Allen C. Tunberg, *The Destiny of Those who are Uninformed About Christ: An Identification of Contemporary Views With Reference To The Doctrinal Standards of the Evangelical Free Church of America*. D.Miss. Project presented to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield IL, 1992), 239–248.

<sup>436</sup> From “The WEF Manila Declaration,” in *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralist World*, ed. Bruce J. Nicholls. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 14.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 15.

evangelicals on this question. It is the same question that evangelicals have been debating since the Reformation, and to which they have given diverse answers.

### Recent Particularists

This debate is reflected in the statements of a large number of evangelical writers who have published books or articles in recent times on the fate of the unevangelized. Some have espoused the particularist perspective (which sees explicit faith in Christ as necessary for salvation).<sup>438</sup> Following are some representative statements by particularist writers.

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<sup>438</sup> Among the many who have written in favor of the particularist viewpoint, the following may be mentioned: Henry W. Frost, *The Spiritual Condition of the Heathen* (Philadelphia: China Inland Mission, 1938); Richard Wolff, *The Final Destiny Of The Heathen* (Lincoln NE: Back to the Bible, 1961); J. Oswald Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972); Dick Dowsett, *Is God Really Fair?* (Chicago: Moody, 1982); R. C. Sproul, *Reasons to Believe*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Ramesh Richard, *The Population of Heaven: A Biblical Response to the Inclusivist Position on Who Will Be Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 1994); Ronald Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Douglas R. Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, "A Particularist View: An Evidential Approach," in *More Than One Way: Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Ockholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 211–245, 259–270; D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Paul R. House and Gregory A. Thornbury, eds., *Who Will Be Saved? Defending the Biblical Understanding of God, Salvation, & Evangelism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000); Chris Wright, *The Uniqueness of Christ* (London & Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2001); Ajith Fernando, *Sharing the Truth in Love: How to Relate to People of Other Faiths* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2001); Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelized: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology*, Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002); Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Faith Comes By Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008); John Piper, *Jesus—The Only Way To God: Must You Hear the Gospel to Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010). Veli-Matti Karkkainen lists the following as exclusivists who leave room for the possibility that some may be saved without explicit knowledge of Christ: John Stott, *The Authentic Jesus* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1985); J. I. Packer, "Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation," in *Evangelical Affirmations*, eds. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry

Henry W. Frost, former Director of the China Inland Mission:

The Rev. J. Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission and for many years a missionary in China, made the declaration toward the end of his life that he would never have thought of going to China had he not been convinced that the Chinese were lost and that they needed Christ . . . . But times have changed. Now, comparatively few persons believe that the heathen are lost or that they need Christ as a Saviour. And the result is that there is a general apathy in the church concerning those in heathendom, in offering prayer, in giving money, and in going forth as preachers of the Gospel . . . . The Word declares that sin has passed upon all men, including the heathen, and in consequence, that they are estranged from God and lost; that Christ has commanded that the Gospel should be preached to them as to those who are in need of being saved; that the apostles and early disciples went forth throughout the heathen world proclaiming that there was but one way of salvation, which was by a faith exercised during the present life and in the person of Christ; and finally, that we are to believe as our forefathers believed, to go forth as they went forth, and to preach as they preached.<sup>439</sup>

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(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 121–123; Klaas Runia, “The Gospel and Religious Pluralism,” in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 (October 1990): 341–379; William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, eds., *Through No Fault of Their Own: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991); Alister McGrath, “A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach,” in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995); Daniel B. Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords: Christianity Encounters World Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); Christopher R. Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized: An Evangelical Appraisal and Missiological Contribution to the Debate* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000); David F. Wells, Peter R. Jones, Richard D. Phillips, Philip G. Ryken, J. Ligon Duncan III, D. A. Carson all contributed to the book *Only One Way? Reaffirming the Exclusive Truth Claims of Christianity*, ed. Richard Phillips. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006); and possibly, Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved? The Destiny of Those Who Do Not Hear of Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

<sup>439</sup> Henry W. Frost, *The Spiritual Condition of the Heathen*, 3–4, 18.



Richard Wolff (speaker on the French program of the Back to the Bible

Broadcast):

The Gentiles, or heathen, are in darkness and under the power of Satan; they are without a vital knowledge of the truth, and although they may not be aware of it, their religion is actually demon worship. Their basic preoccupation is with material things and they are dominated by passions and lusts. They are without Christ, without hope and without God, walking in the vanity of their mind, their understanding darkened and their hearts hardened. It is hardly necessary to remark that according to Scripture such people are lost. The heathen are lost. The verses quoted do not refer exclusively to those who had heard the message of Jesus Christ and rejected it, but also to those heathen who had never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is, therefore, the explicit teaching of the Word of God that those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ are lost.<sup>440</sup>

Former director of the China Inland Mission, J. Oswald Sanders:

There is not a single Scripture which clearly assures us that the atonement of Christ can be made efficacious for the person left in ignorance of it.<sup>441</sup>

Ajith Fernando, Bible teacher and former national director of Youth For Christ in Sri Lanka:

The Bible does not make any clear statement about exceptional persons to whom God speaks directly and gives salvation without their hearing the gospel. This principle can be derived only from hints and questionable examples in Scripture. If God wants to save people without their hearing the gospel, I am not going to protest! Certainly God can directly do in a person what He does through an evangelist. But from what the Bible says, we do not have sufficient grounds to entertain a hope of salvation for anyone apart from hearing the gospel. We know

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<sup>440</sup> Richard Wolff, *The Final Destiny of The Heathen*, 18–19.

<sup>441</sup> J. Oswald Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?*, 61–62.

that most people in the world do not seek after God as Cornelius did. We have no convincing evidence to expect that the few Cornelius-type seekers in the world can be saved apart from hearing the gospel. God would have us regard all people everywhere as lost and desperately in need of the message of the gospel.<sup>442</sup>

R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips:

In our view, Christianity is uniquely true, and explicit faith in Jesus Christ is a necessary condition for salvation . . . . If particularism is true, then pluralism and inclusivism offer dangerously misleading assessments of the human condition and of the prospects for resolving the human predicament.<sup>443</sup>

Christian theologian and philosopher Ronald H. Nash:

Saul, I submit, passed every test of inclusivist salvation. He satisfied Clark Pinnock's faith principle with plenty to spare. Not only did Saul believe that God existed, but he was also diligently seeking him. In fact, he sought Yahweh with such diligence that he participated in the persecution and execution of Yahweh's enemies (Acts 22:20) . . . . It is appropriate to reread Paul's own description of his preconversion zeal for God (Acts 26:4–5; Phi. 3:4–6). If inclusivism is true, then Saul the Pharisee was saved. But this judgment was not shared by the divinely inspired writer Paul the apostle (Phi. 3:7–11). Even though Saul satisfied every requirement of inclusivist salvation, he was still a lost sinner (I Tim 1:15).<sup>444</sup>

New Testament scholar Andreas J. Kostenberger:

For people to 'cross over from death to life' (Jn 5:24), they have to believe in Jesus and his word. The world without Christ is a dark place, and people are lost

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<sup>442</sup> Ajith Fernando, *Sharing the Truth in Love*, 227.

<sup>443</sup> Geivett and Phillips, "A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach," in Ockholm and Phillips, eds., *More Than One Way*, 243, 245.

<sup>444</sup> Ronald H. Nash, "Restrictivism," in Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 138–139.

without him (Jn 3:19–21). For this reason, ‘Those who believe in the Son have eternal life, but those who reject the Son will not see life, for *God’s wrath remains on them*’ (Jn. 3:36). Thus there is no ‘third way’ for people: either they believe and are saved, or God’s wrath remains on them. This is precisely why the gospel, and it alone, is such good news, because, without it, people are lost in their sin and doomed to hell.<sup>445</sup>

Pastor John Piper:

Paul and John are of one mind: people only come to saving faith through the word of the gospel of Christ. The sheep hear the voice of their Shepherd through the word of those who are sent (John 10:4; 17:20); and Paul knows himself to be sent in this way: ‘I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins’ (Acts 26:17–18). Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, who works through the word of the gospel of Christ (1 Peter 1:23–25), there is no faith and no new birth and no salvation. This is why ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations’ (Luke 24:47).<sup>446</sup>

### Recent Inclusivists

Other writers of this era have embraced the inclusivist perspective (which allows for the possibility of salvation apart from explicit faith in Christ for those who have not had a genuine opportunity to hear the gospel).<sup>447</sup> Following are representative comments by some of these writers.

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<sup>445</sup> Andreas J. Kostenberger, “The Gospel for All Nations,” in *Faith Comes By Hearing*, eds. Morgan and Peterson, 206.

<sup>446</sup> John Piper, *Jesus—The Only Way To God*, 115–116.

<sup>447</sup> Among those who have embraced an inclusivist perspective, the following should be mentioned: C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 65, 176; C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 102; C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis. (New York: Harcourt

Though Roman Catholics, Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli are widely read by evangelicals. They stated:

Socrates (or any other pagan) could seek God, could repent of his sins, and could obscurely believe in and accept the god he knew partially and be saved.<sup>448</sup>

C. S. Lewis, in commenting on the eighteenth of the Articles of the Church of England:

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Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 247; C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*. (New York: Collier Books, 1956), 164–165; Joseph M. Ferrante, “The Final Destiny of Those Who Have Not Heard the Gospel,” *Trinity Studies* 1.1 (Fall 1971), 55–62; Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity and Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1979), 253–257; Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 57–77; Molly Truman Marshall, *No Salvation Outside the Church? A Critical Inquiry*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, (Louisville KY, 1983); Sir Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism*. (Leicester UK, Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), ch. 5; Stuart C. Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim: A Philosophical and Critical Apology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 242–246; William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 220–223; Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness: The good news in a world of suffering and disorder* (London: SPCK, 1990), ch. 4–5; Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996); John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation Into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992); John Sanders, “Inclusivism,” in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 21–55; Stanley J. Grenz, “Toward an Evangelical Theology of the Religions,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 31.1–2 (Winter–Spring 1994), 49–65; Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2000), ch. 8; Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004); Neal Punt, *A Theology of Inclusivism* (Allendale MI: Northland Books, 2008); Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003).

<sup>448</sup> Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 328.

(O)f course it should be pointed out that, though all salvation is through Jesus, we need not conclude that he cannot save those who have not explicitly accepted Him in this life.<sup>449</sup> In his much beloved book *Mere Christianity* he states: “Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? . . . We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”<sup>450</sup> In one of his letters, he states: “I think that every prayer which is sincerely made even to a false god . . . is accepted by the true God and that Christ saves many who do not think they know him. For he is (dimly) present in the *good* side of the inferior teachers they follow. In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. xxv. 31 and following) those who are saved do not seem to know that they have served Christ.”<sup>451</sup> He also went so far as to say that: “honest rejection of Christ, however, mistaken, will be forgiven and healed—‘Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him.’”<sup>452</sup>

Scottish missionary to India John Nicol Farquhar:

Will then no one be saved except such and amongst them there must be large numbers who have lived in accordance with all the moral and spiritual light they had; such men will undoubtedly be saved; for they have done the will of our Father in heaven as for (sic) as they knew it.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 102.

<sup>450</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 65.

<sup>451</sup> *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 247.

<sup>452</sup> C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 111.

<sup>453</sup> John Nicol Farquhar, *The Inquirer* (published by the YMCA’s Association Press, Calcutta), 4:5 (January 1903), 2. Quoted in Ivan M. Satyavrata, *God Has Not Left Himself Without Witness* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2011), 84.

Missiologist Charles Kraft:

We have usually assumed discontinuity and antagonism between Christianity and paganism. Yet it was *within* paganism that God stimulated Abraham (and countless others whose stories are not recorded in the Bible) to faith based largely on the knowledge they already possessed . . . . Can people who are chronologically A.D. but knowledge-wise B.C. (i.e., have not heard of Christ), or those who are indoctrinated with a wrong understanding of Christ, be saved by committing themselves to faith in God as Abraham and the rest of those who were chronologically B.C. did (Heb. 11)? Could such persons be saved by ‘giving as much of themselves as they can give to as much of God as they can understand?’ I personally believe that they can and many have.<sup>454</sup>

Baptist theologian Dale Moody (1915–1992):

Those who perish, according to the Gospel of John, are those who are confronted by the Light of the world shining through Jesus and who reject this light, not those who have only the starlight of general revelation . . . . Sin for John is unbelief (16:9). Guilt before God is gauged by the light people have, and those who follow the light they have will surely be accepted by God . . . . The *supreme* revelation was in the days of his flesh, but it is not the sole revelation of the Son of God.<sup>455</sup>

Christian Philosopher Stuart C. Hackett:

If every human being in all times and ages has been objectively provided for through the unique redemption in Jesus, and if this provision is in fact intended by God as for every such human being, then it must be possible for each human individual to become personally eligible to receive that provision—regardless of his historical, cultural, or personal circumstances and situation, and quite apart from any particular historical information or even historically formulated

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<sup>454</sup> Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 254.

<sup>455</sup> Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth*, 61–62.

theological conceptualization—since a universally intended redemptive provision is not genuinely universal in the requisite sense unless it is also and for that reason universally accessible. This, I take it, is exactly the way that Paul argues (Rom. 1:18–23) when he claims that the people of all nations and civilizations, whether or not they have been apprised of God’s historical revelation that reached its climax in Jesus, are nevertheless responsible and guilty before God if they reject God’s moral and spiritual claim upon them, since there is a universally accessible knowledge of God in the manifestation of God through the whole realm of created beings, and even, as he adds later (Rom. 2:14–16), in the divine moral law that is written in their hearts and discernible by their moral consciousness. All this would be quite unintelligible if it did not imply that, through a proper response to this universally accessible revelation, individual human beings of whatever circumstances could so renounce their moral guilt and corruption and could so commit themselves to God and his claim upon them, as to become the beneficiaries of divine grace and forgiveness—a grace and forgiveness made possible only through Jesus’ redemptive provision, of which, however, they would in a large variety of cases, be historically ignorant, or perhaps, in a parallel variety of instances, only weakly, dimly, and inadequately aware.<sup>456</sup>

Theologian George E. Ladd:

The operation of God’s grace may well be wider than the knowledge of the gospel, just as the grace of God in the Old Testament was wider than Israel . . . . No, we do not slam the door shut on those millions who have not heard the name of Christ, any more than we can restrict a saving knowledge of God only to Israelites in the Old Testament. We do pronounce that only the cross and resurrection of Christ saves. We equally pronounce that the non-Christian religions are devoid of any saving truth. But there may be hearts outside the sound of the gospel who have felt after God (Acts 17:27), who did seek for honour and immortality (Rom. 2:7), who do have the true circumcision of the Spirit, and to

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<sup>456</sup> Stuart C. Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim*, 244–245.

these hearts God applies the salvation of Jesus Christ. How many we do not know. We only know that the wideness of God's mercy as testified in Scripture does not narrow the horizon of God's grace down to just those places where His grace is clearly pronounced, whether in Israel or the Christian Church. Only in the final judgment . . . can we speak a final word as to who is saved and who is lost.<sup>457</sup>

Baptist theologian Stanley J. Grenz:

It is simply not our prerogative to speculate as to the final outcome of the eschatological judgment, which will be a day of surprises. Rather, we continue to carry out the evangelism mandate, sometimes to bear the truth into realms of darkness, sometimes to bring to light that truth that is already hidden, and sometimes to bring to explicit confession of Christ the implicit covenant with God already present in our hearers.<sup>458</sup>

Anglican writer Michael Green:

(T)here well may be in heaven many of all races who knew nothing of Christ but somehow trusted in God to accept them though they knew themselves to be unacceptable. That is how David and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were accepted. They had no idea how it could be. But they entrusted themselves to God, and he accepted them, knowing the atonement that was to be made. There is generosity enough and to spare in the Father's house. All who call on his name, however ignorantly and tentatively, will not be disappointed. On that matter he has given his solemn pledge (Rom. 10:11–13).<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Ladd is quoted without reference in J. Oswald Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?*, 62–63.

<sup>458</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 285–286.

<sup>459</sup> Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984), 85.



Methodist theologian William J. Abraham:

If Christ's activity extends through all creation, and if it is possible in principle to be saved without hearing of Jesus, then it is reasonable to infer that people outside the biblical traditions may also be saved and acquitted. Clearly such people will not know that their salvation has come to them through the work of Christ, but then Abraham did not know that either and this does not at all disqualify him from salvation. Nor is this a mere hypothetical possibility dreamed up to fit a favored theory. Cornelius is a good example of such a case from the biblical traditions.<sup>460</sup>

Yale professor Mark Heim has offered the suggestion that there may be different destinies for adherents of the various religions.<sup>461</sup> For example, Nirvana may indeed be the destiny of Buddhists, and paradise the destiny of Muslims. But this view has not received acceptance among evangelicals.

### Post-Mortem Evangelization

Still other recent evangelical writers have also embraced the idea of a post-mortem opportunity for those who have not heard the gospel.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 220.

<sup>461</sup> S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

<sup>462</sup> Among these, the following should be noted: C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 69; Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (cited above), 168–180; Stephen T. Davis, "Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant," *Modern Theology* 6.2 (January 1990), 173–195; Gabriel Fackre, "Divine Perseverance," in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* ed. John Sanders, 71–95; Donald G. Bloesch, "Descent into Hell," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 313–314. James Beilby, *Postmortem Opportunity: A Biblical and Theological Assessment of Salvation After Death* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2021).

Theologian Donald Bloesch states:

Christ's descent into Hades after his crucifixion and death has a solid foundation in both Scripture and the early church. In the NT it is attested in Acts 2:31; Eph. 4:9–10; and I Pet. 3:19–20. The passages in Ephesians and I Peter seem to indicate the extension of the saving work of reconciliation and redemption to the souls in the nether world of Hades . . . . To believe in the literal descent of Christ into Hades for the purpose of offering redemption does not imply universalism. Most of those who have held to this belief admit the possibility of rejecting the offer of salvation given by Christ. Again, this is not to be confounded with the doctrine of a second chance. What the descent doctrine affirms is the universality of a first chance, an opportunity for salvation for those who have never heard the gospel in its fullness.<sup>463</sup>

Theologian Gabriel Fackre:

The reality of sin and our creatureliness enter to limit the range of the church's mission in time and space. We have not gotten the Word out to the last and the least. Yet the goodness of God will not relent in the face of these realities. And the power of God breaks through their limitations. The gates of death, as well as the 'gates of hell,' cannot prevail against the divine perseverance. The powerful love of God assures that the saving Word will be proclaimed to those who have not heard it, even beyond the gates of death . . . . Personal salvation—our righteousness before the holy God—is inseparable from hearing, believing and confessing Jesus Christ . . . . The divine perseverance will not deny the saving Word to any, and will contest all the makers of boundaries, including the final boundary, 'the last enemy, death.'<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, "Descent into Hell (Hades)," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 314–315.

<sup>464</sup> Gabriel Fackre, "Divine Perseverance," in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, ed. John Sanders, 81, 93.

Philosopher Stephen T. Davis, commenting on I Peter 4:5–6, says:

But if the gospel was once preached to the dead, perhaps the ignorant are preached to after death and receive then the chance they never had before to receive Christ and turn to God . . . . As long as it is recognized that these are conjectures without systematic or clear biblical warrant, we might even suggest that Christ has the power to save human beings *wherever* they are, even in hell . . . . Is it possible that there are persons who would respond positively to God's love after death even though they have not responded positively to it before death? I believe this is possible. In fact, one reason for this latest conjecture is the observation that some who hear the gospel hear it in such a way that they are psychologically unable to respond positively. Perhaps they heard the gospel for the first and only time from a fool or a bigot or a scoundrel. Or perhaps they were caused to be prejudiced against Christianity by skeptical parents or teachers. Whatever the reason, I believe it would be unjust of God to condemn those who did indeed hear the good news but were unable to respond positively. This is why I suggest that even in hell, people can be rescued . . . . Does this bring in universalism by the back door? Certainly not. I have little doubt some will say no to God eternally . . . , nor do I see any need for a 'second chance' for those who have freely and knowingly chosen in this life to live apart from God. Perhaps God never gives up on people, but some folk seem to have hardened their heart to such a degree that they will never repent. For such people, hell as separation from God exists forever, just as it exists for them now. But perhaps some who die in ignorance of Christ will hear the good news, repent, and be rescued. Perhaps even some citizens of hell will do so too. Again, the key word is *perhaps*. We have no ground to dogmatize here. I do not think we *know* the fate of those who die in ignorance of Christ. All I am sure of is that God's scheme for the salvation of human beings will turn out to have been just, perhaps in ways we cannot now understand.<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> Stephen T. Davis, "Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant," (cited above), 183–184.

## Dual-Covenant Theology

One development in the past century that is of particular significance is the proposal by some that there are two ways of salvation for Jew and Gentile—what is often called the “Dual-Covenant Theology.” The “Dual-Covenant Theology” (DCT) suggests that though Jesus is the mediator of salvation to the Gentiles, he is not the Savior for the Jewish people.<sup>466</sup> Whereas the New Covenant is appropriate for Gentiles, it is on the basis of the eternal covenants with Israel that the Jewish people relate to God.

DCT finds its roots primarily in the teaching of Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), who had nearly converted to Christianity, but who then promoted this thesis. He said: “We are wholly agreed as to what Christ and his church mean to the world: no one can reach the Father save through him . . . . No one can reach the Father! But the situation is quite different for one who does not have to reach the Father because he is already with him. And this is true for the people of Israel (though not

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<sup>466</sup> For an exposition and evaluation of “Dual-Covenant Theology,” see the following: Ronald H. Miller, *Dialogue and Disagreement: Franz Rosenzweig’s Relevance to Contemporary Jewish-Christian Understanding* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1989); Maurice G. Bowler, “Rosenzweig on Judaism and Christianity: The Two Covenant Theory,” *Mishkan* 11.1 (1989), 1–8; Louis Goldberg, “Are there two Ways of Atonement?” *Mishkan* 11.1 (1989): 9–30; David W. Torrance, “Two Covenant Theology,” *Mishkan* 11.1 (1989), 31–35; Arnulf H. Baumann, “The Two Ways / Two Covenants Theory,” *Mishkan* 11.1 (1989), 36–43; Mitch Glaser, “Critique of the Two Covenant Theory,” *Mishkan* 11.1 (1989), 44–70; Termod Engelsviken, “The Willowbank Declaration on the Christian Gospel and the Jewish People: An Introduction,” *Mishkan* 11.1 (1989), 71–84 (This article contains the text of the *Willowbank Declaration*); “From the Manila Manifesto of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism, July, 1989: The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ,” *Mishkan* 11.1 (1989), 85; “Resolution of the USA branch of Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism re. the Christian Identity-movement, April, 1989,” *Mishkan* 11.1 (1989), 86; Kai Khaer-Hansen, “The Problem of the Two-Covenant Theology,” *Mishkan* 21.2 (1994), 52–81; Kai Khaer-Hansen, “One Way For Jews and Gentiles in the New Millennium,” in *To the Jew First: The Case for Jewish Evangelism in Scripture and History*, eds. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 292–311.

of individual Jews).”<sup>467</sup> The allusion to John 14:6 in the first part of this statement is evident: “No one comes to the Father but through Me.” And in the second part of the statement, one can see Rosenzweig’s allusion to the words of the father to the elder son (in the parable of the “Prodigal Son”): “Son, you have always been with me” (Lk. 15:31). The implication of the DCT is that evangelization of the Jewish people is entirely unnecessary and inappropriate, because they already have a relationship with God based on his covenants with Israel.

DCT received some backing from more liberal theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, who said: “Missionary activities among the Jews are wrong, not only because they are futile and have little fruit to boast for their exertions. They are wrong because the two faiths despite differences are sufficiently alike for the Jew to find God more easily in terms of his own religious heritage than by subjecting himself to the hazards of guilt feelings involved in conversion to a faith which, whatever its excellencies, must appear to him as a symbol of an oppressive minority culture.”<sup>468</sup> DCT also received support from Episcopal theologian Paul Van Buren (1924–1998), in his book *A Christian Theology of the People of Israel*.<sup>469</sup>

Krister Stendahl was another proponent of this view. He observed what he believed was “Paul’s growing awareness that God envisages a co-existence between Jews

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<sup>467</sup> Rosenzweig is quoted in Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*. (New York: Stocken Books, 1953), 341.

<sup>468</sup> Quoted in A. J. Heschel, “No Religion is an Island,” in *Disputation and Dialogue: Readings in the Jewish-Christian Encounter*, ed. F. E. Talmage. (Hoboken NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1975), 356.

<sup>469</sup> Paul Van Buren, *A Christian Theology of the People of Israel, Part II* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983).

and Christians, a co-existence that makes mission an inappropriate mode of witness.”<sup>470</sup>

He bases his observation at least in part on the absence of any mention of Christ in Romans 9–11, after 10:17.<sup>471</sup> Stendahl’s view, however, is inconsistent with the account in the Book of Acts, which actually closes with Paul’s attempts in Rome to seek to persuade the Jews in that city about Jesus, and his turning to the Gentiles after they largely rejected his message (Acts 28:17–29).

In 1989 a group sponsored by the World Evangelical Fellowship issued “The Willowbank Declaration on the Christian Gospel and the Jewish People,” which rejected the DCT; and while renouncing anti-Semitism in every form, urged evangelical Christians, out of love, not to abandon their mission to the Jewish people.<sup>472</sup> This was obviously not well received by leaders of the Jewish community.<sup>473</sup>

It is difficult to know how widely DCT is embraced by evangelicals. But not that many have publicly defended it.<sup>474</sup> Unlike the inclusivism of some evangelicals (who seek to support their view on the basis of Scripture), biblical support for DCT can hardly be found, and runs counter to the entire sweep of biblical theology. As others have pointed out, John 14:6 is not limited to the Gentile world, but embraces the entire world. The Apostle Paul clearly states that the gospel is for “the Jew first and also (for) the

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<sup>470</sup> Krister Stendahl, “In No Other Name,” in Arne Sovik, *Christian Witness and the Jewish People* (Geneva: LWF, 1976), 53.

<sup>471</sup> Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 4.

<sup>472</sup> See the citation regarding the text of “The Willowbank Declaration” in note 466 above.

<sup>473</sup> “Rabbi A. James Rudin, National Director of Inter-Religious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, called the Declaration a ‘blueprint for spiritual genocide that is shot through with the ancient Christian “teaching of contempt” for Jews and Judaism.’” Kay Kjaer-Hansen, “The Problem of the Two-Covenant Theology,” *Mishkan* 21.2 (1994), 56.

<sup>474</sup> San Antonio pastor John Hagee embraced a view similar to the DCT in his book *Should Christians Support Israel?* (San Antonio: Dominion Publishers, 1987).

Greek” (Rom. 1:16). And as for the statement of the father to the elder son in the parable, that he had “always been with him,” this was intended to lead the elder son, not to contentment with his current position, but to repentance (and by implication, was intended to urge the Pharisees to embrace the message of Jesus).

Rich Robinson has provided an insightful critique of DCT.<sup>475</sup> He points out that even the Jewish scholar Alan Segal recognized that the Apostle Paul could not possibly have believed this theory. He particularly noted Paul’s words in Galatians 2:15–16, which read: “We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.”<sup>476</sup>

Kai Kjaer-Hansen states:

It would be a gross simplification to maintain that the appearance of two-covenant theology is due to the Holocaust. Its roots are . . . in the time before the Holocaust. On the other hand, it is difficult to over-emphasize the impact of the Holocaust on the theory’s growth and further development in *Christian* circles after World War II. Ridden with guilt, some Christians were forced to a rethinking which resulted in a theology of silence towards Jews . . . . It therefore becomes a relevant question whether it is God’s word and his imperatives to missionize among Jews which should be obeyed, or whether it is people’s emotions and ideas of the Holocaust that should guide one’s thinking. In double covenant thinking, so much significance seems to be attached to the Christian

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<sup>475</sup> Rich Robinson, “Should Jewish People Hear the Gospel? Judaism and the Uniqueness of Christ,” in *Proceedings of the Wheaton Theology Conference 1* (Spring, 1992), 119–136.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

Church's cruel history that the authority of the Lord of the Church according to the New Testament seems to be disregarded.<sup>477</sup>

This is not to say that we should be insensitive to some of the terribly regretful ways in which some Christians have treated Jewish people over the centuries. One thinks of the awful words of Martin Luther, who actually recommended that Jewish synagogues and schools be burned, and their houses razed.<sup>478</sup> We must be humble and compassionate in the way we speak with and conduct ourselves toward our Jewish friends. And if we have harbored antisemitic sentiments in any way ourselves, we must also be repentant in our attitude. But this should not keep us from urging them to listen to the message of the New Testament and its testimony to the saving work of Jesus.

As can be seen from the evidence cited in this chapter, the discussion about the unevangelized that has been going on for generations, has continued with no abatement into our own.

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<sup>477</sup> Kai Kjaer-Hansen, "The Problem of the Two-Covenant Theology," *Mishkan* 21.2 (1994), 74–75. For a helpful guide to sharing Christ with our Jewish friends, see: Avi Snyder, *Jews Don't Need Jesus & Other Misconceptions: Reflections of a Jewish Believer* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2017).

<sup>478</sup> See "On the Jews and Their Lies," (1543) in *Luther's Works, Vol. 47: The Christian in Society IV*. Ed. Franklin Sherman, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 268-70.



## Chapter 8

### *Conclusion to Part I*

From the earliest days of the church, and the commission to preach the gospel to every creature, questions have been posed about the fate of those who have never heard of Christ in any meaningful way. And various answers to these questions have been given. In the earliest years, the discussion focused on the fate of those who lived outside God's covenant community (Israel) before the coming of Christ. Some proposed that those who lived prior to Christ were evangelized in Hades by the crucified Christ. Others believed that many people who lived prior to Christ had been unknowingly led to grace through the divine Logos present to all people. Still others believed that even before the coming of Christ, salvation came only through anticipatory faith in him or in the true God, and that divine revelation had been proclaimed (naturally or supernaturally) to as many as God knew would believe (or, for Augustine, those whom God had had elected to believe).

Since the gospel was believed to have penetrated the entire world, few were concerned with the question of those who remained without the gospel. As it became apparent that there might be some on the fringes of civilization who might not have heard the gospel, most believed that if they did what was in their power, God would send the saving message to such people (if even by an angelic messenger). Some believed that those who were outside the hearing of the gospel were not of God's elect, or had forfeited the hearing of the gospel by their misconduct and unbelief.

As greater thought was given to the status of those who did not have full comprehension of the details of Church dogma, or who were not able to be baptized before death, the theory of implicit faith in God (and his provision of redemption, however it might be accomplished), and the baptism of desire came to be accepted in the Medieval Church. These concepts were then also applied to those who lived prior to Christ, and who may not have been in possession of divine revelation. After the discovery of the New World, and the awareness of a great mass of humanity who gave no evidence of having ever been evangelized, these ideas eventually came to be applied to all who were without the gospel “through no fault of their own.” If they believed in God, and responded to whatever light they had, they would be saved. In the twentieth century, the Catholic church eventually came to believe that even those who lacked faith in God might receive God’s salvation, if they were submissive to the dictates of conscience.

With some exceptions, those who embraced the principles of the Reformation adhered to the necessity of explicit faith in Christ for salvation. Most of the Reformed believed that all whom God had called to salvation would receive the gospel in this lifetime, whether by the ordinary means of preaching, or by extraordinary and even supernatural means. Those who followed Arminius believed that if someone used the grace God had granted to all in a favorable way, God would see that they received the gospel so as to be saved, whether by ordinary or extraordinary means.

In time, however, most Arminians (some would say under the influence of a growing rationalism) embraced the idea that an implicit faith in what had been revealed generally to all people (and discernible by reason) was sufficient for salvation (though recognizing that not all of the blessings of Christ would be enjoyed until they heard the

gospel). Many moderate Calvinists, and some classical Calvinists (such as Shedd), also entertained hopes that God would grant saving grace to the unevangelized, through their response to natural revelation or truth in other religions (though for different reasons than the Arminians suggested).

Orthodox Lutherans maintained the necessity of explicit faith, and believed that the gospel had been universally declared. Many also believed that those nations and peoples who lacked the saving message, had forfeited their day of grace by the rejection or neglect of the gospel in previous generations. In time, however, and many would say under the influence of enlightenment rationalism, most Lutherans abandoned this belief, and adopted either the view of the later Arminians, or the view that God would provide an opportunity for salvation after death to those who had not heard the gospel during this lifetime.

Indeed, in the course of time the number of those who believed explicit faith in Christ is necessary for salvation (at least during this lifetime) diminished. In those segments of Christendom where confidence in divine revelation was overshadowed by confidence in personal religious experience, belief in the necessity of explicit faith entirely vanished. Religious pluralism (the view that all religions are human responses to experience of the divine, and represent legitimate ways to God) now reigns among those who have relinquished confidence in the authority of Scripture.

Among those who have maintained faith in the authority of Scripture (evangelicals), the debate over the fate of the unevangelized continues to this day. Most (though not all) Calvinists (and conservative Lutherans) likely continue to believe in the necessity of explicit faith in Christ during this lifetime, whether communicated by a

human messenger or in an extraordinary and supernatural way. A minority of those who believe in the necessity of explicit faith in Christ entertain at least the possibility of an opportunity after death, for those who had not knowingly rejected Christ in this lifetime. Most evangelical Arminians (unless they adhere to the view Arminius held personally), and some Calvinists, hold to some form of inclusivism, believing that God extends at least the beginnings of salvation to all those who embrace whatever light they possess. There clearly is no single view on this matter espoused by all evangelical believers.

It would seem that one's views are in large measure determined by his/her beliefs about the nature of God's grace. If God, desiring the salvation of all, at least partially restores all people spiritually by granting them sufficient grace to believe, then it would seem that so long as a person uses that grace in a positive way by responding to whatever revelation he possesses, then God would in turn respond favorably to that proper use of grace, even if the person as yet does not know the gospel. Based then, on one's proper use of sufficient grace, a person may possess a disposition to believe long before actually believing in Christ. In Wesley's view, a person in this position has already received God's salvation, at least "to a degree." And in this way of seeing things, salvation is a process that is experienced "by degrees." That is, salvation is extended to people in measure, based on the "dispensation" under which they are living. And this is determined by the degree of revelation they have received.

If, on the other hand, man is "dead in trespasses and sins" and by nature is unwilling to believe apart from God's efficacious grace, then only those who are recipients of this grace may properly be spoken of as being saved. Though God may use general revelation in preparing a person for salvation, until that person receives this

grace, he or she is lost. This is the essence of Calvinism, as well as of conservative Lutheranism. Most Calvinists believe that God's efficacious grace is always accompanied by the gospel. And conservative Lutherans believe the same. However, some Calvinists and Lutherans, though they believe that it is God's normal way to save people through the gospel, that this is not always the case. In their view, God sometimes grants saving grace (regeneration) prior to (perhaps a long time prior to) sending the gospel. Such people would evidence a positive response to whatever revelation they possess. Some may believe that this is a rare occurrence, while others believe it is not so uncommon. One can see that what we believe about the unevangelized is really a function of other important beliefs about the human condition, as well as about the nature of God's grace

But what should also be evident from the foregoing study is that it's very possible for our beliefs to be greatly influenced, not only by our theology, but by other external forces as well. Significant events, such as the discovery of the New World, or the Holocaust, have influenced the way Christians have viewed the unevangelized. No doubt, the increase in close contact with people of other cultures and religious world views brought about by increased immigration and advances in world-wide travel, and communication, is another important factor. The "unevangelized" are not only "over there," but they are around the corner and down the street. Such events should certainly be occasions for re-evaluating our beliefs in the light of Scripture. But we must be careful that they do not shape our views in ways contrary to Scripture.

Equally, there can be no doubt that the promotion of cultural relativism and postmodern skepticism must also be taken into account. One feels in our generation the necessity of being in possession of almost overwhelming evidence before accepting

significant truth claims. Add to this the growth of nationalism in non-Christian cultures, and the guilt that many in the West feel about what some would characterize as centuries of imperialistic colonialism (even if only a partially accurate perception), it is easy to see how these forces can weigh heavily when seeking satisfying answers to questions that impinge on our relationships with “outsiders.”

These factors are certainly real, and should not be ignored. But if we are to do justice to the claim to be “evangelical,” we must be vigilant to make certain our beliefs are ultimately founded on Scripture and theological deductions clearly drawn from Scripture. Not least should this be true of our views about what is required for salvation. It is to this that we will turn in the second part of this work. What do the Scriptures teach about the possibility of the unevangelized being saved apart from the gospel?

## **Part II**

### ***Biblical Theology***

Conclusions regarding the biblical teaching on the fate of the unevangelized must be drawn from more than simply a handful of “proof texts” (such as John 14:6 and Acts 4:12), but must take into consideration the broad teaching of Scripture in its historical and theological context. An attempt will be made in this section to do that. I will first examine and evaluate the biblical evidence for the inclusivist viewpoint, and then the case for the particularist viewpoint.

Though my own view on this matter will become more evident in this section of the work, I have attempted to be as fair and evenhanded as possible. Nonetheless, the views which I have arrived at and have expressed in this part of the work, have been formed over many years, and while held humbly, do represent my own conclusions about this important matter.





## Chapter 9

### *The Case for Inclusivism*

It will be my purpose in this chapter to present as clearly as possible a biblical case for the view that the unevangelized may obtain salvation apart from explicit knowledge of and faith in Christ. I will present an evaluation of this case in the following chapter.

The major thesis of the inclusivist view is that since God's salvific will is universal (He desires all to be saved), the means of salvation must be universally accessible. Since the gospel of Christ is not universally known, there must be another way for those who are without the gospel to be saved—that is, through responding to whatever truth about God might be known to all.

The thesis that God desires the salvation of all mankind will not be disputed. A handful of passages, support the thesis that God's revealed will is that all should turn to him and be saved:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. (John 3:16–17)

This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (I Tim. 2:4)

For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers. (I Tim. 4:10)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men. (Tit. 2:11)

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (II Pet. 3:9)

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other. (Isa. 45:22)

Other passages also make it clear that God does not desire the death of unbelievers:

Say to them, “As I live!” declared the Lord God, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezek. 33:11; cf. 18:23, 32)

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it! (Lk. 13:34)

The second part of the thesis is that since God’s salvific will is universal, the means of salvation must be universally accessible. And since Christ is not universally known, this knowledge must not be mandatory for any to be saved. Whether this follows from the first part of the thesis, and whether this entails the belief that something less than explicit knowledge of Christ may be the means by which some are saved, will be considered in the next chapter.

### The Condition for Salvation

Prior to presenting biblical evidence commonly appealed to in support of the inclusivist view, I will first define what inclusivists generally hold to be the condition for salvation—and that is faith in God as he is known to a person. Clark Pinnock calls this

the “faith principle.” John Sanders states that we must draw a distinction between “believers” and “Christians.” All Christians are believers. But not all believers are Christians. Yet all believers in God are saved.<sup>479</sup> While acknowledging that some cognitive content regarding God is necessary for salvation, Sanders states that “the Scriptures do not set out the precise amount of information that is required.”<sup>480</sup> Based on Hebrews 11:6 (“without faith it is impossible to please Him, for He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of those who seek Him”), Sanders states that “Anyone who believes God will respond benevolently to those who seek him thereby gives evidence of trusting God and thus possesses saving faith.”<sup>481</sup> He states as well: “All those who are saved are saved by believing in the same God even though he may be known to various people through various identifying characteristics . . . .”<sup>482</sup> Furthermore, as do all inclusivists, Sanders believes that what can be known about God through general revelation is sufficient to save. He states: “God uses general revelation to mediate his salvific grace . . . . People can be saved or lost depending on their response to the general revelation.”

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<sup>479</sup> John Sanders, *No Other Name*, 224–225.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, 228. Sanders does state that a “penitent humility” is an essential characteristic of saving faith (228–229). Many inclusivists would concur with this statement, though not all seem to make this clear.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, 227–228.

## Biblical Evidence for Inclusivism—Old Testament Saints

I will now examine the biblical evidence most commonly appealed to in support of inclusivism. The first line of evidence is that Old Testament saints within Israel were saved apart from explicit faith in Christ. Clark Pinnock states:

The Old Testament describes a large number of believing Israelites who trusted in God, though the Messiah had not yet come to them. Yet they exercised saving faith, as did Abraham, and experienced forgiveness, as did David. Their theological knowledge was deficient, measured by New Testament standards, and their understanding of God was limited because they had not encountered Jesus, in whom alone one sees the Father. Nonetheless, they knew God and belonged to the great cloud of witnesses who encourage us (Heb. 12:1). Without actually confessing Jesus Christ, they were saved by his work of redemption.<sup>483</sup>

Though there are promises of a coming Deliverer (cf. Gen. 3:15), and types and shadows of Christ in the Old Testament, inclusivists argue that it is doubtful that most Old Testament believers knew more than that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was their Savior, and that faith in him was necessary to be saved. Those who lived before the founding of Israel (e.g., Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah) knew even less about the Lord, yet they found grace in the eyes of the Lord as well. If God extended salvation on the basis of a general faith in God to those who lived before Christ's coming, inclusivists argue, might it not also be possible that he would do the same today for those who do not know of Christ?

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<sup>483</sup> Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 163.

### Biblical Evidence for Inclusivism—“Holy Pagans”

The second line of evidence is that even during Old Testament times there are examples of people outside God’s covenant people Israel who were saved—so-called “holy pagans.” This is evidently true of Melchizedek, who was a “priest of God Most High” (El Elyon). Some believe that this is the name commonly used of the chief Canaanite God.<sup>484</sup> Pinnock states that because Abram paid tithes to Melchizedek, and used the name of the God (El Elyon) whom he represented as the God whom he himself worshiped and served (Yahweh), that he was “thus accepting the equivalence of Yahweh and El Elyon, and the validity of Melchizedek’s worship.”<sup>485</sup> Pinnock likewise points to Abimelech, as another example of someone outside the covenant people who apparently had a relationship with the Lord (Gen. 20).<sup>486</sup>

Moses’ father-in-law Jethro was priest of Midian (Ex. 3:1), and not a part of the Abrahamic community. It is clear that before the event of the Exodus, he entertained a belief in other gods besides the Lord (Ex. 18:11). Yet he is presented as a man of faith and wisdom, whose counsel was received by Moses.

Job was also a man of obvious faith, yet he was not a recipient of the Abrahamic revelation. Some might also point to Naaman the Syrian (II Kings 5), who appeared to continue to engage in pagan worship of the god Rimmon (v. 18), or to Balaam, by whom God gave prophecies (Num. 22–24), Hiram-abi of Tyre, a man “endowed with understanding” (II Chron. 2:13), as well as the Queen of Sheba (I Kings 10:1–13).

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<sup>484</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, *The Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 47.

<sup>485</sup> Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 94.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Some see in the prophet Ezekiel's mention of Daniel (Ezek. 14:14) a reference to a non-Israelite mentioned in the Ugaritic texts. He is described in "the legend of Aqhat" as a dispenser of justice: "He judges the cause of the widow, and vindicates the cause of the fatherless."<sup>487</sup> Kenneth Cracknell speaks of this Daniel: "His name means 'God has judged', and we may presumably take it that in the contemporary prophetic tradition he was held up as a paragon of wisdom and justice, even though he was a Syrian and a non-Jew."<sup>488</sup>

When we come to the New Testament, we also find reference to people outside the nation Israel who were people of faith. This would include the magi who came from the east to see Jesus (Mt. 2). We also hear Jesus praising the faith of a Gentile Centurion. We do not know how much he knew about Jesus, but we nevertheless find Him praising his faith with the words: "Truly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven . . . ." (Mt. 8:10–11; cf. Lk. 7:9). The latter part of this statement seems to suggest that there will be many like the Centurion who have faith, but who are not part of the community we might expect to be saved. We also find Jesus praising the faith of the Syrophenician woman (who lived outside the borders of Israel) with the words, "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish" (Mt. 15:28).

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<sup>487</sup> Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faiths* (London: Epworth Press, 1986), 38. He cites *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Second Edition, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 150.

<sup>488</sup> Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship*, 38.

The foremost example of a person of faith outside the covenant community in the New Testament is the Centurion, Cornelius. Before he even heard about Christ or the gospel, he is spoken of as “a devout man and one who feared God” (Acts 10:2), as well as a “righteous and God-fearing man” (Acts 10:22). The favor that God showed to Cornelius prompted the Apostle Peter to say, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him” (Acts 10:34–35). The Greek word used here is *dektos* (acceptable, welcome, favorable). Inclusivists believe that this suggests that Cornelius was accepted by God even before he heard about Christ through Peter’s message. It is true that Cornelius is not said to have received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit until after he heard and believed the gospel (vv. 43–48). But in the view of inclusivists, this need not suggest that had Cornelius died prior to that moment he would not have entered heaven. Nor need this be implied by the angel’s statement to Cornelius that he would be saved (future tense) through Peter’s message (11:14). This need only suggest that at the time he heard and believed the gospel Cornelius entered into the fullness of the New Covenant blessings of salvation. Inclusivists contend that the same might be said of others today who have responded to what they know about God, but have not yet heard the gospel about Christ.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> A proponent of the view that Cornelius was saved prior to hearing the gospel is Glenn N. Davies. See his article: “When was Cornelius Saved?” *Reformed Theological Review*, 46.2 (1987), 43–49. “The impression gained from this cumulative picture strongly suggests that Cornelius enjoyed a saving relationship with God.” *Ibid.*, 44–45.

The nineteenth century Baptist commentator George W. Clark stated concerning Cornelius:

Cornelius seems to have been in much the same condition as the pious Jew before Christ—a worshiper of the true God, feeling the need of more light, and perhaps, like the eunuch (8:28), a reader of the Old Testament Scriptures, and a searcher after the Promised One. He seems to have been in a state acceptable to God through him who was to come. He needed Peter, in order to know the fact of his personal salvation and the method of salvation through Jesus Christ . . . . But Peter appears to imply that some outside of Cornelius and his company, among all nations might be in a savable state. Since Christ is the Word and the Truth and the Revealer of these to men, all revelations may be traced back to him. If any one by this light is led to see his fallen and helpless condition and cry out, ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner,’ ready to accept Christ, so soon as offered, and shall manifest his sincerity in a prayerful life and devout conduct, may he not be ignorantly but truly a worshiper of God and of him who is the only Revealer of God to men? And this accords with the words of our Saviour, ‘Many shall come from the east and the west,’ etc. (Matt. 8:11, 12) ‘And other sheep I have which are not of this fold,’ etc. (John 10:16).<sup>490</sup>

In response to the question as to why we should send missionaries to those who may be in the same condition as Cornelius, Clark writes (in his comments on Acts 18):

1. To make known Jesus Christ to those who may be craving and looking for a Saviour.
2. To arouse and deepen this feeling of need and longing in any others who may be seeking after God.
3. To announce Christ to the millions who live on a lower plane of enlightenment than Cornelius and persons of similar experience.
4. The fact that cases like Cornelius’ are sometimes found affords encouragement to push missionary work. The Lord is preparing the way, showing us our duty and

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<sup>490</sup> George W. Clark, *Notes on the Acts of the Apostles: Explanatory and Practical* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1892), 170.



opportunity. We should at once heed the call, ‘Come over and help us,’ and the encouragement, as the voice of God, saying, ‘Be not afraid, but speak and hold not thy peace; for I am with thee . . . for I have much people in this city.’ (18:9, 10.).<sup>491</sup>

E. H. Plumptre makes the following statement in commenting on Acts 10:34–35.

It applies, not to those only who know the name of Christ and believe on Him when He is preached to them, but to all who in all ages and countries ‘fear God’ according to the measure of their knowledge, and ‘work righteousness’ according to their belief and opportunities. The good works in such a case, are, in their measure and degree, as ‘fruits of faith and follow after justification’ . . . justification having been, in such cases, objectively bestowed for the merits of Christ, and subjectively appropriated by the faith which, in the Providence of God, was possible under the conditions of the case . . . . What such men gain by conversion is a fuller knowledge of the Truth, and therefore a clearer faith, a fuller justification, and a higher blessedness, but as this history distinctly teaches, they are already accepted by God. They are saved . . . even though they know not the Name whereby they must be saved . . . , by Christ, who is the Saviour of all.<sup>492</sup>

His view seems to reflect that of John Wesley, that people may experience salvation “by degrees.”<sup>493</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>492</sup> E. H. Plumptre, “Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles,” in *A Bible Commentary for Bible Students by Various Writers*, 8 volumes, ed. Charles John Ellicott (London & Edinburgh: Marshall Bros. Ltd., 1821–1891), VII:69.

<sup>493</sup> See the exposition of Wesley’s views in the chapter on the Arminians. It is difficult to comprehend how a person could be “partially justified.” It would seem that a person would be either justified, or not.

## Biblical Evidence for Inclusivism—Infant Salvation

It is also sometimes held that the unevangelized are in a similar category as are infants and children who die before the “age of accountability.” If God grants eternal life to these who are unable to believe, it would seem that he would also grant salvation to the unevangelized who are also unable to believe.<sup>494</sup>

## Biblical Evidence for Inclusivism—Specific Texts

Beyond these examples, we also have a number of biblical texts which are sometimes appealed to in support of the inclusivist viewpoint. We will take them in the order in which they appear in the canon of Scripture. The first is Exodus 6:2–3, “God spoke further to Moses and said to him, ‘I am the Lord; and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name, Lord, I did not make Myself known to them.’” This verse is taken by some to show that even the patriarchs did not know God as Yahweh, as he would later make himself known to them. Rather, he was known to them as the God whom the surrounding cultures worshiped, who was called El, and sometimes Elyon. The argument would be that if it was not necessary for the patriarchs to know God as Yahweh, as he would later reveal himself, in order to be saved, then how can we say that it is necessary today that someone have explicit knowledge of Christ in order to be a recipient of his salvation. Christopher Wright states: “In the discussion whether it is possible to be saved without knowledge of Jesus, it can be

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<sup>494</sup> See Clark Pinnock, “Acts 4:12— No Other Name Under Heaven,” in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, eds. W. V. Crockett and J. G. Sigountos, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 156. See also John Sanders, *No Other Name*, 70.

pointed out that if Wenham, Moberly and others are right in taking Exodus 6:3 in its natural meaning and interpreting Genesis in light of it, then Abraham was saved not only without knowing Jesus but also without knowing about Yahweh.”<sup>495</sup> Based on this notion, he furthermore states that “a case could be argued biblically, it seems to me, for the view that the criterion of salvation is not how much you do know about God, but how you respond to what you know. And equally on the same grounds, that ultimately only God holds the key to that criterion.”<sup>496</sup>

Some inclusivists appeal to the statement in Deuteronomy 4:19, where the Lord states that the gods represented by the moon, stars and hosts of heaven had been “allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.” Though Israel was commanded not to worship these gods, the thought is that God allowed the Gentile nations to do so, and that he had a redemptive purpose in doing so.<sup>497</sup>

Another verse appears in the prophet Malachi: “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts” (v. 11, RSV).<sup>498</sup> This verse is taken to suggest that in contrast to the dishonorable worship being offered to God in Israel at that time, genuine worship was being offered to him among the Gentile nations (albeit in ignorance). The translation of this verse as it appears in the RSV is disputed, as we shall see in the next chapter. But if taken in this way, it could be taken in a way that supports the inclusivist viewpoint.

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<sup>495</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, “Editorial: P for Pentateuch, Patriarchs and Pagans,” *Themelios* 18.2 (January 1993), 3.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>497</sup> Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 101.

<sup>498</sup> Pinnock voices this view. *Ibid.*, 28–29.

Clark Pinnock appeals to Jesus' teaching about the judgment in Matthew 25:31–46, in which those who unknowingly served Christ when they cared for his “brethren” as indicating that people’s faith can be implicitly evidenced in their unconscious actions. He states: “Serving the poor embodies what the love which God himself is and is accepted as the equivalent of faith.”<sup>499</sup> He states again: “So wherever we find traces of Jesus in the world and people opening up to his ideals, we know we are in the presence of Spirit. Wherever, for example, we find self-sacrificing love, care about community, longings for justice, wherever people love one another, care for the sick, make peace not war, wherever there is beauty and concord, generosity and forgiveness, the cup of cold water, we know the Spirit of Jesus is present.”<sup>500</sup>

In his parable of the soils, Jesus describes those who receive the word so as to bear fruit, as those “who have heard the word in an honest and good heart” (Lk. 8:15). This could be taken to suggest that even before hearing the word, there are people whose hearts may be described as “honest and good” (*kale kai agathe*). One is reminded of Peter’s description of Cornelius prior to his hearing the gospel.

Another verse which is frequently appealed to by inclusivists is John 1:9, “There was the true Light which coming into the world, enlightens every man.” The contention is that every person is enlightened by Christ, in such a way that he may be redeemed apart from actually hearing the gospel about Christ. One such commentator was the Welsh preacher David Thomas (1813–1894), who held that this Light convinced every person of three things: “1) social obligation—a sense of right and wrong; 2) religious worship—an

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<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>500</sup> Clark Pinnock, *The Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 209–210.

awareness of God; and 3) future retribution—a future judgment of reward or punishment.”<sup>501</sup> He held that this Light comes through both the external revelation of God through his creation (Rom. 1:20) and the internal revelation of conscience (Rom. 2:14–16). In discussing the implications for those who have not yet received the gospel message, he makes the following statement:

This fact reveals the responsibility of heathens. They are not left in utter darkness, Christ is amongst them. They have in them the elements of truth, and many of them without revelation attain to high spiritual intelligence; may it not be that all who act up to the light they have are accepted of their Maker? In expressing the hope that heathens will thus be saved, we are not making salvation independent of Christ, for He is the true Light of all. I rejoice to believe that the rays of Christ’s mind and heart fall beyond the pale of Gospeldom.<sup>502</sup>

John 3:21 says, “But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” This verse is taken by some to state that there are those who already practice the truth (“ho poion ten aletheian”) as they know it, and who welcome the message about Christ when they hear it.<sup>503</sup> A similar statement is made in John 8:47, “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.” The key phrase is “he who is of God” (ek tou Theou). The implication is that there are those who can be said to be “of God” before they hear about Christ. A similar statement is found on Jesus’ lips in his words to Pilate at his trial, “Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice” (John 18:37b).

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<sup>501</sup> David Thomas, *The Gospel of John: Expository and Homiletical Commentary*, 2 volumes in 1. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1980, originally published 1885), 15–17.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>503</sup> August Tholuck, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 124.

The key phrase here in Greek is “ek tes aletheias.” This is another statement that could be taken to suggest that there are those who are “of the truth” (and therefore are in fellowship with God already) before they ever hear the truth about Christ.

Another text which is sometimes appealed to is John 10:16, “I have other sheep which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.” This statement is sometimes taken to imply that there are those who belong to Christ who have yet to hear of him or gain explicit knowledge about him.<sup>504</sup>

During the Apostle Paul’s sermon in Athens, he said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22b–23). It is suggested that Paul was telling them that by honoring this god who was unknown to them, they were worshiping the true God, though ignorant of this fact.

One commentator who held this position commented regarding those who “seek for God” whom Paul mentions in this passage:

When men grope in the dim twilight for something they desire to find, they show their sincerity, and sooner or later they will find God. If they do not find him on this side of the grave, God will, no doubt, take into account their ‘feeling after him.’ It was the only faith in the unseen and eternal which they could exercise, and He will ‘count it to them for righteousness.’ The rule of right proceeding from God Himself will be made good in their case. ‘If there be first a willing mind, it is

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<sup>504</sup>Ibid., 264.

accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not' (2 Cor. Viii. 12).<sup>505</sup>

When Paul first came to Corinth, the Lord appeared to him in a vision, and said “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9b–10). The inclusivist view is that even prior to Paul’s preaching the gospel, there were many people in this city who belonged to the Lord (and thus were saved already).

Another statement that is sometimes appealed to appears in Acts 17:30, “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent . . . .” This is similar to what Paul said in Acts 14:16, that “In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways . . . .” The suggestion is that God was forbearing toward Gentile nations who did not have the true knowledge of him for many generations, and that he granted them salvation based on their response to what they knew.<sup>506</sup>

#### Biblical Evidence for Inclusivism—General Revelation

A final group of passages concerns the value of general (or natural) revelation in leading people to a saving knowledge of God. John Sanders is representative of inclusivists, when he states that “salvific grace is mediated through general revelation and God’s providential working in human history.”<sup>507</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> M. F. Sadler, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1904), 336.

<sup>506</sup> Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 101.

<sup>507</sup> John Sanders, *No Other Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 131.

Millard Erickson believes that the following facts may be known about God through general revelation: “(1) The belief in one good powerful God. (2) The belief that he (man) owed this God perfect obedience to his law. (3) The consciousness that he does not meet this standard, and therefore is guilty and condemned. (4) The realization that nothing he can offer God can compensate him (or atone) for this sin and guilt. (5) The belief that God is merciful, and will forgive and accept those who cast themselves on his mercy.” Based on these facts, he says:

May it not be that if a man believes and acts on this set of tenets he is redemptively related to God and receives the benefits of Christ’s death, whether he consciously knows and understands the details of that provision or not? Presumably that was the case with the Old Testament believers . . . . If this is possible, if Jews possessed salvation in the Old Testament era simply by virtue of having the form of the Christian gospel without its content, can this principle be extended? Could it be that those who ever since the time of Christ have had no opportunity to hear the gospel, as it has come through the special revelation, participate in this salvation on the same basis? On what other grounds could they fairly be held responsible for having or not having salvation (or faith)?<sup>508</sup>

The first of these passages concerning general revelation appealed to would be Psalm 19:1, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.” Another is Acts 14:17 where Paul says of the Lord, “(A)nd yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” Both of these passages attest to the fact that God has revealed something about the greatness of his

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<sup>508</sup> Millard Erickson, “Hope for Those Who Haven’t Heart? Yes, But . . . .” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 11.2 (April 1975), 124–125.



glory and his goodness in the way he has created the world, and the way in which he satisfies our needs through his arrangement of the seasons and needed rainfall.

Another key passage is found in Romans 1:18–21,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Though this passage emphasizes the failure of men to respond appropriately to God, by giving Him honor and thanks, it does state that God's attributes are clearly evident in the creation—a revelation that is available to all. Inclusivists believe that this is sufficient to save.

The following chapter of Romans also explains that the Law of God is revealed even to those who lack any special revelation, through what God has implanted in the human heart and conscience. Romans 2:14–15 states, “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively (lit. by nature) the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them . . . .” Not only is God's nature revealed in the external creation, but his moral nature and his moral requirements for people are revealed in what God has planted in the human heart and conscience.

Through both of these means then, through the creation and through the conscience, God has revealed himself to all people—even to those who lack any additional revelation from him. It will be argued by those who hold the inclusivist viewpoint that if a person responds by honoring God, thanking him for his blessings, and honestly recognizing that he falls short of satisfying the demands even of his own conscience, then God would certainly accept this response by granting his salvation to him or her.

The commentator William Walford (former professor at Homerson College, Cambridge) states in support of this view: “These objects of Divine favour cannot be described indeed, as believers in a Redeemer, of whom they never heard, but they exercised dispositions of heart, which would have induced them joyfully to welcome him, if the discovery had been made to them: they were therefore virtually, though not formally, believers; and their acceptance with God is illustrated by the history of Cornelius . . . .”<sup>509</sup>

We might add to these texts the statement in Romans 10:18, “But I say, surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have; ‘Their voice has gone out into all the earth, And their words to the ends of the world.’” In this verse, Paul emphasizes that no one can claim not to have received any revelation from God. For, quoting Psalm 19, God’s general revelation through creation is accessible to all.

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<sup>509</sup> William Walford, *Notes on the Epistle to the Romans, with A Revised Translation* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1846), 39–40. Walford does acknowledge, however, that “the number of such virtual believers was comparatively small” and that “the case is such as to supply the most pressing reasons, for earnest and persevering endeavours (sic) to diffuse the knowledge of the gospel to the ends of the earth.” Ibid., 40.

The inclusivist viewpoint, then, holds that since God's salvific will is universal, the means of obtaining salvation must be universally accessible as well, even to those who lack the special revelation about Christ. Evidence for this is sought by noting that Old Testament believers in Israel were saved without any explicit knowledge of Christ, as well as others outside Israel (such as Melchizedek and Job). Evidence from the New Testament is also sought, particularly through the example of Cornelius. Aside from these examples, a number of explicit statements of Scripture are identified as supporting this view. Of particular note are those passages which speak of God's general or natural revelation which is universally accessible.

When inclusivists are confronted with well-known passages of Scripture which state that salvation comes only through Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), they generally respond by saying that though Christ is the only Savior, the salvation he provides can still be given to those who do not have explicit knowledge of him.<sup>510</sup> John Sanders states: "It is not certain from these passages that one must hear of Christ in this life to obtain salvation. They simply say there is no other way one can get to heaven except through the work of Christ; they do not say one has to know about that work in order to benefit from it."<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> An inclusivist who comments on Acts 4:12, for example, is William Benham: "The notion which some have formed that this verse denies the possibility of salvation to the heathen must not be entertained for a moment,—'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right'. But the verse does declare that all who receive salvation, soundness, health, receive it through Christ, whether they have heard of Him or not." Rev. Canon Benham, "Acts of the Apostles," in *The N.T. of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Acc. To the Authorized Version. With a Brief Commentary by Various Authors* (London: S.P.C.K., 1900), comments on Acts IV:12.

<sup>511</sup> John E. Sanders, "Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?" *Evangelical Quarterly* 60.3 (July–Sept. 1988), 246.



## Chapter 10

### *An Evaluation of Inclusivism*

The major thesis of inclusivists, that God desires the salvation of all people, is in my opinion a thesis that should be accepted as a clear teaching of Scripture. The passages cited in the previous chapter give strong support to this thesis. Those of us who are Calvinists may object that it may not be God's ultimate purpose to save every person. And this may be true. But even so, there is no denying that it is God's desire that all might come to repentance and faith. Paul states that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4). Peter states that God is "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (II Pet. 3:9b).<sup>512</sup> This sentiment is reflected in the statement in Ezekiel: "'Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,' declares the Lord God, 'rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?'" (Ezek. 18:23; cf. v. 32). It is also reflected in Jesus' words over Jerusalem: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Mt. 23:37). Calvinist and Arminian alike can agree that though God is just in judging those who are impenitent, he is nonetheless grieved by the loss of any individual.<sup>513</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> Some Calvinists will say that these two texts apply only to the elect. But in light of the two passages cited below (Ezek. 18:23, 32; Mt. 23:37), it is impossible to deny that God is grieved over the loss of the impenitent. The prophet states clearly that it would please God if sinners turned to him in repentance. And Jesus wept over the spiritual condition of Jerusalem (Lk. 19:41ff).

<sup>513</sup> John Piper endorses the view that though God is sincerely willing to see all people be saved, this does not lead Him to see that all are actually saved: "God wills not to save all,

The second part of the inclusivist thesis, however, is less convincing. God's desire for the salvation of all does not necessarily require that a revelation sufficient to save must be made known to all. All that is required is that God reveal enough about himself to awaken a desire to seek for God. God has done this through his general or natural revelation. Through general revelation, a person can come to know that there is a God to whom he is accountable (Rom. 1:19), that he fails even to live up to the dictates of his own conscience (Rom. 2:15), and that there is a judgment awaiting all who fail to do so (Rom. 1:32). But there is nothing to be found in this revelation that would lead a person to know that God has provided a way of salvation or deliverance from his judgment.

This leaves room for the principle stated in Luke 8:18 to be applied to all people: "So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him." This general principle would appear to have application to those who possess only God's general

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even though he is willing to save all, because there is something else that he wills more, which would be lost if he exerted his sovereign power to save all." John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), 123. Piper states that what God wills or desires more is "the manifestation of the full range of God's glory in wrath and mercy (Rom 9:22-23) and the humbling of man so that he enjoys giving all credit to God for his salvation (1 Cor 1:29)." Ibid., 124. The author of Lamentations states that there are some things which God wills to do, but not "willingly." He states: "For if He causes grief, then He will have compassion according to His abundant lovingkindness. For He does not afflict willingly or grieve the sons of men" (Lam. 3:32-33). The NASB notes that the word "willingly" means literally "from His heart." God does will to bring judgment on sinners, even though not with the same wholeheartedness with which He extends compassion to the penitent. See the discussion in John Piper, *Does God Desire All to Be Saved?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 48-49. For background of the common Calvinistic belief in the two wills in God, see the article by James White, "Primary Sources on The Two Wills of God: Grudem, Carson, Bavinck, Edwards, aBrakel, Turretin, Calvin, Luther" at <https://www.monergism.com/primary> (Accessed March 5, 2025)

revelation about himself. If they respond appropriately to what they know through this means (and we will discuss this later), God will reveal more to them—including the saving message of the gospel. If they do not respond appropriately, then God may not only withhold additional revelation, but may even withdraw what they have. This is God's judgment on a sinful humanity.

But there is also an element of mercy in this. This is seen in that those in darkness are not held accountable to the same degree as are those who are privileged to receive the light of the truth. Paul states that “where there is no law, there is no violation” (Rom. 4:15). That people are held accountable for their response to the revelation they have is stated in a number of passages (cf. Lk. 12:47–48; Jn. 9:41; 15:22; Rom. 2:12). In fact, Peter even says: “For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them” (II Pet. 2:21). In other words, their judgment would be more severe for having rejected what they knew, than for those who did not know as much as they did.

#### Salvation of Old Testament Saints

I will now seek to evaluate the evidence which inclusivists marshal in support of their thesis. The first line of evidence was that the Old Testament believers within Israel were saved without explicit knowledge of Christ. This is true, in the fullest sense of the word. God did not reveal in advance to Israel all that would later be made known about Christ once he had come. But this is not to say that God revealed nothing about his saving purposes and the means by which he would ultimately provide for their salvation. It is clear that from the very beginning, God made it known that salvation came through faith

in his gracious promise of blessing and deliverance from judgment, and that an atoning sacrifice for sin was a necessary element of this salvation. In the words of John Feinberg: “Thus we see that in each period of the Old Testament economy, the specific content revealed for men to believe involved truths about sacrifices and promises.”<sup>514</sup>

These elements are evident in Genesis 3, where God promised a deliverer who would crush Satan, though through his own suffering (v. 15). This promise has been the subject of a great deal of discussion. But the tradition that the promised “seed of the woman” ultimately refers to Christ has been widely held among Christian interpreters.

Kenneth Matthews comments:

Our passage provides for this mature reflection that points to Christ as the vindicator of the woman (cp. Rom 16:20) . . . . Specifically, Paul identified Christ as the ‘seed’ ultimately intended in the promissory blessing to Abraham (Gal. 3:16), and Abraham’s believing offspring includes the church (Rom 4:13, 16–18; Gal 3:8) . . . . Finally, the Apocalypse describes the ‘red dragon,’ who is identified as ‘that ancient serpent’ (Rev. 12:9), opposing the believing community (i.e., the woman) and plotting the destruction of her child (i.e., the Messiah). Ultimately, ‘that ancient serpent’ is destroyed by God for its deception of the nations (Rev. 20:2, 7–10).<sup>515</sup>

The element of sacrifice for sin is evident in the Lord’s sacrifice of an animal to provide clothing for Adam and Eve (Gen. 3: 21). Kenneth A. Matthews states:

Although the text does not specify that animals were slain to provide these coverings, it is a fair implication and one that likely would be made in the Mosaic

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<sup>514</sup> John S. Feinberg, “Salvation in the Old Testament,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, eds. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 60.

<sup>515</sup> Kenneth A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary, Volume 1A, Genesis 1–11:26* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 1A:247–248.



community, where animal sacrifice was pervasive. Since the garden narrative shares in tabernacle imagery, it is not surprising that allusion to animal sacrifice is found in the garden too. Through an oblique reference to animal sacrifice, the garden narrative paints a theological portrait familiar to the recipients of the Sinai revelation who honored the tabernacle as the meeting place with God. Sacrifice renewed and guaranteed that special union of God with his people (e.g., Day of Atonement, Lev 16). This mode of provision then for Adam and Eve affirmed God's abiding goodwill.<sup>516</sup>

The element of sacrifice is evident also in the following accounts regarding the worship of Abel (Gen. 4:4), and Noah (Gen. 8:20f), as well as that of Abraham (Gen. 12:8).

The element of faith in God's promise of blessing and deliverance is also implied in the early chapters of Genesis—in the cases of Eve, when she expressed her belief that the Lord had enabled her to give birth to a man (4:1), of Abel, when he brought a sacrifice to the Lord (4:4), of those who “called upon the name of the Lord” (4:26), of Enoch, who “walked with God” (5:22), and of Noah, who also “walked with God” and obeyed his commandments (6:8, 9, 22; 7:5). And it is made even more explicit in the case of Abraham, of whom it is said that “he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

It is even said of Abraham in the New Testament that the gospel was “preached beforehand” to him (Gal. 3:8). Not the gospel in the fullest sense in which we know it today, but the gospel (“good news”) nonetheless. As Mark Shaw states: “Abraham's response was to say ‘Amen’ (Hamen); in effect meaning ‘I believe this promise will be

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<sup>516</sup> Ibid., 255.

established.’ Abraham sensed the reality of God’s promise to such a vivid degree that he regarded it as good as done. Abraham was abandoning himself not to a vague hope of mercy but to the clear promise of God given through special revelation.”<sup>517</sup>

The crucial importance of faith in God’s revealed promise is plainly taught by Paul in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Romans, where he shows that Abraham was justified by grace through faith: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Rom. 4:3). The same is taught in Galatians 3:6–9.<sup>518</sup>

But what is faith? The writer to the Hebrews states that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). This tells us that saving faith involves being assured that God’s promises in which we hope are true, and that what is yet unseen will be seen. Faith is confidence in God’s revealed promise, and thus includes an indispensable cognitive element. William Lane states about this verse: “faith

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<sup>517</sup> Mark Shaw, “Is There Salvation Outside the Christian Faith?” *East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 2 (1983), 56.

<sup>518</sup> Walter Kaiser is among those who believe that Abraham was not justified by faith until his response to God’s promise of a son recorded in Genesis 15:4–5, where it is stated that “he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (v. 6). See, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Is it the Case That Christ is the Same Object of Faith in the Old Testament? (Genesis 15:1–6),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55.2 (2012), 291–298. Matthews, however, states: “Recognition of Abram’s faith at this point in the story . . . should not be taken as the initiation of his faith. Abram had already responded earlier to the call and promise of God’s word (12:1–3). Just as the covenant ritual of chap. 15 does not initiate God’s commitment but formally ratifies it, so the narration’s affirmation of Abram’s faith in v. 7 declares the faith Abram had exercised from the outset. The verbal construction ‘believed’ (v. 6) and reference to a past event at Ur (v. 7) substantiate that Abram already exhibited faith. The syntax of the verb *wehe’emin* diverts from the typical pattern found in past tense narrative. The force of the construction conveys an ongoing faith repeated from the past. The author is editorializing on the events reported, not including Abram’s faith in the chain of events as a consequence of the theophanic message. The point of the author is that Abram continued to believe in the Lord. In addition, reference to the Lord’s appearance to Abram at Ur (v. 7) implies an antecedent relationship (cp. Acts 7:2–4).” Kenneth A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary, Genesis 11:26–50:26, Volume 1B*:166–167.

celebrates *now* the reality of the *future* blessings that constitute the objective content of hope.”<sup>519</sup> The entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews emphasizes the crucial role of faith in God’s promise as the essential element in salvation. The word “promise” is used in Heb. 11:9, 11, 13, 17, 33, 39, and is implied in several other verses.

As to the identity and role of the deliverer whom God promised to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15), more and more was revealed as the generations went by. We do not know how much was understood about him by the common believer in Israel. But it is evident that Abraham’s descendants knew more about him than is explicitly stated in the text, judging by Jacob’s statement to his son Judah about “the one who is to come” (Gen. 49:10.)<sup>520</sup>

Certainly, there was no understanding of the trinitarian nature of the Godhead. But believers placed their faith in the God who had made gracious promises in which they hoped. This went far beyond what might have been gleaned about God simply by reflecting on his general or natural revelation. Something more was required.

This raises the fact that the content of the “faith” which inclusivists propose in response to general revelation is quite vague in comparison to faith as it is spoken of in the Scriptures. Speaking of the relationship between saving faith in the Old Testament and the New, Geoffrey W. Grogan states: “In each case . . . we see faith as the correlative of revelation, and that revelation both personal and propositional. It was personal in that

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<sup>519</sup> William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9–13* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 328.

<sup>520</sup> “The Christian interpreter, who identifies the king of our passage explicitly as Jesus of Nazareth, therefore can agree with the historian that the Davidic monarchy must be initially in view and also can agree with ancient Jewish interpretation that our text requires a messianic fulfillment.” Kenneth A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary, Volume 1B, Genesis 1–11:26*, 1B:896.

God disclosed *Himself* and not simply truths about Himself . . . . It was also propositional, for it was response to God as he made Himself known *in His promises*.<sup>521</sup> This is what is generally lacking in the inclusivist conception of saving faith. D. A. Carson observes: “Most of the pre-Christ believers are those who enter into a covenantal, faith-based relationship with the God who had disclosed himself to them in the terms and the extent recorded up to that time . . . . (T)hese believers on the Old Testament side were responding in faith to special revelation, and were not simply exercising some sort of general ‘faith’ in an undefined ‘God.’”<sup>522</sup>

It should be noted here that when those who had been saved through their faith in the God of Israel later came to know and trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior, they did not replace one faith with another. Rather, their faith moved from one that was anticipatory to one that was based on the fulfillment of God’s promise of redemption.<sup>523</sup> Their faith moved from anticipating the Deliverer to come, to believing in the Deliverer who *has* come. This was certainly true of the disciples, whom Jesus said were already spiritually “cleansed” on the night of his betrayal (John 13:10; 15:3), but whose faith entered into a new phase when they came to understand more fully the redemption accomplished in his death and resurrection.

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<sup>521</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, “The Experience of Salvation in the Old and New Testaments,” *Vox Evangelica* 5 (1967), 21.

<sup>522</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, 298.

<sup>523</sup> This is evident from Jesus’ words about his coming to “fulfill” the Law (Mt. 5:17), and that he came to fulfill all that was written about the Messiah in “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Lk. 24:44). It is evident as well in the argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which portrays Jesus as the fulfillment and completion of the Old Testament faith.

It was true of Zacharias and Elizabeth who were “righteous in the sight of God” (Luke 1:6), and of Simeon, who was “looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him” (Luke 2:25). This appears also to be true of the “Jews and God-fearing proselytes” in Pisidian Antioch who “followed Paul and Barnabas,” embracing their message about the salvation available through faith in Christ (Acts 13:43). These, they urged to “continue in the grace of God” (v. 43). Something similar occurred in Iconium (Acts 14:1), Philippi (Acts 16:14–15), Thessalonica (Acts 17:4), Berea (Acts 17:10–12), Corinth (Acts 18:7–8), and Rome (Acts 28:24), where some of the Jews came to believe in Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. As we shall see, however, the conversion of Gentiles (who were without God’s special revelation) would be described in a much different way.

#### The “Holy Pagans”

The second line of evidence appealed to by the inclusivist is that during Old Testament times there were redeemed people outside God’s covenant community. The first example is Melchizedek, who is identified as “a priest of God Most High” or El Elyon (Gen. 14:18). El Elyon was apparently one of the names given to El, the high god among the Canaanites.<sup>524</sup> However, that the writer intends for us to understand that Melchizedek was a worshiper of the true God is supported by the fact that Abram identified El Elyon as “*the Lord* (Yahweh) God Most High, possessor of heaven and

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<sup>524</sup> Walton, et al, *The Bible Background Commentary*, 47. However, Bruce Waltke points out that though the title Elyon appears in Canaanite literature, the title El Elyon never actually appears (though Baal Elyon does appear). Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 233.

earth” (v. 22). It is also evident that the patriarchs distinguished their worship of the Lord from the worship of the Canaanites. They did not worship at the same worship sites, but built their own altars to the Lord (12:8; 13:18; 26:25; 35:3). Furthermore, we see that the patriarchs distinguished the Lord from the gods worshiped by the Canaanites, as exemplified in the words of Jacob, who told his household, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you . . . .” (Gen. 35:2).

It is also significant that the name El Elyon is used of the Lord in Psalms 57:2 and 78:56 (“God Most High”). He is also spoken of as “Lord Most High” in Psalms 7:17 and 47:2. The name Elyon (“the Highest”) is also used of the Lord in numerous other passages (Num. 24:16; Deut. 32:8; II Sam. 22:14; Ps. 9:2; 18:13; 21:7; 46:4; 50:14; 73:11; 83:18; 87:5; 91:1,9; 92:1; 107:11; Isa. 14:14; Lam. 3:35, 38). The writer to the Hebrews also identifies Melchizedek as “priest of the Most High God” (Heb. 7:1), endorsing him as a true worshiper of the Lord.

Jesus Christ is identified as a “high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:10), in keeping with the statement in Psalm 110:4. It seems most unlikely that the psalmist would identify the priestly order of which the Messiah would be a member as being one whose first member was only ignorantly a worshiper of the true and living God. This was the view even of Hermann Gunkel. Speaking of the reference in Psalm 110 of the “priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek” he says: “(I)t is very unlikely that the later community, opposed to everything pagan . . . will have sought the pattern for the high-priesthood in a Canaanite.” <sup>525</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997, originally published 1910), 280. Quoted by Daniel Strange, *Their*

The fact that Abram gave tithes to Melchizedek as his expression of honor to the Lord, indicates that he shared a like faith with him. Walter Kaiser states: “Now if Melchizedek was not a genuine believer, why would Abram take the tithe that was usually set apart for the One true God who had just given him an unprecedented victory and hand it over to one who could otherwise be viewed as a pagan priest of a Canaanite deity? That hardly makes any sense.”<sup>526</sup>

We are not told how Melchizedek came to know the Lord. It’s possible that he may have received a direct revelation from the Lord, as Abram had.<sup>527</sup> Or, he may have been the recipient of the original revelation of the Lord that had been handed down through the generations, from Adam, and then through Noah and his sons.<sup>528</sup> We do know that the text of Genesis places Abram not many generations removed from the Tower of Babel event. It is not unlikely that the original faith in the Lord was preserved in various places throughout the world, and Melchizedek is representative of those who preserved this original faith in him. But Melchizedek is not an example of someone who was redeemed through his reflection on God’s general or natural revelation, or through his devotion to another god than the God worshiped by Abraham.<sup>529</sup> Speaking of Old

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*Rock Is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 199.

<sup>526</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Holy Pagans: *Reality or Myth?*” in *Faith Comes By Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, 130.

<sup>527</sup> This seems to be the view of Ramesh Richard, as expressed in his book, *The Population of Heaven: A Biblical Response to the Inclusivist Position on Who Will be Saved*, 39–40.

<sup>528</sup> This was the view of Jonathan Edwards, who believed Melchizedek “could have been saved through the traces of original revelation that still remained among his people.” Jonathan Edwards, “History of Redemption,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harry S. Stout (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1989), 9:179.

<sup>529</sup> This view is in contrast to that presented by Don Richardson, who describes Melchizedek as someone who was the recipient of only general revelation. Don

Testament figures such as Melchizedek, Old Testament scholar Paul House states: “God does not reveal himself to them through Baalism or some other ancient polytheistic religion. Thus, while it is true that the Lord makes himself known through visions or other means, it is not true the he is revealed as one who may be defined differently than the one true God described in the rest of scripture. Rather, these individuals receive knowledge of the one, creating, revealing, saving God known by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”<sup>530</sup>

D. A. Carson states:

When the Melchizedek passage is placed within the developing narrative of the book of Genesis, one can no longer think of monotheism emerging after endless struggles with pagan polytheism. It is far more natural in reading the account to suppose that there were still people who believed in the one true God, people who preserved some memory of God’s gracious self-disclosure to Noah, people who revered the memory of the severe lesson of babel. That Melchizedek should designate ‘God Most High’ as ‘Creator of Heaven and Earth’ points in the same direction . . . . Of course, Abram was the one who still received the special call to follow God and head up the race that would prove a blessing to all the nations of the earth. But that doesn’t mean he was the only one who believed in the one true God.<sup>531</sup>

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Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts: Revised Edition* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), 31. Later, however, on page 151 of this book, he states that Melchizedek “received direct communication from God.”

<sup>530</sup> Paul R. House, “Biblical Theology and the Inclusivist Challenge,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2.2, (Summer, 1998), 3.

<sup>531</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, 250.



Abimelech is another figure sometimes pointed to by inclusivists. He is similar to Melchizedek. He appears in the text of Genesis 20 as one to whom the Lord appeared in a dream, and who is sensitive to sin in his life. Abraham had thought there was no fear of God in his household (Gen. 20:11). But it appears from the text that there was such a reverence for the Lord.

Daniel Strange comments on Abimelech: “If I am right that God’s variegated letting go of the nations after Babel was a gradual degeneration into idolatry, . . . then we are at an early stage where knowledge of the true God and his actions was still widespread. This factor, coupled with God’s choice to communicate more directly with individuals at this time, may well account for Abimelech’s faith in his interaction with Abraham.”<sup>532</sup>

Jethro is also similar to Melchizedek, in that he is identified as a local priest (“priest of Midian”) in Ex. 3:1. The text tells us that he came to faith in the Lord in an exclusive sense only after learning of what the Lord had done for the nation Israel at the Exodus. He said, “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods” (Ex. 18:11). He is never spoken of as a “priest of God Most High,” but apparently had previously facilitated the worship of other gods besides the Lord as well. Nothing is stated in the text about Jethro’s spiritual condition prior to this time. We do know that the Midianites were descended from Abraham and his wife Keturah (Gen. 25:1–2). So it is possible that he and his family knew of the Lord through this lineage. Or, it could be that Moses had told them about the Lord during his many years of dwelling with them in Midian. But from this point on, he became devoted to the Lord alone, as exemplified in his bringing a burnt

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<sup>532</sup> Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 190.

offering to the him (Ex. 18:12), and offering wise counsel to Moses, at which time he affirmed his faith in the true God (Ex. 18:17–23).

Old Testament scholar Duane Garrett refers to this incident as Jethro’s “conversion experience.”<sup>533</sup> Jethro is an example, then, of a priest who came to faith in the Lord out of a polytheistic background. He no doubt knew *of* the Lord prior to this time, but he had not yet come to truly *know* him, or to have faith exclusively in him. There is really no indication that prior to this time he was a redeemed individual. Rather, he is an example of someone who came to faith upon learning of the mighty deeds of the Lord on behalf of Israel.

Job is an interesting case, in that though he was not a Hebrew, he evidenced a mature faith in God. He is identified in Job 1:1 as a man who “was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.” He really is not a valid example of someone who was redeemed in spite of his lack of knowledge of the true God. Throughout the book, Job refers to God as “the Almighty” (6:4, 14; 13:3; 21:15; 24:1; 27:2, 10, 11, 13; 29:5; 31:2, 35), “the Holy One” (6:10), and “my Judge” (23:7). He is spoken of by the narrator as “the Lord” (Yahweh) several times in the book (1:6–8, 12, 21; 2:1, 3; 38:1; 40:1; 42:1, 7, 10, 12), and once by Job himself (12:9). Job concurs with God’s claim to be the creator (38:4), and conceives of him as the sovereign ruler over his creation (12:13–25). In fact, Job recognizes that, though he did not believe his sufferings had come upon him for his personal sin, nonetheless he did realize that he was a sinner, in need of a Redeemer. And he expresses his confidence in God as his Redeemer (Job 20:25f).

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<sup>533</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2014), 444.

Though it is not possible to determine exactly when Job lived, it is apparent that he was a recipient of the true knowledge of the Lord, either through direct revelation, or through the tradition that was passed down from Adam through Noah and his descendants. He is not an example of an individual who was redeemed apart from knowledge of the true God.

Balaam stands in great contrast to Job. Though he is described as someone who in some sense knew the Lord, and to whom God revealed his prophetic word (Num. 22–24), he is also described as participating in offering sacrifices at a “high place” devoted to the worship of the Canaanite god Baal (Num. 22:41–23:2), and of advising the Midianites to seek to tempt Israel against the Lord (Num. 31:16). He is called a “diviner” (Heb. *qusem*) in Josh. 13:22.<sup>534</sup> He was for these reasons killed in battle (Num. 31:8; Josh. 13:22). He is not at all presented in a positive light in the biblical text (cf. Rev. 2:14).

Christopher Little’s estimation sums up the biblical picture of Balaam well:

Balaam represents syncretism in its clearest form. He attempted to possess and experience the best of both worlds but was destroyed in the end. He knew of the true God of Israel but failed to humble himself and turn from his practices of sorcery. Even though he was at one time an instrument for the divine voice, he neither intimately nor redemptively knew the owner of that voice. His life teaches that we must be very careful and cautious in determining who in reality has turned from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of life.<sup>535</sup>

Naaman is a different case. He is spoken of as someone by whom “the Lord had given victory to Aram” prior to his coming to truly know the God of Israel (II Kings 5:1).

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<sup>534</sup> Divination was a practice forbidden to the Israelites (Deut. 18:10, 14). This obviously puts Balaam’s practices outside those approved by the Lord.

<sup>535</sup> Christopher R. Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized*, 80.

This in itself, however, says nothing about his being a redeemed person, as God uses all kinds of people to accomplish his purposes. Cyrus is spoken of in the book of Isaiah as the Lord's "shepherd" and "anointed" one (Isa. 44:28; 45:1) through whom he subdued nations, even though it is stated that Cyrus did not know the Lord (Isa. 45:4). So, Naaman was evidently someone through whom God had accomplished his will, even before he knew him.

As the text recounts, Naaman was directed through a Jewish servant girl to go to Israel to see the prophet Elisha for healing of leprosy. Though initially offended that he would be required to dip himself seven times in the Jordan River, after humbling himself to do so, he was healed of his leprosy. In response, Naaman said, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel . . . ." (II Kings 5:15). Furthermore, he said, "(Y)our servant will no longer offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice to other gods, but to the Lord" (v. 17b). He even asked that the Lord would forgive him for participating in ceremonies involving worship of the god Rimmon, which was apparently required of someone in his position in the government of Aram: "(I)n this matter may the Lord pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon your servant in this matter" (v. 18). It has been pointed out that Naaman does not ask for permission to engage in such a ritual, but for forgiveness. He sees it as inconsistent with his new faith in the Lord. Daniel Strange points out that the "bowing" referred to in this ritual may "be nothing more than the physical movement of his aiding his elderly master to bow."<sup>536</sup> It's obvious that he

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<sup>536</sup> Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 205.

was a genuine worshiper of the Lord God of Israel, and not an example of someone who was redeemed apart from that knowledge.

Huram-abi of Tyre, whom King Hiram sent to build Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, is described as "a skilled man, endowed with understanding" (II Chron. 2:13). Though he was from Tyre, north of Israel, it is stated in the text that his mother was an Israelite from the tribe of Dan (II Chron. 2:14). Furthermore, it should be noted that King Hiram demonstrated in his letter to Solomon that he knew "the Lord, the God of Israel, who has made heaven and earth" (II Chron. 2:12). The mere fact that Hiram-abi was "endowed with understanding" does not demand that he be thought of as a redeemed person. But if he was, then it is clear from the text that he grew up in an environment where the God of Israel was well-known.

The Queen of Sheba came to Jerusalem from a distance to see if the reports she had heard of Solomon's wisdom were true. But it's clear from the text that she had heard also of the Lord: "Now when the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with difficult questions" (I Kings 10:1). Before her departure for home, she said, "Blessed be the Lord your God who delighted in you to set you on the throne of Israel, because the Lord loved Israel forever, therefore he made you king, to do justice and righteousness" (I Kings 10:9). If her words are a reflection of a genuine faith in the Lord, then it is only because she had heard of him prior to this time.

The identity of the person named as Daniel by the prophet Ezekiel (14:14, 20; 28:3) is disputed. Some believe that this is a reference to the character mentioned in the Ugaritic texts, especially since the other members of the trio mentioned by Ezekiel (Noah

and Job) lived during an era long before Ezekiel's generation. The prophet Daniel would have been a contemporary of Ezekiel's (though he may have been well-known to Ezekiel). The spelling of the name Daniel is also somewhat different than the way the biblical Daniel is referred to. This may, however, simply be a variant spelling of the name.

The most serious difficulty with identifying Ezekiel's Daniel as the one mentioned in the Ugaritic texts, is that he is there spoken of as a devotee of a pagan god (likely Baal). It seems highly unlikely that Ezekiel would refer to a worshiper of Baal as "righteous" (14:14), particularly in a context where the Lord is reproving Israel for her idolatry (14:1–11). Indeed, he contrasts the righteousness of Noah, Daniel and Job with the "faithlessness" of Israel in her idolatry (14:12–13).<sup>537</sup> The Daniel spoken of in the Ugaritic texts would not seem to be a good example of faithfulness to the Lord. Furthermore, the Daniel described by Ezekiel was someone to whom God revealed his "secrets" (28:3). This is a fitting description of the biblical Daniel, to whom God revealed mysteries (Dan. 2:28–30).

Coming now to the New Testament, we find the "magi from the east" coming to search for the newborn "King of the Jews" having seen "his star in the east" (Mt. 2:1–2). We know very little about the faith of these magi. But the fact that they responded to the astronomical sign (whatever it may have been) by coming to Israel to find the newborn King, tells us that they must have had some knowledge of the God of Israel prior to this

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<sup>537</sup> My observations about the Daniel referred to by Ezekiel were drawn from the article by Daniel B. Wallace, "Who Is Ezekiel's Daniel?" [www.Bible.org](http://www.Bible.org) (Accessed December 21, 2020.) See also H. H. P. Dressler, "The Identification of the Ugaritic DNIL with the Daniel of Ezekiel," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979), 152–61.

time. Scholars have surmised that they may well have had access to the oracle of Balaam, in which he said, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel . . . .” (Num. 24:17).<sup>538</sup> It’s very possible as well that they had knowledge of the prophecies given to Daniel while he resided in Babylon, about the coming of “Messiah the Prince” (Dan. 9:24–27).

Judging by their response to the baby Jesus, and by the fact that God took extraordinary measures to protect them, it’s apparent that they had a genuine faith in the Lord. But whether they came to saving faith at the time when they paid homage to Jesus, or prior to that time even in their homeland, it is clear in either case that it was as a result of coming to know about the God of Israel, and of his promises. There is no indication that they were redeemed individuals apart from that knowledge.

Craig Keener’s comments are appropriate at this point: “(E)ven supernatural guidance like that of the star can take the astrologers only so far; for more specific direction they must ask the leaders in Jerusalem where the king is to be born (2:2). That is, their celestial revelation was only partial; they must finally submit to God’s revelation in the Scriptures, preserved by the Jewish people . . . .”<sup>539</sup>

The cases of the Centurion who encountered Jesus and of the Syrophoenician woman are likewise not convincing examples of individuals who were redeemed prior to coming to know the Lord, for in both cases their faith was clearly based on explicit

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<sup>538</sup> R. T. France comments: “(T)he star which plays such a prominent role in the story invites reflection on Balaam’s prophecy in Num 24:17–19 of the rise (LXX) *anatelei*, echoed in Matthew’s *anatole*, vv. 2, 9 of a ‘star out of Jacob and a scepter out of Israel’ . . . .” R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 62.

<sup>539</sup> Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 100.

knowledge of the God of Israel. This is true of the Centurion of whom the Jewish elders said “he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue” (Lk. 7:5). And it is equally true of the Syrophoenician woman, who knew enough of Israel’s faith to refer to Jesus as the “Son of David” (15:22). Neither of them is an example of an individual who was redeemed prior to coming to know the Lord. The fact that Jesus said to his followers after his encounter with the Centurion, “I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 8:11), simply affirms the fact that many Gentiles will enter the kingdom. He did not say that they would enter in spite of the fact that they did not know Israel’s God.

The most significant case in the New Testament is that of Cornelius, as recorded in Acts 10–11. Interpreters are divided as to whether Cornelius was a redeemed individual prior to his hearing the gospel through the Apostle Peter. Some believe that he was. This is based primarily on two facts. First, is the fact that Cornelius is described, even before Peter arrived, as “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually” (Acts 10:2). This would seem to suggest that Cornelius was a true worshiper of the Lord prior to hearing about Jesus. He was a “God-fearer” who worshiped the Lord, but had not submitted to circumcision so as to become a Gentile proselyte.

The second fact is that when Peter arrived at Cornelius’ home, he said, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him” (Acts 10:34–35). This might be taken to mean that even prior to hearing about Christ, a person who “fears God” and “does what is right” is a redeemed individual. If Cornelius was redeemed prior to his



hearing the gospel, however, it would not have been on the basis of a response to general revelation, or another religions, but on the basis of his sharing a faith similar to that of other Old Testament believers—faith in the God of Abraham, who had promised a coming redeemer. He would then, in that case, have transitioned from the era of anticipation to the era of fulfillment. This was, in fact, the view of John Calvin. He stated that: “Cornelius must be put in the catalogue of the fathers, who hoped for salvation of the Redeemer before he was revealed.”<sup>540</sup> It also was the view of Jonathan Edwards, who concluded that Cornelius was saved due to the fact that he “did already in some respect believe in (Christ) even in the manner that the Old Testament saints were wont to do.”<sup>541</sup>

James Buchanan believed that Cornelius was a redeemed person prior to his embracing the gospel, based on his faith as a believer in the promises of the Old Testament. He states:

And on the whole, he may be regarded as a believer, in the same sense in which Abraham was a believer, or the cloud of witnesses which is mentioned in the 11<sup>th</sup> of the Hebrews, who ‘all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth;’ and being a believer, he was justified and accepted, as they were, by faith in God’s covenant promise . . . . The centurion, we believe, was in a state of *transition* from the Jewish to the Christian faith, and the change which occurred in his views ought to

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<sup>540</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: John-Acts* (Wilmington, Del.: Associated Publishers & Authors, n.d.), p. 1095.

<sup>541</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies* 40, quoted in Gerald R. McDermott, “Response to Gilbert: ‘The Nations Will Worship: Jonathan Edwards and the Salvation of the Heathen,’” *Trinity Journal* 23 (spring 2002): 78.

be regarded as his advancement from an imperfect to a more perfect state, rather than as his first conversion to God.<sup>542</sup>

If this was the case, then his experience would also have been to some degree similar to that of the “disciples” described in Acts 19:1–7. They are called “disciples” by Luke, and it is most likely that by this he intends us to understand that they were disciples of Jesus. They had been baptized into John’s baptism, but were unaware of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (as Cornelius was ignorant of Jesus). They would have been among those who were redeemed by their faith in God and his promised redeemer—something Paul mentions in the passage when he said that John taught people to “believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus” (Acts 19:4). These disciples were then baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus” and received the Holy Spirit through Paul’s laying his hands upon them.

I believe, however, that the text best supports the conclusion that Cornelius was not redeemed until he heard the gospel. In favor of this view are several facts. The first is the statement of Cornelius that the angel who had spoken to him prior to Peter’s arrival had told him that it would be through Peter’s words that he would “be saved” (Acts 11:14). This implies that Cornelius was not yet a saved person prior to his hearing the gospel through Peter.

The second fact is that it was only after Peter said that “through His (Jesus’) name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” that then “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message” (Acts 10:43–44). This would suggest

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<sup>542</sup> James Buchanan, *The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 324–25, 26.

that prior to Cornelius believing in Jesus, he had not received the gift of the forgiveness of sins and of the Holy Spirit. In spite of the fact that he was described as “devout” (vv. 2, 31), as well as “righteous and God-fearing” (v. 22), he still was in need of salvation.

As I. Howard Marshall states: “Piety, such as that shown by Cornelius . . . , is an indication of readiness to accept the message, and is pleasing to God (Acts 10.31), but is no substitute for actually responding to the gospel, which brings salvation (Acts 11.14, 18).”<sup>543</sup> It’s obvious by his response to the gospel that Cornelius did not believe his religious devotion and good works were sufficient for his personal salvation. As Marshall furthermore states: “(H)ad a person like Cornelius said, ‘My good deeds are sufficient to win me favour with God, and I have no need of the gospel’ . . . then it would have become clear that he was not accepted by God; a good life is acceptable in God’s sight only when it leads to recognition of its own inadequacy and to acceptance of the Gospel.”<sup>544</sup>

The text tells us that Cornelius had been a praying person prior to his encounter with Peter (Acts 10:2). The angel told him that his prayers (as well as his alms) had “ascended as a memorial before God” (Acts 10:4). This phrase is an allusion to the “memorial” portion of an offering which “ascended” to God, as an appeal for him to remember with favor the offerer.<sup>545</sup> And in Cornelius’ case, God did respond to his

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<sup>543</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 60.

<sup>544</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 189–190.

<sup>545</sup> “The grain offering’s *memorial portion* was . . . burned on the altar as *a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the Lord*, serving as the offeror’s request to be remembered with favour when presenting praise or petition . . . .” Jay Sklar, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 97.

prayer. It was evidently the forgiveness of his sins (Acts 10:43), for which Cornelius had been praying (at least in part), as suggested by the angel's words to him: "your prayer has been heard" (Acts 10:31). This is the evidence that the Holy Spirit had been at work in Cornelius' life, convicting him of sin, and preparing him for the reception of the gospel.

Later, Peter made the statement that Cornelius' experience shows that "God has granted to Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). Later also, at the Jerusalem Council, Peter referred to God having cleansed the hearts of Gentiles by faith (Acts 15:9), suggesting that such cleansing occurred in conjunction with coming to trust in Christ as Savior. This implies that though the Holy Spirit was at work in Cornelius' heart prior to the coming of Peter to preach the gospel, nonetheless, prior to his placing his faith in Jesus, he did not yet possess eternal life, and that he was not yet cleansed of his sins. He came to possess eternal life and to be cleansed of his sins through repentance and believing in Christ as his Savior.

In this case, Peter's statement that those from any nation who "fear God and do what is right" are acceptable to him simply tells us that nationality is not a factor in determining whether one can be saved or not. Being a Gentile is no barrier to being accepted by God. But in any nation, those who worship him and do what is right are acceptable (dektos) to God.<sup>546</sup> The word dektos does not mean that the person is "justified," but that God will receive such a person when they place their faith in him. D.

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<sup>546</sup> Ronald E. Clements shows that the concept of being "acceptable" signified by the use of the word dektos echoes the acceptability of prescribed sacrifices in the book of Leviticus (1:4; 7:18; 19:7; 22:23, 25, 27). Ronald E. Clements, "The Old Testament Background of Acts 10:34–35," in *With Steadfast Purpose: Essays on Acts in Honor of Henry Jackson Flanders*, ed. Naymond H. Keathley (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1990), 205. See also G. Gerleman, "ratsah," *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, eds. E. Jenni and C. Westermann (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1972), 2:810–813.

A. Carson states that the word translated “acceptable” (*dektos*) “is never used in reference to whether or not a person is accepted by God in some saving sense.”<sup>547</sup> John Stott writes: “It is clear then that, although in some sense ‘acceptable’ to God, Cornelius before his conversion had neither ‘salvation’ nor ‘life.’”<sup>548</sup>

The New Testament commentator Henry Alford states:

The question which recent events had solved in Peter’s mind, was that of the admissibility of men of all nations into the church of Christ. *In this sense only*, had he received any information as to the *acceptableness* of men of all nations before God. He saw, that in every nation, men who seek after God, who receive His witness of Himself without which He has left no man, and humbly follow His will as far as they know it,—these have no *extraneous hindrance*, such as uncircumcision, *placed in their way* to Christ, but are capable of being admitted into God’s church *though Gentiles*, and *as Gentiles* . . . . It is clearly unreasonable to suppose Peter to have meant, that *each heathen’s natural light and moral purity would render him acceptable in the sight of God*:—for, if so, why should he have proceeded to preach Christ to Cornelius, or indeed *any more at all*? And it is equally unreasonable to find any verbal or doctrinal difficulty in *erg. dikaiosunen*, or to suppose that *dik.* must be taken in its forensic sense, and therefore that he alludes to the state of men *after becoming* believers . . . . The deeper truth, that the preparation of the heart itself in such men *comes from God’s preventing grace*, is not in question here, nor touched upon.<sup>549</sup>

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<sup>547</sup> D. A. Carson, *Gagging of God*, 51.

<sup>548</sup> John R. Stott, “Dialogue, Encounter, Even Confrontation,” in *Faith Meets Faith*, Mission Trends, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 5:167.

<sup>549</sup> Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament: with a critically revised text, a digest of various readings, marginal references to verbal and idiomatic usage, prolegomena, and a critical and exegetical commentary*, 4 volumes (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 2:118.

Philip Schaff states similarly:

National distinctions, he would say, have nothing to do with admission into the kingdom of God. The great requisite is, not descent from Abraham, not circumcision, but simply a sincere desire for salvation. God looks upon the heart; and to every one who reveres him according to the measure of his knowledge and advantages, and lives accordingly, he will graciously show the way to the Saviour, who alone can satisfy the cravings of his soul. This is the sense of the words in their connection.<sup>550</sup>

The Baptist commentator Horatio B. Hackett, states:

That Peter did not intend, however, to represent his righteousness, or that of any man, as sufficient to justify him in the sight of God, is self-evident; for in v. 43 he declares that it is necessary to believe on Christ in order to obtain ‘the remission of sins.’ (Compare also 14:11.) . . . . In other words, since the apostle has reference to the state of mind which God requires as preparatory to an interest in the benefits of the gospel, the righteousness and the acceptance of which he speaks must also be preparatory, i.e. relative, and not absolute.<sup>551</sup>

Cornelius, then, would be among those whose hearts the Holy Spirit had prepared to receive the gospel.

John Piper states concerning Cornelius: “My suggestion is that Cornelius represents a kind of unsaved person among an unreached people group who is seeking God in an extraordinary way. And Peter is saying that God *accepts* this search as genuine (hence “acceptable” in verse 35) and works wonders to bring that person the gospel of

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<sup>550</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Apostolic Church*, trans. Edward D. Yeomans (New York: Chas. Scribner, 1957), 222.

<sup>551</sup> Horatio B. Hackett, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: A New Edition* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1882), 134.

Jesus Christ the way he did through the visions of both Peter on the housetop and Cornelius in the hour of prayer.”<sup>552</sup> As J. Oliver Buswell states: “It is not to be supposed that Cornelius (Acts 10) was born again prior to Peter’s visit, but it should certainly be clear that he had been convicted and brought to a point where he was ready to believe, prior to his first hearing of the Gospel.”<sup>553</sup> But he was not yet saved until he heard and believed the gospel about Christ.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>552</sup> John Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God*, 87. It should be recalled that Augustine expressed what may be thought of as a similar view in his comments about Cornelius: “A man begins to receive grace the moment he begins to believe in God, being moved to faith by some internal or external admonition. But the fullness and evidentness of the infusion of grace depends on temporal junctures and on sacramental rites. Catechumens are not unbelievers, otherwise Cornelius did not believe in God, although by his prayers and alms he showed himself worthy to have an angel sent to him. But these good deeds would have no effect had he not already believed; and he would not have believed had he not been called by some secret admonition coming through visions of the mind or spirit, or by more open admonitions reaching him through the bodily senses. In some there is the grace of faith, but not enough to obtain the kingdom of heaven, as in catechumens, or in Cornelius himself before he was incorporated into the Church by participation in the sacraments . . . . There are therefore inchoate beginnings of faith, which resemble conception. It is not enough to be conceived. A man must also be born if he is to obtain eternal life. None of these beginnings is without the grace of God’s mercy. And good works, if there are any, follow and do not precede the grace . . . .” *De Diversis Quaestionibus Ad Simplicianum* (*To Simplician On Various Questions*): 2. Translated by John H. S. Burleigh. [www.romancatholicism.org/jansenism/augustine-simplician.htm](http://www.romancatholicism.org/jansenism/augustine-simplician.htm) (Accessed January 2, 2021.) Here he does acknowledge a grace and “faith” before saving faith. His comparing God’s prevenient grace to conception does seem unfortunate, however, as this implies there is new life prior to saving faith. We will discuss this more thoroughly in our discussion of God’s preparing grace in the next chapter.

<sup>553</sup> Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 1:354.

<sup>554</sup> The objection is sometimes raised against the view that Cornelius was not yet saved before believing in Christ, that if this was the case, then he would have gone to hell if he had died before Peter arrived at his home to deliver the gospel message. But this is to fail to recognize that if God had brought someone to the point of readiness to respond to the gospel, then he would certainly see that they received the gospel before they died (or even at the time of death). What God had begun, he would surely complete (Phil. 1:6). Paul Helm writes that it is “unacceptably abstract and hypothetical to say . . . if Cornelius had not met Peter he would not be saved. Scripture does not invite us to break up the causal nexus of events as revealed and to speculate about each link in the chain.” Quoted in Daniel Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*, 327 n. 74. He quotes from Paul

In no case, however, would Cornelius be an example of someone who was saved apart from knowledge of the true God, merely on the basis of their response to general revelation, or through another religion. As James Buchanan states: “Some, considering Cornelius as a Gentile, and founding on his declared acceptance with God, have inferred the sufficiency of mere natural religion . . . . (But this view) derives no support from the case of Cornelius. For the religion of Cornelius was not derived solely, or even chiefly, from the volume of Nature: it was drawn from the revelation of God’s truth in the Old Testament Scriptures . . . .”<sup>555</sup>

It should be noted that Peter’s message to Cornelius was virtually the same as the one Paul preached to both Jews and “God-fearers” recorded in Acts 13:16–31, in which he said that forgiveness of sins comes through believing in Jesus (Acts 13:38–39).<sup>556</sup>

It is important also to note here that this passage clarifies for us what it means for a person to be “saved.”<sup>557</sup> The texts in these chapters tell us that salvation is conceived of in Acts as consisting of the forgiveness of sins (10:43; 15:9), receiving the gift of the

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Helm, “Are They Few That Be Saved?” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 280.

<sup>555</sup> James Buchanan, *The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit*, 332–333.

<sup>556</sup> It is generally held that “God-fearers” were Gentiles who had associated themselves with the synagogue, and who embraced the teachings of Judaism, but had not received circumcision so as to become proselytes.

<sup>557</sup> Though the relationship of Old Testament believers to the Holy Spirit is a matter of debate (based on Jesus’ statement in John 14:17), it seems clear that there was no essential difference in the nature of the salvation of believers during Old and New Testament times. Salvation has always consisted of the forgiveness of sins and justification before God, as well as regeneration and the gift of eternal life. See Arthur H. Lewis, “The New Birth under the Old Covenant,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 56.1 (Jan. 1984), 35–44; Geoffrey W. Grogan, “The Experience of Salvation in the Old and New Testaments,” *Vox Evangelica* 5 (1967), 4–26; John S. Feinberg, “Salvation in the Old Testament,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, 39–77.



Holy Spirit (10:44, 47; 11:17; 15:8), and the gift of eternal life (11:18). This salvation comes now through repentance (11:18) and believing in Jesus (10:43; 11:17; 15:7, 9).

This is not to deny that there is a work of God's grace in preparation for saving faith (more about this in the following chapter). But it is to say that prior to such explicit faith, one cannot be said to have received salvation. This seems to be one of the primary weaknesses of the inclusivist viewpoint—that it fails to clearly distinguish between God's preparing grace and his saving grace.<sup>558</sup> This failure results in some inclusivists speaking of a person experiencing salvation *to a degree* prior to the point of conversion, and receiving a “fuller justification” when they come to faith in Christ, as Plumptre suggests.<sup>559</sup> It is difficult to conceive of a person being only partially justified. It would seem much better to conceive of a person as being *not yet* justified, rather than justified in some lesser sense, prior to coming to faith in Jesus. This is, in my opinion, the major weakness of the inclusivist position.

John Piper's comments regarding the sense in which Cornelius is an example of the “one who fears God and does what is right, and is welcome or acceptable to God” are worth repeating:

So the fear of God that is acceptable to God in verse 35 is a true sense that there is a holy God, that we have to meet him some day as desperate sinners, that we cannot save ourselves and need to know God's way of salvation, and that we pray

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<sup>558</sup> Arminius himself speaks of those who “feel the motions of the Holy Spirit which belong either to preparation or to the very essence of regeneration, but who are not yet regenerate . . .” James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 1:325. Though he does consider both aspects to be part of God's “saving grace,” he does go on to refer to them as “either . . . primary or secondary, as [preveniente] preceding or subsequent,” and states that “(u)nless a man properly distinguishes each of these, and uses such words as correspond with these distinctions, he must of necessity stumble, and make others appear to stumble . . .” Ibid., 1:326-27.

<sup>559</sup> See notes 284 and 492 above.

for it day and night and seek to act on the light we have. This is what Cornelius was doing. And God accepted his prayer and his groping for truth in his life (Acts 17:27) and worked wonders to bring the saving message of the gospel to him.<sup>560</sup>

In the case, then, of all of the so-called “holy pagans” in Scripture, I conclude that they all were either not holy (Balaam), or were not pagan (they were all recipients of special revelation). None of them could really be conceived of as having been saved apart from believing in God’s gracious promises. Even Terrance Tiessen, who adheres to what he calls the “accessibilist” view, acknowledges that he can “find no biblical examples of people who were saved through general revelation alone.”<sup>561</sup> And though he argues at length for the possibility that it is nonetheless possible, he expresses “doubt that many people come to God in acceptable faith through general revelation *alone* . . . .”<sup>562</sup>

### Salvation of Infants

Another argument sometimes advanced by inclusivists is that if God grants eternal life to infants and children who are unable to believe, it seems that he would do the same for the unevangelized who likewise are unable to believe. This is based, however, on a false comparison. For whereas children are innately incapable of believing, this is not true of unevangelized adults who are capable of perceiving what God has disclosed through general revelation. As Gary Phillips states: “(T)hey do not have the

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<sup>560</sup> John Piper, *Jesus the Only Way to God*, 89–90.

<sup>561</sup> Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 149.

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

capacity to respond to general revelation or conscience.”<sup>563</sup> Infants are in a very different category from unevangelized adults, and thus do not provide a fair analogy.

### Specific Texts

I will now examine the specific biblical passages that are sometimes appealed to by those who hold the inclusivist viewpoint. The first of these is the statement in Exodus 6:3, that the patriarchs did not know God by the name of the Lord (Yahweh). This statement has been used by those who hold to the documentary hypothesis regarding the composition of the Pentateuch, to show that belief in Yahweh was not part of the patriarchal religion, but was introduced into the text by a later author/editor (the Yahwistic author, or J).

If we take the book of Genesis, however, as it now reads, we find that the name Yahweh appears throughout the text. This is true not only of the writer who is narrating the events (for example in Gen. 12:1), but the name also appears in the statements of particular individuals quoted by the writer (e.g., Gen. 14:22; 15:2; 16:2, 5; 24:3, 7; 26:28–29; 27:20; 29:33, 35; 30:24, 30). It is used by Eve, for example, in Gen. 4:1, “I have gotten a manchild with the help of the Lord.” It is most notably used by Abraham in naming the place where God intervened to spare Isaac: “The Lord (Yahweh) will provide” (Gen. 22:14). And it appears also when the Lord refers to himself in Gen. 22:15. Some would suggest that the writer has inserted the name Yahweh into the text at these

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<sup>563</sup> W. Gary Phillips, “Evangelicals and Pluralism: Current Options,” in *Proceedings of the Wheaton Theology Conference* 1 (Spring, 1992), 183.

points, to show that the God of the patriarchs was the same as Yahweh.<sup>564</sup> It should be noted, however, that when Moses asked the Lord who he should tell the Israelites had sent him as their deliverer, he should tell them that “I AM has sent me to you” (Ex. 3:14). He then says, “‘The Lord (Yahweh), the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations” (Ex. 3:15). These statements suggest that the name of the Lord was familiar to the people of Israel at that time.

Allen P. Ross points out that the statement in Genesis 4:26 is very difficult to account for if it was not part of the original account: “Then men began to call upon the name of the Lord.” He states: “The expression states clearly that something specific was taking place, i.e., that the name Yahweh was being proclaimed or invoked.”<sup>565</sup> Ross points out that the word “called” (qara) indicates that the Lord’s name (Yahweh) was “proclaimed” or “used in public worship.”<sup>566</sup>

If, then, the texts in Genesis which use the name Yahweh represent the actual words of the persons in question, then in what sense could it be said that God had not

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<sup>564</sup> Gordon J. Wenham provides a thorough discussion of this matter in his chapter, “The Religion of the Patriarchs,” in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, eds. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (London: InterVarsity Press, 1980), ch. 6. He holds that the patriarchs did not know the name Yahweh.

<sup>565</sup> Allen P. Ross, “Did the Patriarchs Know the Name of the Lord?” in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts*, eds. David M. Howard Jr., Michael A. Grisanti (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), 334.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid., 334. As Ross points out, this same phrase is also used in Genesis 12:8, where it is stated that Abram built an altar and “called upon (or proclaimed) the name of the Lord,” as well as in Exodus 34:5, where it is stated that the Lord himself, in the presence of Moses, “descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon (or proclaimed) the name of the Lord.” In other words, he proclaimed his own name, and defined his character in the following verses (vv. 6-7). Ibid., 334-35.

revealed his name as Yahweh to the patriarchs (as some understand Ex. 6:3 to imply).<sup>567</sup> James A. Motyer has suggested that Exodus 6:2–3 should be translated as follows: “And God spoke to Moses, and said to him: ‘I am Yahweh. And I showed myself to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob in the character of El Shaddai, but in the character expressed by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.’”<sup>568</sup> Motyer explains that this translation “does not deny to the patriarchs the knowledge of the name Yahweh, but only denies to them knowledge of the significance of that name; it allows them to know the name but not to know the nature which the name implied.”<sup>569</sup> He points out that “there are forty-five cases which undoubtedly display patriarchal knowledge of the name, either because they themselves use it, or because it is used by God or man in addressing them.”<sup>570</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright believes that the name Yahweh was not made known to the Patriarchs, but that he revealed himself to them by using the terms for God which they were familiar with. But he states: “The fact that the living God addressed Abraham and entered into covenant with him in terms of divine names Abraham would already have known, in no way implies that all Abraham’s contemporaries who worshipped El in his various manifestations, and with the seamier side of his mythology, thereby knew and worshipped the living God . . . . And the purpose of God’s self-revelation was not to validate the religion of El and his pantheon, but to lead Abraham and his descendants beyond it into a personal relationship with God in *preparation* for the full experience of redemption and thereby for full knowledge of his true name and character . . . . So the patriarchal experience certainly allows us to believe that God does address and relate to men in terms of their existing concept of deity (as *e.g.* in the case of Cornelius). But we must presume that such initiative is preparatory to bringing them to a knowledge of his historic revelation and redemptive acts (which, in our era, means knowledge of Christ). It does not allow us to assert that worship of other gods is in fact unconscious worship of the true God, nor to escape from the task of bringing knowledge of the saving name of God in Jesus Christ to men of other faiths.” Christopher J. H. Wright, “The Christian and other religions: the biblical evidence,” *Themelios* 9.2 (Jan. 1984), 7.

<sup>568</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Revelation of the Divine Name* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1959).

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

This view is also supported by John J. Davis.<sup>571</sup> He points out that the name of Yahweh appears in the name of Moses' mother Jochebed, meaning "Yahweh is glorious" (Ex. 6:20; Num. 26:59). This would indicate that Yahweh was the name of God familiar to the Jewish people at the time. Davis shows that the idiom "to know a name" does not necessarily mean that the name had not been literally known previously. In Jeremiah 16:21, the Lord says (referring to Israel's future restoration), "Therefore behold, I am going to make them know—This time I will make them know My power and My might; And they shall know that My name is the Lord."<sup>572</sup> Here, to know the Lord's name is to know by experience his power and might. This sense of knowing the significance of the Lord as Yahweh due to the experience of his power is reflected several times in Exodus. For example, in Ex. 16:12, the Lord says, "I have heard the grumblings of the sons of Israel; speak to them, saying, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"<sup>573</sup> Davis concludes then, that the statement in Ex. 6:3 means that "he is going to provide a demonstration of the fact that He is not only Yahweh who made a covenant with Abraham but is Yahweh who is faithful in keeping it. New aspects of His glory, majesty and redemption are to be known by Israel."<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> John J. Davis, "The Patriarchs' Knowledge of Jehovah," *Grace Journal* 4.1 (Winter, 1963), 29–43.

<sup>572</sup> Cf. also the similar statements in II Chron. 6:33; Isa. 19:20–21; 52:5–6; Ezek. 20:5, 9; 39:6–7.

<sup>573</sup> Cf. the similar statements in Ex. 6:7; 10:2; 14:4; 29:46.

<sup>574</sup> Davis, "The Patriarchs' Knowledge of Jehovah," 40.

Alternatively, Duane Garrett suggests that Exodus 6:3 has been mistranslated, and that it should actually read as follows: “And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai. But my name is Yahweh. Did I not make myself known to them?”<sup>575</sup>

He states:

The repetition of ‘I am YHWH’ in Exod. 6 is certainly not meant to be a revelation of a name that no one had ever heard of before. It is not even, as some suggest, filling out the name YHWH with new meaning and content. The main point is not novelty but continuity. He made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob regarding their offspring and the land of Canaan, and now he is fulfilling those promises. Furthermore, just as he was the fathers’ God, and in covenant with them, now he is the God of all of Israel, entering into covenant with them (6:7, anticipating Exod. 19–24). In fact, one could hardly more badly misread the text than to claim that Exod. 6 is the revelation of something new. It is the completion of something very old. It was no new God that was going to save Israel from Egypt; it was the God the fathers had known.<sup>576</sup>

This translation is certainly possible, but it is not at all necessary in order to establish that the patriarchs knew the name of the Lord.

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<sup>575</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, 244–246, 250–254. He follows the conclusions that were put forth by other scholars (as noted in Allen P. Ross’s work on the patriarchs cited above, p. 327, notes 20, 21 in that work): W. J. Martin, *Stylistic Criteria and the Analysis of the Pentateuch* (London: Tyndale, 1955), 17; and F. I. Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 102; L. A. Herrboth, “Exodus 6:3b: Was God Known to the Patriarchs as Jehovah?” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 4 (1931), 345–49; F. C. Smith, “Observations on the Use of the Names and titles of God in Genesis,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 40 (1968), 103–09; G. R. Driver, “Affirmation by Exclamatory Negation,” *Journal of the Ancient Near East Society of Columbia University* 5 (1973), 109.

<sup>576</sup> Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, 252.

Even if it were the case, however, that the patriarchs did not know the Lord as Yahweh, this does not constitute a strong argument in favor of the inclusivist viewpoint. For, as discussed above in the section regarding Melchizedek, the religion of the patriarchs was clearly distinct from that of the surrounding culture. When Abram first entered the land, he built an altar that was distinct from the existing cultic centers in the land (Gen. 12:8; 13:18).<sup>577</sup> Later, Jacob tells his household: “Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone” (Gen. 35:2–3).<sup>578</sup> He made a clear distinction between the Lord and the gods of the surrounding culture. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was not the god of the Canaanites.

Another Old Testament passage appears in Deuteronomy 4:19, where God says that he had allotted to the nations the worship of various gods represented by the moon, stars and hosts of heaven.<sup>579</sup> This statement comes, however, in the midst of a paragraph warning Israel against following after these gods, and does not state that such worship was sanctioned by God as being legitimate for the nations. Merrill believes that the

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<sup>577</sup> The distinctive features of patriarch worship are described in the article by Augustine Pagolu, “Patriarch Religion as Portrayed in Genesis 12–50,” *Tyndale Bulletin*, 47.2 (1997), 375–378. He states: “The problem of religious syncretism became an issue only after Israel claimed the land as her own and wanted to become like the native inhabitants, but this does not seem to have been a problem for the patriarchs.” *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>578</sup> Daniel Strange brings out these and other contrasts between the patriarchal and Canaanite worship in his book *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*, 186–192.

<sup>579</sup> Craigie suggests that the worship of the heavenly bodies was legitimate for other nations, though not for Israel. Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 137.



statement simply means that God had granted the heavenly bodies to all peoples “for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (Gen. 1:14), but not to be worshiped.<sup>580</sup>

It’s not at all unlikely, however that this statement denotes God giving the nations over to such worship as an act of judgment. This is reflected in Paul’s statement: “In generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways . . . .” (Acts 14:16), as well as in his statements that in response to the nations suppressing the truth about God evident in the creation, He “gave them over” to various forms of depravity (Romans 1:18–32). This is also similar to what is said of Israel, that God “gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart” (Psalm 81:12), and that he “delivered them up to serve the host of heaven” (Acts 7:42–43). So the statement in Deuteronomy that God “allotted to the nations” the hosts of heaven is not a positive endorsement of such worship, as though it was an implicit worship of the true God.<sup>581</sup>

A third Old Testament text sometimes used by inclusivists is found in Malachi 1:11, “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts” (RSV). One rabbi commented on this

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<sup>580</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *The New American Commentary, Volume 4, Deuteronomy* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 123–124.

<sup>581</sup> Gerald McDermott, while recognizing the pagan qualities of these religions, does suggest that God can use these religions (or elements of them) in restraining evil in the world, and even preparing people for worship of the true God. He states: “Like the powers behind national states, the powers behind the religions perhaps restrain other forms of evil that would otherwise reduce civilization to violent anarchy.” Gerald R. McDermott, *God’s Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 83.

verse: “There is the magnificent recognition by Malachi that all sincere heathen worship is in reality offered to the one God of all the earth . . . .”<sup>582</sup>

Joyce Baldwin, however, shows very clearly that this could not possibly be its intended meaning.<sup>583</sup> For one thing, such a meaning would be entirely out of step with the teaching of the rest of the Old Testament, which tolerated the worship of no god but the Lord (Ex. 22:20; Josh. 24:15). This sentiment was strongly supported by the prophets who roundly condemned the worship of other gods (Isaiah 2:8, 18). They are even referred to as “demons” (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37). Secondly, such an interpretation of this verse is inconsistent with the teaching of the rest of the book of Malachi. In 2:11, he condemns intermarriage between Israel and “the daughter of a strange god.” She writes: “In short, there is nothing in the rest of the book to support the interpretation that heathen worship was in reality offered to the God of all the earth.”<sup>584</sup>

She goes on to show that the statement in v. 11 is eschatological in nature, pointing to a future reality. This is seen by the use of the phrase “from the rising of the sun to its setting,” a phrase which appears in eschatological passages elsewhere in the Old Testament (Ps. 50:1; 113:3; Isa. 45:6; 59:9). Furthermore, she points out that the verbal phrase “is offered” is actually a hophal participle, which not unusually bears a future sense (contrary to the present tense translation of the RSV).<sup>585</sup> So, it should be rendered, “in every place incense is going to be offered to My name” (NASB).

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<sup>582</sup> Rabbi Eli Cashdan, *The Twelve Prophets* (London: Soncino, 1948), 336. Quoted in J. G. Baldwin, “Malachi 1:11 and the Worship of the Nations in the Old Testament,” *Tyndale Bulletin*. 23 (1972): 117.

<sup>583</sup> Baldwin, “Malachi 1:11 and the Worship of the Nations in the Old Testament,” 117–124.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

She then points out two additional facts. The first is that the “name” of the Lord is emphasized repeatedly in vv. 11, 14. The “name” of the Lord stood for his character in Hebrew thought. And he would not share his name or glory with another (Isa. 48:11). She states, “It was a scandal that Israel’s priests had despised His name (Mal. 1:6) but it would surely be unthinkable that He should be identified with the gods of the nations.”<sup>586</sup> The second fact is that the offerings that will be offered among the nations will be “pure” (tahor) in nature. She states, “At their best the Levitical sacrifices were said to be tamim ‘whole.’ The nations could hardly have attained to a perfection in worship which was never attained by Israelites at their best, and indeed became possible only through Christ.”<sup>587</sup>

She concludes her discussion with these words: “I find myself asking whether Malachi, a post-exilic prophet, was really weighing up the other religious systems which he had come across and saying magnanimously that they were all so many equally good ways to the one God, or whether nineteenth- and twentieth-century theologians, thinking this way themselves, have read their own universalist thoughts into the words of the prophet.”<sup>588</sup>

Thus, it is better to translate this verse in the future tense, as does the NASB: “For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain

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<sup>586</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid., 124.

offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations,’ says the Lord of hosts.”<sup>589</sup>

Coming to the New Testament, we find first Jesus’ parable about the judgment of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25. Clark Pinnock believes one implication of this parable is that the unevangelized may give evidence of their faith in God by their acts of love toward the poor or suffering, by which they are implicitly serving Christ, even if they lack an explicit knowledge of or faith in him. This is, however, not quite an obvious deduction from this text. The text states that the “sheep” who are commended by the Lord were unconscious of their having rendered service to Christ through their actions (Mt. 25:37–40). But it does not say that they did not know at the time who Christ even was. So the parable really does not lend support to the idea that implicit faith is sufficient for salvation.

The next passage is Jesus’ parable of the soils (Lk. 8:4–15) in which he describes those who have an “honest and good heart” (v. 15) prior to receiving the seed of the word of God. The fact that their heart is described in this way does not suggest that they were redeemed prior to hearing and believing the word. For earlier in Jesus’ explanation of the parable He says, “Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved” (v.

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<sup>589</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright points out: “Even if it is taken in a present tense, one needs to bear in mind the specific purpose of the context, which is vigorous accusation of Israel for profaning the true worship of Yahweh with diseased and inadequate offerings. This verse would then be a rhetorical, ironic comparison intended rather to shame Israel than soberly to describe paganism. A similar rhetorical technique occurs in Ezk. 16:49–52, where Israel and Judah are compared with Sodom and Gomorrah, who are then said to be *righteous*, in comparison with Israel’s wickedness!” Christopher J. H. Wright, “The Christian and other religions,” 10.

12). According to this verse, then, salvation is a consequence of hearing and believing the word. In what sense, then can a person's heart be said to be "honest and good" prior to believing the word, and so prior to being saved? This is a topic we will return to in the next chapter. But it is clearly not the same as having a heart that has been "cleansed by faith" (as Peter says in Acts 15:9) or "circumcised by the Spirit" (as Paul says in Romans 2:29), as those represented by this soil have not yet been saved prior to the seed of the word being sown in them.

Another verse which is frequently appealed to by inclusivists is John 1:9, "There was the true Light which coming into the world, enlightens every man." As noted in previous chapters, this verse is understood by some as stating that Christ (the true Light) illumines every person (even apart from the gospel), in such a way that he may come into a saving relationship with God.

Ed. L. Miller, however, provides a very helpful discussion of this verse.<sup>590</sup> He notes that while some see this enlightenment as coming from the internal sense of reason and conscience (e.g., Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Dodd), others see it as coming from outside the person. Among the latter, some see the enlightenment as coming to all persons from the preincarnate Logos, either naturally or supernaturally. Others see it coming from the incarnate Logos, and benefitting only those who are touched by him personally. Miller favors this latter view. He states: "The idea of a universal revelation by which people in general are illuminated with respect to some basic knowledge of God or

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<sup>590</sup> Ed. L. Miller, "The True Light Which Illumines Every Person," in *Good News in History: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke*, ed. E. L. Miller (Atlanta, FA: Scholars Press, 1993), 63–82.

spiritual truths is otherwise utterly inimical to the Johannine literature.”<sup>591</sup> He cites passages which teach that “apart from the revelatory activity of the Logos all is *darkness* and that ‘the whole world lies in sin’ (I John 5:19).”<sup>592</sup> Among passages which he cites is John 12:46, “I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.” His conclusion is that “The ‘light’ of 1:9 is to be conceived as providing a *special* revelation, radiating specifically from the incarnate Logos and holding consequences and benefits only for those whose lives are touched by it.”<sup>593</sup> He believes that the other view is not only incompatible with the rest of the teaching of John’s Gospel, but also “with the teaching of the rest of the New Testament,” which depict people as being in darkness prior to salvation (he cites Luke 1:79; Acts 26:18; Rom. 2:19; Eph. 5:8; Col. 1:13, I Thess. 5:4 and I Pet. 2:9). Acts 26:18 well illustrates these passages, where the Lord informs Paul of the goal of the mission to which he was being called: “(T)o open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.” This text tells us that people remain in darkness until they are enlightened by Christ (now through his messengers), and their eyes are opened to the truth of the gospel.

William Hendricksen holds essentially the same view. He states that,

He illumines every man who hears the Gospel; i.e., he imparts a degree of understanding concerning spiritual matters (not necessarily resulting in salvation) to all those whose ears and minds are reached by the message of salvation. The majority, however, do not respond favorably. Many who have the light prefer the

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<sup>591</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid., 80.

darkness. Some, however, due entirely to the sovereign, saving grace of God, receive the word with the proper attitude of heart and mind, and obtain everlasting life.<sup>594</sup>

I believe that Miller's argument is persuasive. Christopher Little holds the same view, and he summarizes what I believe to be the correct interpretation of John 1:9.

(T)he *Logos* in John's prologue . . . refers not to a universal enlightening that takes place through a metaphysical principle operating either in the intellect or conscience of humankind by Christ whereby people come to intuitively know and experience a salvific relationship with God. Rather, it is inseparably connected to the incarnation event whereby Jesus invades the world and brings the light of the gospel to whomsoever will accept it when they encounter it.<sup>595</sup>

This illumination was not limited only to the time of Jesus' personal ministry, but continues today, for He is present as well with all who make the gospel known by their witness (Matthew 28:18–20).

While I agree with this argument, it should be pointed out that even if John 1:9 did refer to a universal enlightenment (which I don't believe it does), it would not be required in that case that this is a saving illumination—only that it provides some knowledge of God. We know this is true of God's general or natural revelation, which is universal in its extent (Rom. 1:19f). This may also include the convicting work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7–11), which may in fact be universal in its reach, as well. We will return to this discussion in the following chapter.

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<sup>594</sup> William Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of the Gospel of John, two volumes complete in one* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953), 77.

<sup>595</sup> Christopher R. Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized*, 18.

John 3:21 is another verse believed by some to support the inclusivist viewpoint. As noted in a previous chapter, August Tholuck is one who held that people can be in fellowship with God prior to their conversion to Christ, and he appealed to this passage in support of this view.<sup>596</sup> It reads, “But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” A similar statement is found in John 8:47, “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.” Another similar statement appears in Jesus’ conversation with Pilate: “Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:37). Put together, these passages state that those who “practice the truth,” who are “of God” and “of the truth” come to the Light or listen to God’s words, or Jesus’ voice.

These verses do support the idea that there is a work of God which precedes a person coming to the Light of the gospel, and which prepares him to listen to its message, and also that this work is evident in his works. Lange comments on the text in John chapter 3: “A most suitable parting word for Nicodemus. If thou art and continue to be honest, thou wilt yet come to the light . . . . In these words Jesus seemed to say to Nicodemus: Thou art now come to Me in the night; thou wilt yet come to Me in the light; farewell, to meet again in the light.”<sup>597</sup> The text is saying that in God’s grace, he does move people to respond to what they know of the truth, and this is revealed in their works, and prepares them to respond to the light of the gospel.

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<sup>596</sup> August Tholuck, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 124.

<sup>597</sup> John Peter Lange, *The Gospel According to John*, trans. Edward D. Yeomans and Evelina Moore, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Scribner, 1871), 135–136.



Lange continues:

The works which proceed from this are works done in God, *i. e.*, relatively good works, striving towards their perfection in God; comp. Rom. ii. 7. Thus the uprightness is not to be conceived without the fruit of such deeds, nor indeed the doing without the root of uprightness. *They are wrought in God.* The upright man works unconsciously under the influence of the *gratia praeveniens*, or the Logos, and thus his works, having their starting point in God, will continually reach out towards their full manifestation in the light.<sup>598</sup>

But what is not stated is whether this person may be spoken of as already being in fellowship with God, as Tholuck suggests. The fact that Jesus spoke of them as coming to the light, suggests that prior to that time they were still in darkness (even if God may have been working in their hearts to prepare them to receive the light, or to welcome his voice when it is heard). If these words describe such a person as Nicodemus, Jesus told him that he still needed to be born again so as to be able to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5).

Meyer states concerning those described here: “(E)ven their piety needed purifying and transfiguring into true dikaiosune, which could be attained only by fellowship with Christ . . . .”<sup>599</sup> We will take up these matters more thoroughly in the next chapter.

Another text is one which includes Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. In this encounter, Jesus said that those who worshiped at the Samaritan

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<sup>598</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>599</sup> Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John*, 2 volumes, trans. from the 5<sup>th</sup> edition by William Ulrich, rev. and ed. by Frederick Crombie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874–1875), 1:186–187.

worship site worshiped what they do not know (John 4:22). Some might take Jesus' statement to mean that the Samaritans worshiped the true God, though in ignorance.

There are two reasons why it cannot be that Jesus was endorsing the worship of the Samaritans as a legitimate alternative to the worship of the true God in Jerusalem. First, he says that the God they seek to worship, they do not know. Secondly, he states that "salvation is from the Jews." This tells us that salvation is gained through worshipping the God the Jews worshiped in Jerusalem.

D. A. Carson comments:

Jesus is . . . saying that the object of their worship is in fact unknown to them. They stand outside the stream of God's revelation, so that what they worship cannot possibly be characterized by truth and knowledge. By contrast, Jesus says, *we [Jews] worship what we do know: i.e., whatever else was wrong with Jewish worship, at least it could be said that the object of their worship was known to them. The Jews stand within the stream of God's saving revelation; they know the one they worship, for salvation . . . is from the Jews.*<sup>600</sup>

Another passage is John 10:16, where Jesus said, "I have other sheep which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd." This verse is similar to those previously cited, in that it describes people as "sheep" who belong to Christ prior to their hearing his voice, or prior to their placing their faith in Him. What is distinctive about this statement is that these "sheep" are "not of this fold." This is no doubt a reference to those among the Gentiles who were not of the "sheepfold" of Israel, but would become part of the church

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<sup>600</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 223.

through hearing his voice.<sup>601</sup> A similar statement is made in John 11:51–52, where Caiaphas is said to have “prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.” It is also reflected in Jesus’ words that “many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 8:11; Lk. 13:29).

The question is in what sense these “sheep” could be said to already “belong to Christ.” Or, in what sense could they be already called “children of God”? These questions cannot really be answered by examining only the immediate context of these passages. But these passages must be interpreted in light of the clear teaching of other passages of Scripture, which tell us that though God prepares people in advance to respond to the light, they are not recipients of salvation until they do respond to that light. We will give more attention to this in the next chapter. What is clear from these passages, is that these “sheep” will hear Jesus’ voice in the gospel, and they will become children of God and made part of the “one fold” of his church. In fact, they “must” be.

The next passage that is often appealed to by inclusivists appears in Acts 17, which records the sermon of the Apostle Paul in Athens. He opens his sermon with these words, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you” (vv. 22–23). Some contend that through their giving worship to a deity whose name they did not know, they were implicitly worshiping the

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<sup>601</sup> Ibid., 388.

true God. Clark Pinnock, for example, states that Paul “accepts that the Athenians are worshipping God, howbeit unknowingly.”<sup>602</sup> John Sanders states: “In certain respects they did acknowledge the true God, and Paul makes use of this point of contact to further instruct them about this God. God had overlooked their ignorance and was now bringing them the fuller revelation of the gospel with an invitation to become followers of Christ (17:30).”<sup>603</sup> Their view, however, is not really supported by the text.

In interpreting this passage, it is important first of all to read it in the context of other passages in Acts which address the matter of idolatry, particularly Paul’s other sermons. Paul’s message in Athens is in line with what Luke has recorded throughout his work, that the Christian message is aimed at replacing idolatry with worship of the true God. This is evident in Stephen’s sermon, for example, where he references Israel’s idolatry in the wilderness (Acts 7:39–43). It is suggested in the story of the death of Herod, who received worship as a god, and was struck dead (Acts 12:21–23). It is evident also in the events in Lystra where people tried to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods, and Paul told them to “turn from these vain things (idols) to a living God” (Acts 14:11–18). It will be evident again in Paul’s appeal to the people of Ephesus to turn from “gods made with hands” which “are no gods at all” (Acts 19:25–27).<sup>604</sup> Paul’s sermon at Athens does not differ from what is said about idolatry in these other passages. Nor does it differ from what Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, describing their spiritual condition prior to

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<sup>602</sup> Clark Pinnock, “Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33.3 (September 1990), 365.

<sup>603</sup> John Sanders, *No Other Name*, 246–247.

<sup>604</sup> My analysis of Paul’s sermon in Acts 17 relies mostly on Flavien Olivier Cedric Pardigon, *Paul Against the Idols: The Areopagus Speech and Religious Inclusivism*, Ph.D. dissertation (Glenside, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2008).

knowing the Lord: “However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods” (Gal. 3:8). Others have also noted that Paul’s argument here is patterned after the argument of Isaiah against the idols of his own day (Isa. 44:9–20).<sup>605</sup>

The passage opens by stating that while Paul was in Athens, his spirit was “provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols” (Acts 17:16). The verb “provoked” is a very strong word, and it is in the imperfect tense, implying that this was no passing emotion. It is the same verb used in the LXX in Deuteronomy 32:16, where Moses says that Israel “made Him (the Lord) jealous with strange gods; with abominations they provoked Him to anger.” For some time (“every day”) Paul had been “dialoguing” about the gospel, both in the synagogue and in the marketplace (v. 17). Eventually, some of the philosophers took him to the Areopagus where he would be examined about the nature of his teaching. This may have been a court-like proceeding, during which Paul was being questioned about the “strange things” he was teaching (v. 20).<sup>606</sup> Or, it may have been a meeting of the Council of the Areopagus to see whether the “gods” they perceived Paul to be proclaiming should be admitted to their pantheon.<sup>607</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> “Here he echoes the perpetual Jewish polemic against image-worship which has its roots in such OT passages as Isa. 44:9ff.” F. F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 361.

<sup>606</sup> Some commentators believe that the charges brought against Paul of proclaiming “strange deities” is reminiscent of the charges brought against Socrates, who was accused of the same thing. See Pardigon, *Paul Against the Idols*, 228. The language of 17:22 is also similar to that in Acts 4:7, where Peter and John were brought before the Council in Jerusalem.

<sup>607</sup> This is the view of Bruce W. Winter, as expressed in his article: “On Introducing Gods to Athens: An Alternative Reading of Acts 17:18–20,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 47.1 (1996), 71–90.

When Paul opens his defense, he begins by telling them that they are “very religious in all respects” (v. 22). While some think Paul is complimenting them, others believe he is being derogatory. The word translated “religious” can also mean “superstitious.”<sup>608</sup> It’s likely that he is simply being descriptive of their religious practice.<sup>609</sup>

Noting that he had seen an altar “To an Unknown God,” Paul tells them that what they are worshiping “in ignorance” he will proclaim to them. The theme of ignorance begins and ends Paul’s message. He closes it by stating that God had overlooked the “times of ignorance” (v. 30). Other passages in the New Testament also speak of the ignorance which characterized people prior to their coming to know Christ. In his Ephesian letter, Paul describes the “Gentiles” as “being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the spiritual ignorance” which is rooted in their “hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:17–18). Peter likewise urges his readers not to “be conformed to the former lusts which were (theirs) in (their) former ignorance” (I Pet. 1:14).

Flavien Pardigon makes note of the fact that in his speech, Paul draws a distinction between the ignorant worship of the Athenians and the worship of the true God, by “the consistent use of the neuter each time Paul speaks in relation to the Athenian religion (except in the quotations of pagan material in 23a and 28b) and of the masculine for Paul’s own argument.”<sup>610</sup> He states: “Paul is therefore not equating the one true God, Yahweh, with an idolatrous and polytheistic ‘unknown god.’” Then, quoting I.

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<sup>608</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts: Revised Edition*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 335.

<sup>609</sup> Pardigon, *Paul Against the Idols*, 248.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid., 244.

H. Marshall, he states: “Rather, he is drawing their attention to the true God who was ultimately responsible for the phenomena which they attributed to an unknown god.”<sup>611</sup>

Pardigon states: “This is not a religion in need of adjustment, complement or supplement (whether small or large), but one that needs to be replaced altogether by the gospel.”<sup>612</sup>

Note also the additional statement by Marshall: “There was, to be sure, no real connection between ‘an unknown god’ and the true God; Paul hardly meant that his audience were unconscious worshippers of the true God. Rather, he is drawing their attention to the true God who was ultimately responsible for the phenomena which they attributed to an unknown god.”<sup>613</sup>

It is true that there are cultures where a remnant of belief in the one true God of the Bible has been preserved. And it is entirely appropriate to speak of the Lord as being the true identity of this partially forgotten Creator God. But, in my opinion, the “unknown god” of the Athenians is not a good example of such a case. This god is simply

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<sup>611</sup> Ibid., 244. He quotes from I. H. Marshall, *Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* New Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 286.

<sup>612</sup> Pardigon, *Paul Against the Idols*, 248.

<sup>613</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 286. Marshall’s comments run counter to the thesis presented by the Catholic writer Henri Maurier, who states: “Paganism, that is, the situation of people who have not had the gospel preached to them, is an economy of salvation willed by God, in which he directs men toward Christ.” Maurier does recognize that there is a “radical break whereby man receives, through and in Christ, a ‘divine condition.’” “Nevertheless,” he says, “the human condition is not suppressed; it is reformed by Christ, illuminated, ennobled and fulfilled by him.” Henri Maurier, *The Other Covenant: A Theology of Paganism*, trans. Charles McGrath (Glen Rock NJ, New York, Toronto, Amsterdam, London: Newman Press, 1968), 78. Though Maurier recognizes that many of the unevangelized do turn to idolatry and moral perversion (as attested by Romans 1:18–32), he does state: “The pagan can perform morally good actions by conforming to the ideal of life which he acknowledges in good faith. He is judged according to the lights he possesses (Rom 2,14–15; Acts 10,35; I Pet 1,17) . . . . In his religious activities, whatever forms they may assume, the pagan who has no other horizons than his human condition can, on that basis, offer God a sincere and disinterested homage, however groping and vague it may be . . . .” Ibid., 189–190.

one god among many. He did not even have a name or any attributes. When Paul spoke of this “unknown god,” he did not speak of the one “whom” they worshipped in ignorance, but “what” they worshipped (Acts 17:23).

Paul’s argument is very concise. He tells them that since God is the creator and provider of all things, we should not think of him as someone whose nature is like the manmade images of the many finite gods they worship, and whose presence can be confined to a manmade temple. Nor should he be thought of as someone who depends on our sacrifices and offerings, since he is Lord of all.<sup>614</sup> Indeed, the God who governs all the nations of the human race, made us with the purpose that we might seek him and find him.<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>614</sup> Pardigon states that “(T)he particular emphases of Paul’s speech appear to be polemical (in a radical fashion), not only in relation to so-called popular paganism, but also in relation to those ‘higher pagan’ philosophies . . . . There is no room for a Demiurge, for an eternal primeval matter, or for a shape-giving impersonal principle in Paul’s words.” Pardigon, *Paul Against the Idols*, 255–256.

<sup>615</sup> God’s sovereignty over the nations, even determining the time and place of their habitation, is reflected in a number of Old Testament passages. God is spoken of as giving land to Edom (Deut. 2:5), to Moab (Deut. 2:9), and to Ammon (Deut. 2:19). See also Deut. 2:10–12, 20–23; 32:8; Jer. 18:1–10; 27:1–7. These passages are mentioned in Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2006), 464. The fact that God, in his dispersion of the nations and government of their historical progress has as his aim that people might seek for him is described by Franz Delitzsch: “The breaking up of the united race into peoples with different languages was a divine act for the good of man; for by this means a barrier was made against sin, which without this separating of the wall of the language, would have attained a terrible intensity. Now, however, the immoral and irreligious products of one nation are equally destructive to another; and many false religions are better than one, since they paralyze one another. Even war, which arises from the selfish character of nationalities, is better than the idle peace of universal estrangement from God, for the demon of war arouses the peoples and drives them to God.” Franz Delitzsch, *Old Testament History of Redemption* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888), 39. Quoted in Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 129–130.



Paul's language casts a shadow over the idea that anyone actually does seek for God. The use of "if perhaps" and the optative mood is the most doubtful construction possible in the Greek language, short of an explicit denial of the fact.<sup>616</sup> Paul states elsewhere: "There is none who seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11). The verb "grope" used in this sentence is also used in the LXX of a blind person or someone in the dark.<sup>617</sup> Christoph Stenschke states: "Though the Gentiles were God's offspring and moved, lived and were in his sphere, they were not ready or able to move further to seek and find God. What was known, if it was known, was not pursued. Rather, the opposite was the case."<sup>618</sup> Furthermore, a day is coming when we will be judged as to whether we have indeed sought him as he purposed we should. And he has appointed one to judge us whom God has designated by raising him from the dead—Jesus Christ.<sup>619</sup> Consequently, "God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent" (v. 30). That is, they must repent of their idolatry and turn to the true and living God. Pardigon states: "The command from God is to repent, not to complement or supplement one's preexisting knowledge. It requires from mankind to recognize and confess the sinfulness and guilt of their former ways, and therefore to make a radical break with them. It is

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<sup>616</sup> Pardigon states: "The only way to express a less certain fact would be a straightforward negation, but this was not a possibility for Luke in this sentence, since he meant to depict God's original design." Pardigon, *Paul Against the Idols*, 293.

<sup>617</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 567.

<sup>618</sup> Christoph W. Stenschke, *Luke's Portrait of the Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 217.

<sup>619</sup> "While the Areopagites intended to decide whether these deities should be accepted and venerated, Paul announced God's impending judgement *over them*: the very Jesus under discussion will be *their* judge and God's proof of judgement to them." Stenschke, *Luke's Portrait of the Gentiles*, 220 n.530.

abandoning wholeheartedly the entirety of their pagan beliefs and practices, and replacing them by the Christian gospel . . . .”<sup>620</sup>

When Paul says that God had “overlooked” (*uperidon*) the “times of ignorance,” it does not mean that God excused their ignorance. Rather, it means that God “graciously and patiently bore with it.”<sup>621</sup> As he said to the people in Lystra, “In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways . . . .” (Acts 14:16). That is, he did not intervene to correct their errant ways. This does not mean that God never judged the nations. He clearly did (as for example when he brought the plagues on Egypt, or when he overthrew the kingdom of Babylon by the hand of the Persians). And as Paul says, God’s wrath is even now being revealed on those who “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). But, as Everett Harrison states: “God had permitted the nations to go their own way, neither revealing himself as he did to Israel nor bringing severe judgment on them for their idolatrous practices.”<sup>622</sup> A. C. McGiffert states: “The ‘overlooking’ of ignorance which is here referred to does not imply that in pre-Christian days God regarded the idolatry of the heathen with indifference or saved them from the consequences of their sins, denounced so vigorously in Rom. i., but simply that the time

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<sup>620</sup> Pardigon, *Paul Against the Idols*, 319–320.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid., 318. One source defines the verb as meaning “to overlook, pay no attention to, disdain.” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Second Edition, ed. Moises Silva (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2014), 3:530.

<sup>622</sup> Everett Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 223. There is an interesting statement made in the Apocryphal book of II Maccabees that is relevant to this text: “For in the case of other nations, the Master is long-suffering and waits before he punishes them until they have reached the full measure of their sins; but in our case he has decided differently, so that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height.” II Maccabees 6:13–15. *The Apocrypha: An American Translation*, trans. Edgar J. Goodspeed (New York: Vintage Books, 1989, originally published 1938), 461.

for the final judgment had not come until now, and that they were, therefore, summoned now to prepare for it as they had not been before.”<sup>623</sup>

Why God allowed the nations to remain in darkness so long, he does not state.<sup>624</sup> But now, he was giving them an opportunity to repent (change their mind) and turn to him. And in view of the coming judgment, it is urgent that they do so. Stenschke identifies three things from which they should have repented: “(a) failure to recognize God and his character and therefore to venerate him adequately, (b) failure to search for and find God and (c) withholding the honour and gratitude due to God and lavishing it on idols.”<sup>625</sup>

Johannes Blauw draws the following conclusions from this passage:

1) Paul describes the heathen as being ignorant, and are themselves aware of their ignorance. 2) There is no positive connection to a previous knowledge on their part, but merely to an acknowledgement of ignorance of the only true God, whom the Athenians could have known by virtue of the acts of God in creation and history. 3) The ignorance of the Athenians is no complete ignorance: they possess the knowledge of their relationship to God and with this the knowledge that God is something-other-than what he is represented as being in images. 4) Therefore the ignorance of man is regarded as guilt. 5) Man’s guilt will be fully reckoned with as is evident from the call to conversion, as well as the judgment; men maintain their ignorance as is evidenced by the expression: the times of ignorance. 6) The call to conversion is motivated by the reference to Christ as

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<sup>623</sup> A. C. McGiffert, *History of Christianity in the Apostolic Age* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1897), 260–261.

<sup>624</sup> Paul does address this issue in Romans 11, where he contrasts God’s dealings with Gentiles and Israel, showing that God has dealt with both in such a way that his mercy is extended at the appropriate time to those who repent (Rom. 11:30–32). See John Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God*, 70–75.

<sup>625</sup> Stenschke, *Luke’s Portrait of Gentiles*, 219.

world-judge. His resurrection from the dead is proof and confirmation of his credentials.<sup>626</sup>

Christopher J. H. Wright summarizes what I believe to be the correct interpretation of this passage:

Paul is *not* congratulating the Athenians and saying, ‘You are really worshipping the true God, though you don’t know it’; but he is saying rather, ‘Despite your religiosity, you don’t *know* the true God at all, though you could and should, for knowledge of him is available before your eyes, but you have obscured it with your ‘very religious’ temples and idols.’ Taken thus, it fits perfectly with what Paul writes concerning the availability but suppression of the knowledge of God in Romans 1. God is *not*, in fact, an ‘unknown God’; it is the Athenians who are ignorant of him . . . . There are, however, those who take Paul’s meaning in the former sense, and argue that Paul in fact adopts a very positive and accepting attitude here towards Greek culture, by quoting their own poets. They would see the preaching of Jesus and his resurrection then as the fulfillment of that which the Greeks already worshipped in their excessive religiosity. Certainly Paul quotes from both Stoic pantheism and from Epicurean deism, but careful study shows that he does so in a sense quite different from their author’s original intent. In fact he refers to these philosophies in such a way as to deny their over-all truth when set alongside a scriptural (*i.e.* OT) world-view. So this is not a generously approving reinterpretation, but a radical, though still polite, correction which leads up to the explicit command to *repent* in view of the imminent judgment of God. Repentance means turning. Paul is not expecting the Athenians’ gratitude

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<sup>626</sup> Johannes Blauw, *Goden en Mensen: Plaats en Betekenis van de Heidenen in de Heilige Schrift*, Doctoral dissertation for the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. (Groningen: J. Niemeijer, 1950), 137. Quoted in Richard De Ridder, “God and the Gods: Reviewing the Biblical Roots,” *Missiology: An International Review*, 6.1, 26.

that now they know who they are really worshipping as they continue in their idolatry. Rather he wants them to turn away from those idols to the living God.<sup>627</sup>

A word should be interjected at this point regarding the biblical attitude toward other religions, as reflected in Paul's speech in Acts 17. Two facts are clear from his message. One is that he was not afraid to point out serious contrasts between other religions and the biblical faith. In fact, he begins by challenging the basic polytheistic world view of the Athenians. (It is well to point out, however, that the town clerk in Ephesus acknowledged in Acts 19:37 that Paul did not "blaspheme" their goddess Artemis. Though he did say that "gods made with hands are no gods at all," he did not blaspheme their gods.) But the other fact is that Paul also recognized areas where he could agree with them. He selected quotations from two of their "poets" which to some degree were in harmony with the biblical world view.<sup>628</sup>

Terrance Tiessen is correct in his observation that: "Paul's sermon in Athen is a very interesting example of both affirmation and negation of the religious ideas of his hearers that ended in a call for repentance not just for enlightenment. Paul began with the unknown god but did not commend all of the Athenians' religious conclusions. He criticized their shrines and those who served in them. He granted that the Athenians were

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<sup>627</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, "The Christian and other religions," 14. H. P. Owen states in this regard: "The god of whom Paul says, 'What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you' is the god whom the Athenians refused to personify; he would never have said, with the author of the Letter of Aristeas (15), that Gentiles really know Yahweh even when they call him Zeus or Dis." H. P. Owen, "The Scope of Natural Revelation in Rom. I and Acts XVII," *New Testament Studies* 5.2 (1959), 139.

<sup>628</sup> Commenting on Paul's quoting the Greek writers, F. F. Bruce states: "We are, then the offspring of God, says Paul: not, of course, in the pantheistic sense intended by the Stoic poets, but in the sense of the Biblical doctrine of man, as a being created by God in His image and after His likeness." F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 360.

religious, but he pronounced them ignorant and confused.”<sup>629</sup> He quotes Calvin Shenk: “By calling God the Creator of heaven and earth, Paul was refuting the Stoic doctrine of eternal matter. By affirming God’s intimate concern for people, he corrected the Epicurean idea of distant and uncaring gods.”<sup>630</sup> Tiessen continues: “Yet Paul acknowledged common beliefs with the Stoics in their teaching that God preserves and guides all of life and is immanent in the world in his providential work. Human beings were created to seek and find God who is not far away, as even their own poets affirmed (Acts 17:27-28).”<sup>631</sup>

In our conversations with adherents of other religions today, we may take the same approach. While pointing out essential differences, we can also recognize similarities in our beliefs. There are truths embedded in other religions, even if the religion as a whole is contrary to the biblical faith.

When then should we say about the question of whether Christianity fulfills other non-biblical religions? Some believe that other religions are fulfilled in the Christian faith in the same way or in a similar way as the Old Testament religion is fulfilled in the New.<sup>632</sup> Others believe that though there are analogies between non-Christian religions and the biblical faith, only the Old Testament bears an “organic” relationship with the

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<sup>629</sup> Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 449.

<sup>630</sup> Calvin E. Shenk, *Who Do You Say that I am? Christians Encounter Other Religions* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 1997), 105-6.

<sup>631</sup> Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 449.

<sup>632</sup> A sympathetic appraisal of “fulfillment theology” may be found in Ivan M. Satyavrata, *God Has Not Left Himself Without Witness* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2011). A critique of “fulfillment theology” may be found in Adam Sparks, *One of a Kind: The Relationship between Old and New Covenants as the Hermeneutical Key for Christian Theology of Religions* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010).

New Testament faith. I believe the following statement by Hendrik Kraemer strikes the right note:

Even when we recognize that Christ may in a certain sense be called the fulfilment (sic)<sup>633</sup> of some deep and persistent longings and apprehensions that everywhere in history manifest themselves in the race, this fulfilment, when we subject the facts to a close scrutiny, never represents the perfecting of what has been before. In this fulfilment is contained a radical recasting of values, because these longings and apprehensions, when exposed to the searching and revolutionary light of Christ, appear blind and misdirected. That does not detract in the least from the fact that these longings and apprehensions, humanly speaking, are heart-stirring and noble, but if we want to be loyal to the divine reality that has come to us in Jesus Christ, this appreciation, which is simply a matter of justice and honesty in the human plane, must not obscure our eyes to the truth that in Christ all things become new, because He is the crisis of all religions. In this we recognize that God as He is revealed in Jesus Christ is contrary to the sublimest picture we made of Him before we knew of Him in Jesus Christ.<sup>634</sup>

Missionary Martin Goldsmith writes: “There is always some continuity between other faiths and Christianity. But still people need to repent and believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.”<sup>635</sup>

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<sup>633</sup> It should be noted that the words fulfil(ment) and fulfill(ment) are both correct, and will be used in different contexts in this work. When quoting someone from a British background, the word will be spelled “fulfil(ment)” while those from an American background will generally spell the word “fulfill(ment).” See “Fulfil vs. Fulfill” on [www.grammarly.com](http://www.grammarly.com)

<sup>634</sup> Hendrik Kraemer, “Continuity or Discontinuity,” in *The Authority of Faith: International Missionary Council Meeting at Tambaram, Madras*, ed. G. Paton (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 4. Quoted in Daniel Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*, 270.

<sup>635</sup> Martin Goldsmith, *What About Other Faiths?* (London, Sydney, Auckland, Toronto: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 96.

The next passage that we must examine appears in Acts 18, where the Lord appeared to Paul at night in a vision, and said to him, “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9b). Inclusivists appeal to this passage in support of the notion that there were people in the city of Corinth who belonged to God prior to their coming to believe in Christ. Paul remained in Corinth for a year and a half, “teaching the word of God” (v. 11). And the passage says that “many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized” (v. 8). So in what sense they “belonged to the Lord” prior to believing the gospel is not stated. It could mean that they belonged to the Lord in the sense that they were among his “elect,” or that they were those in whose hearts he had been working to prepare them for the gospel (as we have seen above). But it does not necessarily mean that they were in some sense in fellowship with God or already redeemed, even before hearing and believing the gospel.

### General Revelation

We now come to passages which focus on the general or natural revelation of God. The first of these passages is Psalm 19, which opens with the words, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (v. 1).<sup>636</sup> James Hoffmeier points out two important facts about this verse. The first is that the word used for God in this verse is “El.” The name “Yahweh” is not used until the second half of the psalm (vv. 7–15). It is God as creator that he is made known through

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<sup>636</sup> My thoughts on Psalm 19 have been largely drawn from the article by James K. Hoffmeier, “‘The Heavens Declare the Glory of God’: The Limits of General Revelation,” *Trinity Journal*, 21.1 (Spring 2000), 17–24.



his work in nature. The second fact about this verse is that through creation we are able to behold God's "glory." The Apostle Paul says very much the same thing when he says, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made . . . ." (Rom. 1:20a). Something of the invisible greatness of God can be apprehended through his work visible in creation.

However, it is in the second part of the psalm, that we find God revealed as Yahweh through the revelation of his Word in the Torah. Hoffmeier points out that "The use of YHWH is frequently associated with God as covenant maker."<sup>637</sup> In the closing prayer at the end of the psalm, the Lord is spoken of as "Rock" and "Redeemer" (v. 14). The implication, then, is that though God can be known as Creator through his general revelation in nature, he can only be known as Yahweh, who is our Redeemer and Savior through his special revelation in his Word.

Some believe that the Apostle Paul quotes Psalm 19:4 in his letter to the Romans in a sense that implies the salvific potential of God's general revelation: "But I say, surely they have never heard, have they: Indeed they have; 'Their voice has gone out into all the earth, And their words to the ends of the world'" (Rom. 10:18). Paul is stating in this verse that Israel cannot use the excuse for not responding to God that he had kept them in the dark, for his voice has gone out to the whole world.

It's true that in its original context of Psalm 19, this verse refers to the universal extent of God's general revelation. But Paul is using this statement in a different way than it was used in its original context. He is stating that just as God's general revelation

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<sup>637</sup> Ibid., 21.

has gone out to the entire world, so his special saving message has now been declared throughout the world among the Jewish people of that day as well. As Douglas Moo states: “Paul is not, then, simply using the text according to its original meaning. His application probably rests on a general analogy: as God’s word of general revelation has been proclaimed all over the earth, so God’s word of special revelation in the gospel, has been spread all over the earth. His intention is not to interpret the verse of the Psalm, but to use its language, with the ‘echoes’ of God’s revelation that it awakes, to assert the universal preaching of the gospel.”<sup>638</sup> To hold that this verse supports the idea that general revelation is sufficient for salvation goes against what Paul had just stated in Romans 10:14–15, that salvation comes through hearing and believing in Christ, and the necessity of there being a messenger.<sup>639</sup>

It is fitting to quote Francis Turretin at this point, regarding the insufficiency of general revelation. He makes the following observation:

It is falsely asserted that in that which may be known of God . . . there is given objectively a revelation of grace, and a Redeemer sufficient for salvation, if not clear and explicit, at least obscure and implied, inasmuch as in it God is known as merciful and therefore, in a certain although confused manner, as a redeemer who will accept a satisfaction, may call to repentance and promise remission of sin. For in the first place, to be able to know God as merciful by a general mercy tending to some temporal good and delay of punishment is far different from being able to know him as merciful by a mercy special and saving in Christ after a satisfaction has been made. To be able to know him as placable and benign is

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<sup>638</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 666–667.

<sup>639</sup> Thoughts reflected in John Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God*, 103.

different from being able to know him as actually to be appeased or certainly to be appeased.<sup>640</sup>

In other words, there is no revelation of the fact of God's saving grace in general revelation. There is only evidence of his general mercy in his provision for his creatures (Acts 14:17). But it should be pointed out as well, that there is also evidence in his general revelation of God's judgment, in that the creation has been "subjected to futility" (Rom. 8:20–22). We will return to the ways in which God may speak through his general revelation in the next chapter.

The second passage (already referred to) which provides information about God's general revelation is found in Romans chapter 1:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures (Rom. 1:18–23).

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<sup>640</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:12. Quoted by Daniel Strange, "General Revelation: Sufficient or Insufficient?," in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 68.

The passage is very clear that there are certain things about God which are “evident” and which can be “known” and “understood” by all through the creation.<sup>641</sup> It is on account of this knowledge that people are accountable to God for their response to this knowledge. What is evident about God, according to this passage, are his “invisible attributes.” Specifically, Paul speaks of God’s “eternal power” and “divine nature.” It also says that the appropriate response to this revelation would be to honor (or worship) God and to give him thanks for his blessings. But the passage clearly also teaches that no one does this, at least by their own initiative. Rather, in “ungodliness and unrighteousness” people “suppress” this knowledge. This is the basis on which God judges those who are without a gospel witness. As mentioned above, it should be pointed out, that Paul does also acknowledge that the creation has been “subjected to futility” (Rom. 8:20–22), and so it is also evident that the creation has been tragically affected by sin. This should prompt people to reflect on the fact that though creation gives evidence of God’s power, wisdom and goodness, it also gives evidence that something has come between God and his creation.

H. P. Owen summarizes his interpretation of this passage:

(W)e must suppose Paul to mean that every idolater at *some* time, or times, has a measure of insight into God’s theotes, and that every idolator, instead of letting the insight grow, suppresses it. He suppresses it partly through asebeia, and partly through adikia—through asebeia in so far as the sin of pride leads him (as a Jew

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<sup>641</sup> Moo states: “He asserts that people actually come to ‘understand’ something about God’s existence and nature. How universal is this perception? The flow of Paul’s argument makes any limitation impossible. Those who perceive the attributes of God in creation must be the same as those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness and are therefore liable to the wrath of God. Paul makes clear that this includes all people (see 3:9, 19–20).” Douglas Moo, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Epistle to the Romans*, 105.

or Christian would put it) ‘to worship the creature instead of the Creator’ and through *adikia* in so far as he fears to expose his immoral life to the light of God’s holy presence (cf. John iii. 19–20).<sup>642</sup>

A similar statements is found in Acts 14:17, “(A)nd yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” Paul makes this statement in the context of his appeal to the citizens of Lystra to turn away from their “vain” idols to the “living God” (v. 15).

Johannes Blauw draws the following conclusions from this passage: “1) Paganism is the deification of man. 2) Paganism is essentially ‘useless.’ 3) The heathen need a change of direction, conversion. 4) The heathen have throughout the ages lived under God’s rule but without acknowledging God. 5) There has always been a genuine witness to God through the gifts he showers on the heathen. 6) This witness is, however, not recognized (given attention).”<sup>643</sup>

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<sup>642</sup> H. P. Owen, “The Scope of Natural Revelation in Rom. I and Acts XVII,” 141–42. Owen goes on to surmise: “What would be his attitude towards the philosophers? Would he have regarded their speculations as idolatrous? . . . (I)t is clear that, whether Paul had the philosophers in mind or not, they too according to his principles, fell into idolatry of a subtler kind in so far as they were led to venerate the *kosmos* as divine. Both the idolater and the philosopher ‘suppressed’ their awareness of God’s theiotes by identifying it with the finite representation, in the one case with an image accessible to sense, and in the other with a world-order accessible to reason.” *Ibid.*, 142. Concerning some, such as Plato or Marcus Aurelius, Owen states interestingly: “(W)e have to reckon with varying degrees of idolatry, and, therefore, with varying degrees of ‘suppression.’” *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>643</sup> Johannes Blauw, *Goden en Mensen: Plaats en Betekenis van de Heidenen in de Heilige Schrift*, Doctoral dissertation for the Brije Universiteit in Amsterdam, (Groningen: J. Niemeijer, 1950), 132. Quoted by Richard R. De Ridder, “God and the Gods: Reviewing the Biblical Roots,” *Missiology: An International Review*, 6.1, 22.

The third important passage that discusses God's general revelation is found in Romans 2:12–16,

For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

In this passage, Paul teaches that those who lack God's special revelation in his word will be judged, not by the Law contained in that revelation, but by the Law written on their hearts—a Law which all people fail to conform to. This is an important passage, and reveals that all people have an inner awareness of basic moral principles, as well as a conscience which accuses them and tells them they have fallen short of fulfilling the requirements of this Law written on the heart, to one degree or another.<sup>644</sup> Though some find support in this passage for the idea that some of those beyond the reach of the gospel may obtain salvation by living up to the light of their conscience, this goes beyond what is clearly Paul's purpose in this passage—to show that all, both Gentile and Jew, are guilty of falling short of the law they know, and so are under judgment and in need of God's gift of righteousness. And to hold that this passage suggests that salvation may be obtained by conformity to the law written on the heart is contrary to his explicit statement

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<sup>644</sup> See J. C. Yates, "The Judgment of the heathen: The Interpretation of Article XVIII and Romans 2:12–16," *Churchman*, 100.3 (1986), 220–230.

that “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Rom. 3:20). This is true not only of the Law of Moses, but also of the law written on the heart.

A related passage appears earlier in Romans chapter 2:5–8, “But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.”

Some believe that this passage is describing a hypothetical situation, in which some would obtain eternal life based on their good works.<sup>645</sup> However, as we know from the wider context of this passage, no one actually does accomplish this in themselves. As previously noted, Paul says very plainly that “by works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Rom. 3:20). Others believe that this is describing an actual state of affairs—that there are those whose lives are characterized by “perseverance in doing good.” It seems to me that the latter view has the most in its favor. If this is the case, however, the kind of life described here can only be the result of the gracious work of the Spirit in the “circumcision of the heart,” as the broader context makes very clear (Rom. 2:29; cf. Rom. 8:1–4). Their persevering in doing good is not the source of their salvation, but the fruit of God’s saving work in their hearts.

The question is whether God’s grace might be at work in the hearts of some of those who have not heard of Christ in such a way as to produce these kinds of changes.

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<sup>645</sup> Moo provides a helpful list of possible interpretations of Rom. 2:5–11. Douglas Moo, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Epistle to the Romans*, 139–141.

An inclusivist would say “yes.”<sup>646</sup> Other passages, however, make it clear that the Spirit performs this regenerating work only in those who place their faith in Christ. As Peter says, we are “born again . . . through the living and enduring word of God” (I Pet. 1:23). Thomas Schreiner convincingly argues that those whose good works are described in this passage are believers who have been born of the Spirit: “Paul is speaking of Christians who keep the law by the power of the Holy Spirit . . . .”<sup>647</sup> To interpret this passage as teaching that some among the unevangelized may evidence this transforming work of the Spirit, apart from faith in Christ, runs counter to Paul’s argument in this section of his epistle—that all are under sin (Rom. 3:9ff), and that God’s grace comes through the gospel (Rom. 1:16; 3:22).

The purpose of this chapter has been to show that the case for inclusivism is not as strong as some believe. Though people during Old Testament times were saved apart from a full understanding of the person and work of Christ, they still needed to have faith in God’s gracious promises (Heb. 11). This was true even of those who are sometimes pointed to as examples of people outside the covenant community who were saved (e.g., Melchizedek). Though there is evidence that there is a work of God in the hearts of people prior to their placing their faith in Christ, this work is clearly distinguished from God’s saving work in those who believe (as is evident in the case of Cornelius, who though he feared God, was not yet a recipient of God’s salvation).

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<sup>646</sup> This is the view of Klyne Snodgrass, as set forth in his article: “Justification by Grace — To the Doers: An Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul,” *New Testament Studies* 32 (1996), 72–93.

<sup>647</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Romans, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 124. Commenting on 2:25–29, he states: “The good works done are not an achieving of salvation, then, but the outflow of the Spirit’s work in a person’s life.” *Ibid.*, 153.



Though what can be known of God through general revelation was originally intended by him to instill in people a desire to seek for him (Acts 14:17; 17:27), no one responds in this way on their own initiative (Rom. 1:18; 3:11). We will show in the following chapter, however, that the Holy Spirit does use this general revelation to draw many to seek for God. Nonetheless, what can be known of God through general revelation falls short of giving people evidence to know of God's gracious provision of salvation (cf. Ps. 19).

We will now turn to a positive case for the view that salvation comes only through explicit faith in God's promise, which now is centered on his Son, Jesus Christ.



## Chapter 11

### *The Case for Particularism*

#### Why The Unevangelized Are Unevangelized

I will begin this section by first discussing an important question. Why is it that the unevangelized are unevangelized? How is it that there are large portions of humanity that have come to fall into the category of those who have never heard of Christ in any meaningful way? Those who conceive of the development of religion along “evolutionary” lines generally see religion as moving from animistic or polytheistic religion (in which many gods are worshiped) to henotheistic religion (in which a particular god is worshiped above all other gods), to monotheistic religion (which conceives of one creator God to the exclusion of all others). These theories were advanced especially by the influential work of Edward B. Tylor, in his book, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom*.<sup>648</sup>

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<sup>648</sup> Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom*, 2 volumes (London: John Murray, 1871). Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt documented the growth of this idea in his book, *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories*, trans. H. J. Rose (New York: Dial Press, 1931). This theory, however, began to be seriously questioned with the publication of Andrew Lang’s book, *The Making of Religion* (London: Longmans, 1898). Schmidt himself later published his twelve volume work, documenting the evidence for “native monotheism” in cultures throughout the world: *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee (The Origin of the Concept of God)*, 12 volumes (Munster: Aschendorff, 1912–1954, 1955). Winfried Corduan has provided an excellent study of the debates regarding original monotheism in his book, *In the Beginning God: A Fresh Look at the Case for Original Monotheism* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2013). Don Richardson recounts the development of these theories more briefly in his book, *Eternity in Their Hearts: Revised Edition*, ch. 4. For a study of the history of comparative religion, which gives an account of the debate between the

Those who read the Old Testament from a critical viewpoint, also see the religion which stands behind the biblical traditions as following such an evolutionary pattern.<sup>649</sup> A straightforward reading of Scripture, however, would lead us to conclude that religion did not develop in an evolutionary fashion, but that non-biblical religions represent digressions from the original revelation of the one true God that was made known to all people at the outset of human history.

The worship of the Lord is evident in Genesis 4, in the life of Abel (who brought sacrifices to the Lord), and in the last verse of that chapter: “Then men began to call upon the name of the Lord (Yahweh)” (v. 26). Very quickly, however, people began to turn away from the Lord. Richard Hess, commenting on the genealogy of Cain in Genesis 4:17–26, states: “In its narrative context, the picture is one of religious and moral degeneration in the midst of civilized life.”<sup>650</sup> We see this in chapters four through six of Genesis, with the increasingly murderous actions of Cain and Lamech, and culminating in the sobering statement: “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on

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evolutionists and those advocating for an original monotheism, see Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, Second edition (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986).

<sup>649</sup> Karen Armstrong is also representative of this viewpoint. See her book: *A History of God: The 4,000-year quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994). Corduan makes the significant observation about the perception of God in various religions: “The attributes of the god of many monotheisms today are such that we can say pretty confidently that they all may have a common origin with the one true God, but they are not necessarily identical with the one true God when we consider all their natures.” *In the Beginning God*, 353. For an evaluation of critical approaches to the Old Testament, see Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2011), 123–162.

<sup>650</sup> Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 145.

the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

Not only is there moral degeneracy, but there is evidence of religious and spiritual degeneration as well. This can be seen in the name Methushael, for example (Gen. 4:18), which possibly means “man (or devotee) of El (the god).” This has been thought by some to be a reference to the Mesopotamian god Shuwala.<sup>651</sup>

Though the worship of the Lord was restored through Noah and his family after the deluge, defection from the Lord is soon evidenced once again in the incident of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). In fact, evidence of idolatry is to be found even in the family of Abram. Hess states, regarding Abram’s name: “The name Abram itself . . . carries a possible double meaning to its name, either ‘[my] father is the deity Ram’ or ‘[my] father is exalted.’ Even in the latter case, we cannot be certain if this name refers to God or to another deity.”<sup>652</sup> It may also be that the name Sarai is related to the name of the moon goddess Ishtar.<sup>653</sup> Certainly, prior to his call, Abram’s family had embraced the idolatry of their surrounding culture, as indicated by the statement in Joshua 24:2, “From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods.” Clearly, just as had occurred in the generations after the fall, so in the generations following the deluge, there was a turning away from worship of the Lord to the worship of false gods.

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<sup>651</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>653</sup> R. G. Branch, “Sarah,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 733.

All of this bears out the description of spiritual degeneration provided in Romans 1:18–32. The moral degeneration depicted in this passage is attributed to the religious and spiritual defection from worship of the true God: “Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures . . . . For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever, Amen” (Rom. 1:23, 25). This was due, according to Paul, to the fact that in “ungodliness and unrighteousness” they “suppressed the truth of God” which is known through the creation (vv. 18–19). Cranfield suggests that to “suppress the truth” is to attempt to “bury it out of sight, or obliterate it from the memory.”<sup>654</sup> In a similar way, the Psalmist speaks of the “nations who forget God” (Ps. 9:17).

Not only was this religious defection due to the sinful choice of man, but satanic and demonic powers were actively involved in promoting this move as well.<sup>655</sup> Several passages attest to this fact. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving” (II Cor. 4:4) . . . even disguising himself as “an angel of light” (II Cor. 11:14), and his servants “as servants of righteousness” (11:15). That is, Satan uses religion and morality, as well as evil, to turn people from the knowledge of the truth of God. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul warned that some would “fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and

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<sup>654</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 volumes (London, New York: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1:112.

<sup>655</sup> A helpful overview of the biblical view of other religions may be found in Richard R. De Ridder, “God and the Gods: Reviewing the Biblical Roots,” *Missiology: An International Review*, 6.1, 11–28.

doctrines of demons” (I Tim. 4:1). It’s impossible to deny that, regardless of what positive elements may reside in non-biblical religions, demonic forces have been at work in the development of religious movements which departed from the faith reflected in the Bible.

False gods are spoken of as representing demonic powers in several passages. Speaking of Israel, Moses says, “They sacrificed to demons, who were not God, to gods whom they have not known, new gods who came lately, whom your fathers did not dread” (Deut. 32:17; cf. Lev. 17:7). The Psalmist says of Israel, “They even sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons” (Ps. 106:37). Speaking of pagan worship, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “(T)he things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God” (I Cor. 10:20).

This is not to say that there are no truths in extrabiblical religions. Some religions have preserved elements of the original revelation of God as recorded in Genesis.<sup>656</sup> Some have also absorbed parts of the biblical revelation in the development of their own scriptures (as was the case, for example, with Islam).<sup>657</sup> But even these truths have been

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<sup>656</sup> Some, for example, see the original revelation contained in Genesis preserved in the characters of the Chinese language. See Ethel R. Nelson, Richard E. Broadberry, Ginger Tong Chock, *God’s Promise to the Chinese* (Dunlap, TN: Read Books, 1997); Ethel R. Nelson, Richard E. Broadberry, *Genesis and the Mystery Confucius Couldn’t Solve* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994). Some also see biblical roots in the Hindu Vedas. See Joseph Padinjarekara, *Christ in Ancient Vedas*, (Burlington, Ontario, Canada: Welch Publishing Co., 1984). For a similar study of the background of the Hawaiian people, see Daniel I. Kikawa, *Perpetuated in Righteousness: The Journey of the Hawaiian People from Eden (Kalaha i Hauola) to the Present Time*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Kane’ohe, HI: Aloha Ke Akua Publishing, 1994).

<sup>657</sup> J. H. Bavinck states in this regard: “(H)ere and there, now and then, Christian ideas penetrated other religions, melted into them, and became one with them.” J. H. Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 106. Quoted by Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 256.

mixed with error, and as the above passages testify, are used by Satan to lead people away from God.

The third factor contributing to this process of religious decline, is the judicial action of God. This is seen in several passages. Barnabas and Paul, for example, told the people of Lystra that God had “permitted the nations to go their own ways” (Acts 14:16). In his letter to the Romans, Paul states that due to their suppression of the truth evident to them in creation, God handed the nations over to their “futile speculations” (Rom. 1:21). This is similar to the statement in Psalm 81:12, where in response to Israel’s refusing to listen, God “gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices,” just as Stephen said that he also “delivered them up to serve the host of heaven” in judgment for their idolatry in the case of the golden calf (Acts 7:41–43). God is even said to have “allotted to the peoples” the host of heaven to be worshipped by them (Deut. 4:19)—likely, in my opinion, a judicial act.

Michael Heiser believes that Deut. 32:8–9 describes this judicial process. The text reads in the English Standard Version: “When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the Lord’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.” Heiser comments:

The point of verses 8–9 is that sometime after God separated the people of the earth at Babel and established where on the earth they were to be located, He then assigned each of the seventy nations to the fallen sons of God (who were also seventy in number). After observing humanity’s rebellion before the Flood and then again in the Babel incident, God decided to desist in His efforts to work



directly with humanity. In an action reminiscent of Romans 1, God ‘gave humanity up’ to their persistent resistance to obeying Him.<sup>658</sup>

It should be noted, however, (as mentioned in the previous chapter) that God’s judgment was not without mercy. This is seen first in that those in darkness are not held accountable to the same degree as are those who are privileged to receive the light of the truth. Paul states that “where there is no law there is no violation” (Rom. 4:15). People are held accountable for their response to the revelation they have received, not for what they have not received. This principle is stated in different ways in a number of passages. For example, Jesus said, “And that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few” (Lk. 12:47–48a). It’s likely that the one who did not know God’s will, yet received a few lashes, should have known and could have known God’s will (for example through conscience), yet suppressed this knowledge (Rom. 1:18). (Cf. also Jn. 9:41; 15:22; Rom. 2:12.)

The Apostle Peter even says of those who had turned away from the faith: “For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them” (II Pet. 2:21).<sup>659</sup> It would have been better for them not to have known, than to have known and then turned away, because their judgment would in that case be less severe. As J. Oswald Sanders

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<sup>658</sup> Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), 71. Quoted in Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 145.

<sup>659</sup> It seems just to conclude, that those who grow up in a society where the dominant world view is polytheistic, for example, would be considered not culpable to the same degree as the person who knowingly rejected the revealed truth about the God of the Bible, until he or she is capable of evaluating the evidence in God’s general revelation for him or herself.

states: “It can be affirmed with certainty that no one will be condemned for rejecting a Christ whom they had no opportunity to accept. Or for failing to use light they did not have, but only because they have shut their eyes to the light they *did* have.”<sup>660</sup>

Second, God’s mercy is seen in that many of the religions do perform a positive function in restraining sin and promoting a certain kind of righteousness. Daniel Strange writes: “Because of the common grace order worked by the Holy Spirit . . . , non-Christian religions are instrumental in accomplishing the purposes given to common grace in restraining sin and exciting to civic righteousness.”<sup>661</sup> Gerald McDermott, referring to the teachings of Clement of Alexandria, writes: “Clement suggests that God permitted other, partially false religions in order to keep some peoples from complete destruction.”<sup>662</sup> Referring to John Calvin, Strange writes: “As Calvin notes, God uses false religion to serve as a ‘bridle’ to sustain ‘the thought that God is to be feared’ and so places a restraint on the ‘depraved affections of the flesh.’”<sup>663</sup> Strange further comments: “One can argue that God has caused the rise of organized religions, rather than allowing each person to worship their own idol, as a means of graciously providing agreed social norms within religious societies that save those societies from unrestrained evil and that provide an element of social cohesion.”<sup>664</sup>

Third, God’s mercy is also seen in his patient forbearance with the nations in ignorance of the truth, in not immediately sweeping them away in total judgment, and in

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<sup>660</sup> J. Oswald Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?*, 53.

<sup>661</sup> Daniel Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*, 319.

<sup>662</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, *God’s Rivals*, 131.

<sup>663</sup> Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 320. He is quoting from John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*, trans. John King (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 290.

<sup>664</sup> Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 320.

now giving them an opportunity to come to repentance and salvation during this age of the gospel. Paul said to the Athenians: “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness, through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30). That is, God is affording to those who were formerly in ignorance of the true God, an opportunity to repent of their idolatry and believe in Christ.

If God had chosen to allow the nations to remain in darkness, he could not have been accused of injustice; for man had rejected the truth about God when it was known, and continued to suppress the truth that is universally accessible. As Abraham said to the rich man in Jesus’ parable when he asked that someone from the dead go to warn his five brothers not to follow him to hades: “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead” (Lk. 16:31). In other words, if one rejects what revelation they have, there is no reason why God should send them more—only to have it rejected as well. The problem is the inner disposition of the heart, not a lack of sufficient revelation from God.

But God is not only a God of justice, he is also a God of love and grace. And it is in his grace that he has not “left himself without witness” (Acts 14:17), by revealing his power and divine nature in creation (Rom. 1:20), his moral nature in man’s conscience (Rom. 2:15), and by granting many good gifts in life to all (Acts. 14:17). Indeed, he is “kind to ungrateful and evil men” (Lk. 6:35). “He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Mt. 5:45b). And it is in his grace that he has given his Son for the sins of the world (John 3:16; I John 2:2),

providing many convincing evidences of his identity as the divine Savior (Acts 1:3; 17:31).

### Classic Texts

It is now the place to give attention to a positive biblical case for particularism. The thesis of this view is that eternal life is given by God only through hearing and believing the promise of his provision of salvation, which in this age is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is appropriate to begin by citing a few classic texts which state this fact.

The first of these is the statement in Isaiah 45:22, “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other.” This statement stands in contrast to what is said in v. 20b of this chapter: “They have no knowledge, who carry about their wooden idol and pray to a god who cannot save.”<sup>665</sup> This statement about salvation coming to all nations through knowledge of the Lord is consistent with the promise stated to Abram that it would be through his descendants that God would bring blessing to “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3).

This thought is also reflected in God’s words to Israel through Moses: “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own

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<sup>665</sup> Alec Motyer comments on this verse: “In contrast with the ‘el who is non-salvific (20d), here is a God whose nature includes salvation.” J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 366. The prophet Isaiah says in 53:11b, “By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many . . .” Some believe that this could be translated: “by knowing Him” or “by knowledge of Him,” in which case this would state clearly that salvation or justification comes through explicit knowledge of the Lord. See Martin Goldsmith, *What About Other Faiths?* 78. It could, however, be a reference to the Lord’s knowledge—perhaps his knowledge of God’s will to accomplish salvation through his sacrifice.

possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5–6a). Included in this statement, I believe, is the idea that Israel would function as a priest among all the nations, the channel through which they would come to know God. In the words of the commentator Victor Hamilton: “Israel is the bridge between Yahweh and the nations.”<sup>666</sup>

This idea is also reflected in the prayer and benediction of Solomon at the dedication of the Temple:

Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Your name’s sake (for they will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name, to fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by Your name . . . so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no one else (I Kings 8:41–43, 60).

This concept is reflected as well in the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well: “(F)or salvation is from the Jews” (Jn. 4:22b).

It is for this reason that God placed Israel at the crossroads of three continents, as he stated to Ezekiel: “Thus says the Lord God, ‘This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her’” (Ezek. 5:5). Indeed, the Psalmist says that during Old Testament times the knowledge of the Lord had reached far beyond the borders of Israel: “The Lord has made known His salvation; He has revealed His

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<sup>666</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 304.

righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered His lovingkindness and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (Ps. 98:2–3). In reflecting on the career of King Solomon, the writer of I Kings states: “And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom” (I Kings 4:34).<sup>667</sup>

The second classic statement of this thesis is found in John 14:6, where Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” Jesus is the great High Priest through whom all must come to the Father. He is the one mediator between God and men (I Tim. 2:5). He is the “door” of the sheepfold of God’s family, through whom if anyone enters, “he will be saved” (John 10:9).

The third statement is found in Acts 4:12, where the Apostle Peter said: “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.” It is noteworthy that salvation comes through the “name” of Jesus. This is reminiscent of Paul’s statement that it is those who “call on the name of the Lord” who are saved (Rom. 10:13), as well as Peter’s statement to Cornelius that “through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43).<sup>668</sup> Peter was stating that one must call on Jesus’ name and believe in him for salvation.

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<sup>667</sup> I Kings 10:24 says, “All the earth was seeking the presence of Solomon, to hear his wisdom which God has put in his heart.” Cf. II Chron. 9:23. It should be noted as well, that once Israel and Judah began to be exiled, the Jewish people scattered throughout the nations. Some among them certainly carried the knowledge of the Lord with them, and made him known to these nations.

<sup>668</sup> This is pointed out by John Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God*, 94–95.

Inclusivists, as well as particularists, believe the statements of these verses. But whereas the particularist holds that those who come to the Father through Christ must know of him and believe in him explicitly, the inclusivist holds that it is only necessary to believe “implicitly” by responding to whatever revelation one may have. It’s my purpose in the remainder of this chapter to examine the biblical evidence supporting the particularist point of view.

### The Content of “Faith”

I will begin by noting that salvation has always been “by faith” in God’s word. This is the thesis of Hebrews 11, which states: “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is the rewarder of those who seek Him” (v. 6). As pointed out in the previous chapter, it is clear from the context that such faith is always placed in the revealed word or promise of God. For though it is possible to come to faith that God exists through his general revelation through nature, it requires a further revelation to come to believe that God is the “rewarder of those who seek Him.”<sup>669</sup>

In comparing the role of saving faith in the Old and New Testaments, Geoffrey Grogan states: “In each case . . . we see faith as the correlative of revelation, and that revelation both personal and propositional. It was personal in that God disclosed *Himself*

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<sup>669</sup> Note the statement in Gen. 15:1, where the Lord tells Abraham that his “reward will be very great.”

and not simply truths about Himself . . . . It was also propositional, for it was response to God as he made Himself known *in His promises*.”<sup>670</sup>

Such a promise came initially from God in his promise of deliverance through the seed of the woman that God gave to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15). God’s promise of deliverance and blessing was expanded over the ages, through his word given to Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets, and finally through Jesus Christ and his apostles (Heb. 1:1–2). The fact that faith in God’s word has always been the means through which people came into right relation with God is illustrated by the experience of Abraham, of whom it is said, “Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6.) As pointed out in the previous chapter, this was not the first time Abraham believed in the Lord. For Heb. 11:8 states that Abraham first expressed his faith when he obeyed God by going to the land he was promising to give him. Abraham’s faith was in the promise of God, and in the God who had made the promise.

### Salvation Through Faith

We find many statements in the New Testament that salvation comes through hearing and believing the word of God, or the gospel. The following list of passages is not exhaustive. But it is lengthy, and important. I will cite such texts as they appear in canonical order, and make comments where appropriate.

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned (Mark 16:15–16).

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<sup>670</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, “The Experience of Salvation in the Old and New Testaments,” *Vox Evangelica*, vol. 5 (1967), 21.



(A)nd that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:47).

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name (John 1:12).

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16; cf. v. 18).

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life (John 5:24).

For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day (John 6:40).

I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture (John 10:9).

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die” (John 11:25–26a).

You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you (John 15:3). Notice that the spiritual cleansing of the hearts of his disciples was accomplished through the word of Christ.

This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent (John 17:3). This text states that eternal life comes through knowing Christ.

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word (John 17:20). This text gives a description of the church for whom Jesus is praying. They will come to believe in him through the word of his apostles.

Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43).

Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe (Acts 15:7b).

(S)olemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21).

(T)o open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me (Acts 26:18). Note that faith involves a “turning” and “receiving.”

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16).

(E)ven the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe (Rom. 3:22).

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1).

(A)nd these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified (Rom. 8:30). It's noteworthy that all whom God has predestined are also called, so that they may be justified by faith.

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation (Rom. 10:8–10).

(F)or "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? (Rom. 10:14–15a). Note the emphasis on both hearing the word and believing in the Lord so as to call upon his name for salvation.

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith, to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen (Rom. 16:25–27).

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message

preached to save those who believe (I Cor. 1:21). It is through believing the message proclaimed by God's messengers that people come to know God and be saved.

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved (I Cor. 15:1–2a). We are saved by or through believing the gospel.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (II Cor. 4:3–6). Notice that people come out of darkness into light through the knowledge of Christ in the gospel.

We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified (Gal. 2:15–16). Justification comes through faith in Christ.

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal. 3:2; cf. v. 5). The Holy Spirit is received when people hear the gospel and place their faith in Christ.

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise (Eph. 1:13).

(T)hat the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Eph. 3:6). Note that it is through the gospel that people inherit these blessings.

(N)ot having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Phil. 3:9).

We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; because of the hope laid up for you in heaven of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth (Col. 1:3–7a).

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe (I Thess. 2:13).

They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved (I Thess. 2:15b–16a). Notice that the salvation of the Gentiles is dependent on the word of God being made known to them, and that apart from this there appears to be no possibility of their salvation.

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you

through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (II Thess. 2:13–14). Salvation comes through faith in the truth about Christ.

Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life (I Tim. 1:16). Notice that eternal life comes through believing in Jesus Christ.

This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (I Tim. 2:3–5). Notice the connection between salvation and knowledge of the truth.

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned. For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory (II Tim. 2:8–10). Notice that the elect may not be saved apart from hearing the gospel, which is why Paul is willing to suffer for the sake of making it known. The Lord had previously told him, at his conversion, that he “must suffer for (his) name’s sake” (Acts 9:16).

Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago, but at the proper time manifested, even His word, in the proclamation with which I was entrusted according to the commandment of God our Savior (Tit. 1:1–3). Notice that “those chosen of God” come to possess eternal life through the knowledge of and faith in the truth.

In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures (James 1:18). Notice that believers have come to new life through the “word of truth.”

(F)or you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God . . . . And this is the word which was preached to you (I Pet. 1:23, 25). Notice again that it is through the preached word that we are born again.

To those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust (II Pet. 1:1b–4). Notice that it is through the true knowledge of Christ and faith in him and his promises that we have become partakers of the divine nature (the new birth).

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God . . . . And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life (I John 5:1a, 11–12).

Taken together, these texts communicate a unified message that it is through hearing and believing in Christ through the gospel that people receive the gift of the forgiveness of sins and of eternal life.<sup>671</sup>

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<sup>671</sup> It should be noted that there is disagreement in Reformed circles regarding the question of whether regeneration precedes faith or is simultaneous with it. It is not

## Pre-Conversion State of Believers

The second group of passages is equally important. These are passages which describe the pre-conversion state of people prior to their coming to faith in Christ.

(T)o open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me (Acts 26:18). We will examine this verse in detail at the end of this section.

However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God . . . . (Gal. 4:8–9a). Prior to their coming to their coming to faith in Christ, the Galatians did not know God (nor were they known by him in a relational sense), and they were enslaved to false gods.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience (Eph. 2:1–2). Prior to faith, they were spiritually dead (cut off from the life of God), lived in the sphere of “trespasses and sins,” and were under the power of Satan.

Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:11–12). Prior to faith, the Ephesians were not united to Christ, not numbered among God’s people

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important that we attempt to resolve this issue here. But it is important to recognize that faith in God’s word and regeneration are portrayed as closely connected in these passages.



Israel, and not heirs to the promises given to them. Rather, they were without any hope and estranged from God.

So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart . . . (Eph. 4:17–18). The Gentiles' thinking was futile and darkened. They were ignorant and hardened in heart.

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:13–14). They lived in spiritual darkness, and did not know God's redemption or forgiveness.

And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister (Col. 1:21–23). Notice the stark contrast between their former and their current spiritual condition, and that this transformation was brought about by their faith in the gospel which they heard through Paul. They had been hostile to God, and engaged in evil deeds.

For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God . . . (I Thess. 1:9). Notice that prior to turning to the Lord, these Thessalonian believers had been serving idols which were neither living nor true.

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Tit.3:3–7). Notice again the dramatic contrast, and the fact that transformation came through Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance (I Pet. 1:14). They were dominated by strong passions, due to their ignorance of the truth.

(K)nowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers (I Pet. 1:18). The former way of life of the Gentiles is described as “futile.” J. N. D. Kelly comments on this word: “The adjective futile (*mataios*: ‘vain’, ‘powerless’, almost ‘non-existent’) . . . is scornfully applied in the LXX to the gods of the heathen, in contrast to the one living and true God (e.g. Lev. xvii. 7; 2 Chron. xi. 15; Jer. viii.19; x.15), or else to those who have never known Him (e.g. Wis. xiii. 1) or have apostatized from Him (e.g. Jer. ii. 5).”<sup>672</sup>

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have

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<sup>672</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on The Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), 74.

received mercy (I Pet. 2:9–10). They lived in spiritual darkness, had not been among God’s people, nor were they recipients of God’s merciful salvation.

For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls (I Pet. 2:24). They strayed like sheep without a shepherd.

These passages uniformly describe Gentiles in particular as being without hope, in darkness and under the power of sin and Satan, prior to coming to know Christ and placing their faith in him. There is no hint of their having been in fellowship with God in any sense prior to their hearing the gospel and believing in Christ.

Christoph W. Stenschke has conducted an extensive study of the description of the pre-conversion state of Gentiles in Luke’s writings.<sup>673</sup> From the Lord’s commission to Paul (Acts 26:18), Stenschke draws the following conclusions about the Gentiles.<sup>674</sup> First, they are blind. He states: “Gentile eyes are closed to the truth and their true state. This observation cautions against assuming much adequate ‘natural’ insight among the Gentiles. Through their blindness they do not recognize the darkness they live in and the bondage they live under.”<sup>675</sup> Second, they are in darkness. Stenschke states: “In addition to having closed eyes, Gentiles are in darkness, in need of divine light and revelation to dispel darkness and to recognize the true state of affairs and need for salvation.”<sup>676</sup> Third, they are under the power of Satan. He states: “Luke indicates that the dominion over the kingdoms of this world has been given to Satan (Luke 4:5–8). Satan has these kingdoms

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<sup>673</sup> Christoph W. Stenschke, *Luke’s Portrait of Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

<sup>674</sup> Ibid., 243–55.

<sup>675</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid., 247.

at his disposal and is able to pass them and his exousia over them to whom he pleases. Through his earthly vassals Satan is master over the whole oikoumene in which Gentiles live under his exousia.”<sup>677</sup> Fourth, they are distanced from God. They are estranged from God, and in need of being turned away from darkness and to God.<sup>678</sup> Fifth, they are in need of forgiveness. “They have sinned and are sinners in need of forgiveness.”<sup>679</sup> Sixth, they are unholy and unbelieving. They are in need of being made holy or sanctified by the Lord. “Gentiles could not sanctify themselves but *had to be sanctified by God*. Gentiles were made holy by their faith in Jesus. Prior to this faith Gentiles did not believe in God. This new position was exclusively tied to faith and could not be achieved otherwise. None of the Gentiles’ past achievements constituted an acceptable contribution, not surprisingly in view of the earlier description of their state.”<sup>680</sup> Consequently, Gentiles are in need of repentance, and God’s help in living a totally new life, as reflected in Paul’s summary of his message: “that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance” (Acts 26:20).

Stenschke points out that Isaiah chapter 42 provides the background to the statement in Acts 26:18.<sup>681</sup> This is especially obvious in the Lord’s statement in that chapter in Isaiah that he had called his Servant “to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison” (Isa. 42:7).

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<sup>677</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid., 251. Paul described the idols which the Gentiles in Lystra worshiped (and everything associated with their worship) as “vain things” (touton ton mataion) in Acts 14:15. See Stenschke, *ibid.*, 186.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>680</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid., 262ff.

Stenschke points out as well, that descriptions of Gentile Christians are important to note, for they imply that prior to their coming to faith in Christ they did not possess these characteristics. He identifies the following characteristics.<sup>682</sup> First, they are called “saints” or holy ones “specially devoted to God” (Acts 9:13, 32, 41; 26:10; as well as numerous places in Paul’s epistles). This suggests that prior to coming to know Christ, they were not saints and were not holy. They may have been God-fearers or worshipers, but they were not saints. Second, they are designated as “believers” (Acts 15:7), in contrast to their former unbelieving state. Third, they are called “disciples” or learners (Acts 11:26, 29). They are called followers of “the way” (Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). “Gentile *Christians* travel on a road that is *qualitatively* different, not on their own way, now better lighted and delineated.”<sup>683</sup> They are called “brothers” (Acts 15:3, 23). They are part of a new family of God. They are called “Christians” (Acts 11:26), or those who belong to Christ. They are the “church” (Acts 14:23; 15:41; 16:5; 20:28). They are part of God’s “called out” community of salvation. As Stenschke states: “The designations applied to Gentile Christians or to communities including them show that Gentile Christians enjoy a new state and blessings previously unknown.”<sup>684</sup>

What About God-fearers?

This description of Gentiles prior to faith (in contrast to their new identity in Christ) obviously leads us to ask how it is consistent with the description of some Gentiles, such as Cornelius, who would fall into the category of “God-fearers,” or at least

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<sup>682</sup> Ibid., 322–335.

<sup>683</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>684</sup> Ibid., 332.

“seekers” (such as the Ethiopian eunuch).<sup>685</sup> I will address this question more thoroughly below. But for the moment, I will make these observations about these two individuals. The Ethiopian eunuch is described as having “come to Jerusalem to worship” (Acts 8:27). He is similar to Cornelius, who is described as “a devout man and one who feared God . . . and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually” (Acts 10:2; cf. 10:35). However, whereas Cornelius was described as “devout” it seems that the Ethiopian eunuch was more of an inquirer, who lacked a full understanding of the Old Testament faith.

It is important to point out that both of these men arrived at the spiritual state they were in as a result of exposure to the Jewish religion and the Old Testament scriptures.<sup>686</sup> Nonetheless, both of these men were in need of hearing the Christian message. To the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip “preached Jesus” (Acts 8:35) from Isaiah 53. Prior to this, he did not understand the meaning of the passage, and needed Philip to explain it to him

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<sup>685</sup> God-fearers were “attached to the synagogue by their acceptance of Jewish religious and ethical principles and general sympathy with the Jewish way of life . . . one who was half-way to being a proselyte, one who had taken several steps but not the final decisive step toward becoming a proselyte.” C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles I: Preliminary Introduction and Commentary on Acts I-XIV*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 500f.

<sup>686</sup> It should be pointed out that after the founding of Israel (and prior to the founding of the church), every Gentile who is spoken of in the Scriptures in a spiritually positive way, was first exposed to God through that nation or one of its prophets. Consider the Queen of Sheba (I Kings 10), Naaman (II Kings 5), the Ninevites (Jonah), Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4), the magi (Mt. 2), the centurion in Capernaum (Mt. 8:5–13; Lk. 7:1–10), the Syrophenician woman (Mt. 15:21–28; Mk. 7:24–30), and the Samaritan leper who was healed (he lived in a village between Samaria and Galilee, and was willing to go to a Jewish priest, Luke 17:11–19). The testimony of the centurion at the death of Jesus, that he was a “righteous man” (Luke 23:47) and “a son of God” (Mt. 27:54; Mk. 15:39) shows that he was at least open to God. See the discussion in Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2 volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994, 1996), 2:1863–64.

(Acts 8:30–34). It was only after his understanding was opened and he believed in Jesus and was baptized, that he “went on his way rejoicing” (v. 39). Likewise, Peter proclaimed to Cornelius and his household that “everyone who believes in him (Jesus) receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43). The fact that Peter no doubt has Cornelius’ conversion in mind when he said at the Jerusalem Council, that God was at work among the Gentiles, “cleansing their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9) tells us that prior to his placing his faith in Jesus, his heart had not yet been cleansed. Though the Holy Spirit had obviously been at work preparing the hearts of these two men to receive the gospel when they heard it, nonetheless, they were still in an unsaved condition prior to that time. As Stenschke says: “The fact that these God-fearers needed to be brought into contact with the Christian message (Acts 8.26–39; 10.9–23) shows that their present status, though an excellent preparation, was insufficient.”<sup>687</sup>

It is important to note also that not all those described as “devout” received the Christian message, as reflected in the fact that at Pisidian Antioch, some of “the devout women of prominence” rose up in opposition to Paul and Barnabas, in addition to many of the Jews (Acts 13:50).<sup>688</sup> In addition, on the Day of Pentecost, there were (among the Jews present there) “devout men,” some of whom at first “mocked” the disciples who were speaking in tongues when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 2:5, 13). These devout men were in need of repentance “for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38). Thus,

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<sup>687</sup> Stenschke, *Luke’s Portrait of Gentiles*, 313.

<sup>688</sup> This fact is noted by Stenschke, *Luke’s Portrait of Gentiles*, 194 n428.

something more is required for salvation than merely being a “devout” or religious person, whether Gentile or Jew.<sup>689</sup>

The Apostle Paul himself would certainly have been described as a “devout” person prior to his conversion to Christ. He said of himself that he far excelled his peers in religious devotion (Phil. 3:4–6). Yet he considered his own righteous works as “rubbish” compared to knowing Christ (Phil. 3:7–9). With regard to his fellow Jews, Paul said that those who fell short of salvation did so because they sought to “establish their own” righteousness, rather than seeing their need for the gift of a right standing with God that comes through faith in Christ (Rom. 10:1–4).

What should be observed regarding particularly the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius, however, is that what the Lord had begun in the hearts of these two men by way of preparation, he completed by bringing the Christian message to them. And in their case, he used extraordinary means to do so. Stenschke comments on this fact: “God initiated the encounters of Gentiles with salvation and directed the missionary journeys (8.26–28; 10.3; 13.2; 16.9f). On these journeys the missionaries visited synagogues and their God-fearers. If God arranged for and became active in their step from Judaism to Christianity, is it not likely that he initiated and led their first step from paganism to this association?”<sup>690</sup> I believe he is right. What God begins, he completes.

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<sup>689</sup> “*Devoutness and works of righteousness and religious sincerity do not solve the problem of sin. The only hope is to believe on Jesus.*” (Italics in original.) John Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God*, 83. To be “devout” (*eusebes*) is to be “profoundly reverent or respectful.” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition*, ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 413.

<sup>690</sup> Stenschke, *Luke’s Portrait of Gentiles*, 314. Later on the same page, he writes: “Though they were still in need of Christian salvation, God had already started to work in the lives of some Gentiles.”



The Calvinist writer Mark Shaw puts it this way: “The true seeker is one who is simply in the early stages of the Spirit’s transforming work. The Spirit’s grip will not let him go till he has been justified, sanctified and glorified. In the back of the seeker before the dawn of time is the mystery of God’s loving election in Christ. The true seeker will find Christ and his fullness.”<sup>691</sup> One need not necessarily be a Calvinist to agree that God persists in his work of leading people toward Christ. He does not use half measures, leaving those whom he has prepared to receive the gospel without ever hearing the saving message.

#### Ordinary and Extraordinary Means of Evangelization

A fact that is alluded to in the passages cited earlier in this chapter is that God’s ordinary means of communicating the gospel to people who do not yet know Christ, is through a human messenger. This is especially clear in the Romans 10 passage, where Paul asks, “How will they hear without a preacher?” (v. 14). It was for this reason that he said, “And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named . . . (that) ‘They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand’” (Rom. 15:20–21). Reading through the Book of Acts we also see what

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<sup>691</sup> Mark Shaw, “Is There Salvation Outside the Christian Faith?” 60–61. Shaw distinguishes between the true seeker and the insincere dabbler: “Most seekers are not moved by saving grace but simply a general conviction of sin and need. This only reliable test of a true seeker is if he finds Christ. The perpetual nibblers, the incurably curious are like Bunyan’s ‘Talkative’—often in the company of believers but moving in the opposite direction and to an ultimately opposite destiny. This distinction is not clearly made. (C. S.) Lewis is perhaps the most vague on this. His suggestion that the religious seeker who explicitly (sic) rejects Christ may still be accepted by God (possibly after some sort of purgatorial experience) is a triumph of the imagination over the authority of Scripture. It owes more to Hindu mystics than Hebrew prophets.” *Ibid.*, 61.

extraordinary means God can use in directing his messengers to bring the gospel to those who need it, and whose hearts the Holy Spirit has prepared to receive it.

Might it be possible, however, that God could use extraordinary means in directly communicating the gospel to people, apart from a human messenger, in some cases? We know that the Lord spoke directly to the Apostle Paul on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1–9), and that this was an essential element in his conversion. There is evidence that God has employed such extraordinary means in the past in the words of Elihu, as recorded in the book of Job:

Why do you complain against Him that He does not give an account of all His doings? Indeed God speaks once, or twice, yet no one notices it. In a dream, a vision of the night, when sound sleep falls on men, while they slumber in their beds, then He opens the ears of men, and seals their instructions, that He may turn man aside from his conduct, and keep man from pride; He keeps back his soul from the pit, and his life from passing into Sheol (Job 33:13–18).

Here, Elihu states that God sometimes speaks directly to people in a dream or vision, to save them from sin and death.<sup>692</sup> He goes on in vv. 23–28 to state that such a saving message can even come through an angel:

If there is an angel as mediator for him, one out of a thousand, to remind a man what is right for him, then let him be gracious to him, and say, “Deliver him from going down to the pit, I have found a ransom”; let his flesh become fresher than in youth, Let him return to the days of his youthful vigor; Then he will pray to God, and he will accept him, that he may see His face with joy, and he may restore His righteousness to man. He will sing to men and say, “I have sinned and perverted

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<sup>692</sup> A contemporary theologian who appeals to this passage in suggesting that God may reveal the gospel to people in an extraordinary way is John Feinberg. See his book, *Light in a Dark Place* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1981), 95.

what is right, and it is not proper for me. He has redeemed my soul from going to the pit, and my life shall see the light.”

He concludes by stating: “Behold, God does all these oftentimes with men, to bring back his soul from the pit, that he may be enlightened with the light of life” (vv. 29–30). He did not consider this to be a rare thing in his day.

John Hartley comments on this passage: “One of Elihu’s main postulates is that God goes to great efforts to communicate with a person, above all to prevent that person from going astray. Elihu believes that God speaks to a person in many different ways and on many occasions . . . . The two most prominent ways God employs to warn an individual are visions during the night (vv. 15–18) and disciplines of pain (vv. 19–22).”<sup>693</sup>

Christopher Little also comments on the significance of this passage with regard to the unevangelized: “The soteriological implications of this passage as it pertains to missiology are immense. At the very least, what we have here is a phenomenological presentation through poetry concerning how God works redemptively ‘oftentimes’ through the modality of a dream, a vision, and/or an angel.”<sup>694</sup> Little goes on to point out that Job himself is an example of someone to whom God spoke directly (Job 38–42), and that Job did not seem to think that this was unusual.<sup>695</sup> In fact, the book of Job gives

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<sup>693</sup> John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 442–43.

<sup>694</sup> Christopher R. Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized*, 75.

<sup>695</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

evidence that God had revealed to Job that because he was his Redeemer, he would one day see him in the resurrection (19:25–26).

We noted in the chapters on the history of this discussion, many people who believed that God communicated the gospel at times in extraordinary ways. John Wesley stated regarding extraordinary communication of the gospel: “And we cannot deny that saving faith is often given in dreams or visions of the night; which faith we count, neither better nor worse, than if it came by any other means.”<sup>696</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones is another commentator who suggests that some of the unevangelized are saved by extraordinary means. Speaking of an unevangelized individual, he states: “In His own mysterious manner by the Holy Spirit God can give that man the knowledge of Christ which is adequate to save him.”<sup>697</sup>

The Princeton professor Archibald Alexander recounts the testimony of the Methodist theologian John Fletcher that he was brought to faith in Christ in part through a dream he had of the final judgment. As a result of this dream, Alexander writes: “From this time he began with all earnestness to seek for justification through the blood of Christ; and never rested until he found peace with God by a living faith in the truth and promises of God.”<sup>698</sup> F. B. Meyer likewise wrote of a man who came to faith in Christ through a dream in which he saw Jesus Christ.<sup>699</sup> In recent times there have been many

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<sup>696</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, in 7 Volumes, Third and Complete American Standard Edition* (New York: Eaton & Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings & Pye, n.d.), 1:200.

<sup>697</sup> D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 10: “Saving Faith”* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 263.

<sup>698</sup> Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (London: Banner of Truth, 1967, originally published 1841), 81–84.

<sup>699</sup> Meyer, citing Dr. James H. Taylor, quotes the man who had this dream, Jake Parsons: “That night, Jesus Christ appeared in my sleep. His face, as I saw it, seemed so pure, so

accounts of individuals in the Muslim world coming to faith in Jesus through dreams and visions, in which they are directed to those who can share with them the gospel.<sup>700</sup> Some have also appealed to the passage in Revelation where it is recorded that an angel is seen preaching the “eternal gospel . . . to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people” (Rev. 14:6).

While it is quite possible that God may at times (and perhaps on many occasions does) use such extraordinary means of communication in bringing someone to salvation, it should be noted from the examples that we have in Scripture that even in these cases,

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lovely, so friendly to me that when I awoke I forgot my old vices, and so loved my Saviour that I could not displease Him. He did not speak to me, He only looked at me; but His look told me that there was hope for me, that I could be forgiven, that I could be purified. I looked at Him, and cried like a child; I felt that I was a vile, miserable, wicked wretch, filthier than a dunghill. I cannot tell how I felt. When I looked at Him I was too happy to be afraid; but when I looked at myself I was too afraid to be happy. I forgot all about rum and tobacco, I was thinking so much about Christ so pure, so lovely, so beautiful, so friendly.” F. B. Meyer, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1952, originally published 1899), 149.

<sup>700</sup> See especially in this regard: Tom Doyle, with Greg Webster, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012). It’s important to note that in Doyle and Webster’s accounts, in no case is a person actually brought to faith through the dream or vision, but they are directed to a human messenger through whom they might receive the gospel. See also Philip H. Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Wiebe was Professor of Philosophy at Trinity Western University in Canada. He interviewed many people who claimed to have had a vision of Christ. Concerning his findings, he made this comment: “Christic visions are evidently more common than is ordinarily believed, although a lack of documentation currently makes this conclusion unprovable . . . . (T)he fact that so many of the percipients I interviewed were in British Columbia, a province with fewer than four million inhabitants, suggests that they are quite ubiquitous.” Ibid., p. 212. A woman in the congregation I served as pastor many years ago told me that she came to faith after a vision involving a bright light in her room, which she perceived to be Jesus. The experience radically changed her life. A nurse originally from Africa, and former Muslim, who worked at the hospital where I served as chaplain for many years told me that she came to faith through a vision of Jesus. She was a very vibrant Christian.

God generally directs people to a human messenger as his agent in bringing people to faith.<sup>701</sup> It appears likely, however, in the case of the Apostle Paul, that he actually came to faith at the time he had a direct encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1–19). When Ananias greeted him in Damascus, he greeted Paul as a “brother” (Acts 9:17). Of course, Paul was no doubt already aware of the content of the Christian message, through his previous encounters with believers.

Though God is perfectly able to communicate the gospel directly to people in an extraordinary way (and it is apparent that he at times does), it is apparent that his desire and plan is to do so normally through a human messenger—and this for good reasons. Frederick W. Grant writes: “In making known His gospel God is pleased to use, not the tongues of angels, but those of men, recipients themselves of the same grace; who can give testimony with their lives as with their lips. Upon this the apostle lays great emphasis: ‘even as ye know what sort of persons we were among you for your sakes.’”<sup>702</sup> A human messenger is able not only to communicate the message of the gospel verbally, but also to give witness to and demonstration of its transforming power in his or her life.

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<sup>701</sup> One might not fully agree with the implications of his statement; but the words of missiologist Herbert Kane should be noted: “There is not a single line in the book of Acts to suggest that God can save a human being without employing a human agent. On the contrary there are several examples of God’s going to great lengths to secure the active cooperation of one or another of His servants.” J. Herbert Kane, *Understanding Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 12. Of course, this does not mean it is impossible for God to do so. But it certainly implies that it is not his ordinary method, and that there are reasons why God would choose to employ a human messenger, even when extraordinary means are used in the process.

<sup>702</sup> *The Numerical Bible*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 7 volumes (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, Bible Truth Depot, 1890–1904), 6:407.

Thomas Chalmers states:

This preference for the agency of men in the work of Christianization is conspicuous in every age of the church; and at no time more than in the first age, even though it was the period of miracles and supernatural visitations. We have often looked on the history of the conversion of Cornelius as a striking illustration of this. God could have worked a saving faith in the heart of Cornelius, by an immediate suggestion from His own Spirit, or through the mouth of an angel. And He did send an angel to Cornelius, not however that he might preach the gospel to him, but that he might bid him send for Peter, and receive that gospel at the lips of a fellow-mortal.<sup>703</sup>

Though we may not agree fully with his conclusion that God hardly ever communicates the gospel directly with people, nonetheless the words of John Howe are worth quoting:

And we, lastly, instance in the fixedness of that course which God hath set for making known to the world the contents of the gospel of Christ; so that little is ever done therein *immediately* or by *extraordinary means*. The apostle Paul is stopped in the career of his persecution by an amazing voice and vision; but he is left for instruction, as to his future course, to Ananias. Unto Cornelius an angel is sent, not to preach the gospel, but to direct him to send for Peter for that purpose. The Lord doth not immediately himself instruct the eunuch in the faith of Christ, but directs Philip to do it; and experience shows that, according to the rule set in that case, where they have no preachers, they have no gospel.<sup>704</sup>

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<sup>703</sup> Thomas Chalmers, *Lectures on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (New York: Robert Carter, 1848), 413.

<sup>704</sup> John Howe, *The Works of John Howe*, 6 volumes (London: Religious Tract Society, 1862–1863), 3:355.

John Flavel (c. 1627–1691) makes a similar observation:

Or, had he commissioned *angels* for this employment, though they stand not at such an infinite distance from us as God doth, yet such is the excellence of their glory (being the highest *species* and order of creatures) that their appearances would be more apt to astonish than persuade us; besides, they being creatures of another rank and kind, and not partaking with us, either in the misery of the fall, or benefit of the recovery by Christ, it is not to be supposed they should speak to us so feelingly and experimentally, as these his ministers do; they can open to you the mysteries of sin, feeling the workings thereof daily in their own hearts; they can discover to you the conflicts of the flesh and spirit, as being daily exercised in that warfare; and they, being men of the same mould (sic) and temper, they can say to you as Elihu did to Job, chap. xxxiii. 6, 7. ‘Behold, I am according to thy wish, in God’s stead, I also am formed out of the clay; behold, my terror shall not make thee afraid, neither shall my hand be heavy upon thee.’<sup>705</sup>

As these quotations testify, God obviously desires to communicate the gospel through his human messengers, even when he may employ extraordinary means in the process. But this is not to say that God cannot, or that he does not communicate it in any other way. Of course, if God should reveal Christ to someone personally at the very last moments of their earthly life, and take them home to heaven without any contact with a human messenger (and we do not know how often this might be the case), we would know nothing at all about it until we meet them in heaven ourselves. We will consider the possibility that God may communicate the gospel to people at the moment of their death below.<sup>706</sup>

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<sup>705</sup> John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 6 volumes (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968, reprint, originally published 1820), 2:53.

<sup>706</sup> This is, in the opinion of many, the case with infants who depart this world. For a discussion of the salvation of infants who die before being able to trust in Christ, see Roy



The words of theologian George Hill are appropriate at this point:

There are numberless ways in which the Father of spirits may extend the knowledge of Christ to all those whose names enter into the decree of election, whatever be the circumstances in which they are placed; and we need not be surprised that the Scriptures give no aid to our conjectures as to the time or the manner of their illumination. For it may be observed in general, that while we are fully instructed in every thing which can serve to direct our conduct, we are kept in the dark as to every thing that may serve only to gratify our curiosity; and with regard to this particular point, it appears that the Scriptures give us no light for this reason, that the condition and the fate of persons, who are not favoured with the outward means of knowing Christ, form no rule to us who enjoy them. Whatever extraordinary revelation the mercy of God may vouchsafe to men in a different situation, our advantages serve at once to point out our duty, and to set bounds to our expectations; and all that concerns our everlasting peace is couched in the spirit of those significant words, which our Lord puts into the mouth of Abraham as an answer to the request of the rich man, who asked that Lazarus might be sent from the other world to his father's house to testify to his five brethren; "they have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them."<sup>707</sup>

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B. Zuck, *Precious in His Sight: Childhood & Children in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), ch. 13. J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. suggests as a "postulate" that "the Holy Spirit of God prior to the moment of death, does so enlarge the intelligence of one who dies in infancy (and I should make the same postulate to cover those who die in imbecility without having reached a state of accountability), that they are capable of accepting Jesus Christ." J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 2:162. Whether this is the case, we do not know. But it is certainly not impossible. God did create Adam and Eve as adults.

<sup>707</sup> George Hill, *Lectures in Divinity* (New York: Robert Carter and Bros., 1865), 615. John Calvin also noted along this line: "We should not investigate what the Lord has left hidden in secret, nor neglect what he has brought out into the open, so that we may not be convicted of excessive curiosity on the one hand, or of excessive ingratitude on the other." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.21.4. God has not revealed to us all we would *like* to know. But He has revealed all we *need* to know to fulfill his will for us.

That is to say that, though God may communicate the gospel to some people (perhaps many people) in extraordinary ways, for those of us who have the means at our disposal of communicating the gospel through the already revealed word, we are accountable to use those means under God's guidance, to the very best of our ability. We give ourselves to the proclamation of the gospel to every creature, not because this is the only way God is able to make his message known. He clearly is able to communicate in a direct manner. But for reasons alluded to above, this is the means that he *desires* to use. And we give ourselves to the ministry of the gospel out of our love and obedience to the Lord, and our love for the world for which Jesus died (II Cor. 5:14). As we go, we take courage in knowing that he has promised to be with us (Mt. 28:20), and he has gone before us to prepare people's hearts to respond to the saving message.

#### Evangelization at the Moment of Death?

We saw in the historical section of this work that there have been many who have suggested that God may communicate the gospel at the moment of death to some people.<sup>708</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones was one who believed this was possible. Concerning someone who had never heard the gospel, he writes: "But what is there to stop the almighty God from illuminating the man's mind, and giving him a revelation of Christ and the gospel, even in the last agony of death? Do you tell me that God cannot do that? I

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<sup>708</sup> For references in this work to these individuals, see: for John Calvin see note 64 above, for Martin Luther see note 83, for W. G. T. Shedd see note 124, for Samuel B. Wylie see note 125, for Augustus Toplady see note 120, for John Wesley see note 260.

believe He can . . . . In His own mysterious manner by the Holy Spirit God can give that man the knowledge of Christ which is adequate to save him.”<sup>709</sup>

We know that the Apostle Paul had a “near death experience” (II Cor. 12:1–4), during which he saw heaven. There are also numerous contemporary accounts of others who have seen Jesus or angels during similar experiences.<sup>710</sup> Kurt E. Koch, for example, recounts the story of a witch doctor in South Africa, who reported that he had an encounter with the Lord after he had died in the King Edward Hospital in Durban, and was then revived. The witchdoctor described his experience: “God spoke to me and brought before me all my sins. He showed me that I would be lost forever if I entered eternity with my sins; he explained to me that I must make my life right. He also showed me a man who could point out the way of salvation to me.” He soon after encountered a man, who did just that.<sup>711</sup>

God has not revealed to us that this is his practice. So we can only speculate on what God might do. But to believe that he may, and that he does at times reveal the gospel at the moment of death to some whose hearts he had been preparing to receive it, is certainly consistent with what we know of the goodness and mercy of God.

Ladislaus Boros suggests (correctly in my estimation) that if there is such an event at death, that the decision made at that time is consistent with the spiritual state of

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<sup>709</sup> D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 10*, 263.

<sup>710</sup> For an informed discussion of near death experiences, see H. Leon Green, *If I Should Wake Before I Die: The Medical and Biblical Truth About Near-Death Experiences* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997).

<sup>711</sup> Kurt E. Koch, *God Among the Zulus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1981), 140–141.

the person during his life: “The final decision is in part determined by the preparatory decisions taken during the course of a lifetime.”<sup>712</sup>

### God’s Preparation for Salvation

We must now address more thoroughly the question that is raised regarding how the passages listed earlier in this chapter, which show that people are in darkness prior to their conversion, relate to other texts examined which suggest that there are some in whom God accomplishes a work prior to their hearing the gospel or coming to faith in Christ (such as Cornelius). How should we relate these two groups of passages?

As we have seen, inclusivists believe that there are those who obtain saving grace prior to hearing the gospel (whether by ordinary or extraordinary means). The fact that these passages describe those who have not yet come to faith in Christ as “in darkness” and “without hope in the world,” however, would seem to cast serious doubt on this conclusion. Even Cornelius, who is spoken of as a “devout” man who “feared God” (Acts 10:2), was also described as someone whose sins had not yet been forgiven (Acts 10:43), who had not yet received the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44), who was yet to be saved (Acts 11:14), and was no doubt among those whom Peter described as those whose hearts had not yet been cleansed by faith (Acts 15:9).

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<sup>712</sup> Ladislaus Boros, *The Mystery of Death*, trans. Gregory Bainbridge (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965), 97. He does allow for the rare case where there is a “complete re-directing of a whole life’s fundamental orientation,” (97). We do have the example of the thief on the cross whose unexpected conversion occurred not long prior to his death. Terrance L. Tiessen also suggests an encounter with Christ at the moment of death (though he believes that people may be saved prior to death apart from explicit faith in Christ). Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 216-29.

As mentioned earlier in this work, a better way of viewing these passages which describe someone in the state which Cornelius was found prior to his hearing about Christ, I believe, is to see them as describing those in whose hearts God has been working to *prepare* them to receive the gospel when it comes. John Murray speaks of certain works of grace that are antecedent to a person's actually exercising faith in Christ. He states:

They are preparatory to these saving operations and in the gracious design of God place the person concerned in the psychological condition that is the prerequisite of the intelligent exercise of faith and repentance. In other words, they place in his mind the apperceptive content that makes the gospel meaningful to his consciousness. But since they are not the saving acts of faith and repentance they must belong to a different category from that of saving grace and therefore to the category of non-saving or common grace . . . . We may thus say that in the operations of common grace we have what we may call the vestibule of faith. We have as it were the point of contact, the *Anknüpfungspunkt*, at which and upon which the Holy Spirit enters with the special and saving operations of his grace. Faith does not take its genesis in a vacuum. It has its antecedents and presuppositions both logically and chronologically in the operations of common grace.<sup>713</sup>

Charles Hodge speaks also of this work of preparation for the gospel (which he refers to as "preventing grace," or grace which precedes regeneration): "By preventing grace is meant such an influence of the Spirit on the mind which precedes and excites its effort to return to God."<sup>714</sup> William G. T. Shedd likewise refers to this preparatory work

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<sup>713</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 volumes (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2:115.

<sup>714</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II:12.

of the Spirit: “There is a grace of God that goes before regenerating grace and makes the soul ready for it. It is common or prevenient grace.”<sup>715</sup>

There are passages of Scripture which provide evidence that there is such a preparatory work in the hearts of people prior to their coming to faith. For example, to the scribe who asked Him which commandment was “foremost of all,” Jesus responded: “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). The implication is that there are some who are further from the kingdom, and others who are closer. Another passage is the one in which the Lord said to Paul on the Damascus Road, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14). Craig Keener says that a “‘goad’ was a pricked utensil used to get animals to move in the right way.”<sup>716</sup> The use of this word indicates that God was at work “nudging” Paul toward Christ, even before he had his encounter with Jesus on the way to Damascus. It’s been suggested that one of the factors God used in this way in Paul’s life was his witness of the martyrdom of Stephen, where it is said that Paul (called Saul at the time) guarded the robes of those who stoned him (Acts 7:58). It is also likely that God used the Law in bringing conviction to Paul prior to his conversion, particularly with regard to the sin of covetousness (Rom. 7:9–11).

As noted earlier in this work, a thorough discussion of this topic appears in John Owen’s discussion of “Works of the Holy Spirit Preparatory Unto Regeneration.”<sup>717</sup> In this section he states that “ordinarily there are certain *previous* and preparatory works, or

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<sup>715</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, II:512.

<sup>716</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 408.

<sup>717</sup> John Owen, Chapter II “Works of the Holy Spirit Preparatory Unto Regeneration,” in *The Works of John Owen*, 16 volumes (London: Banner of Truth, 1966, reprint), 3:228–242.

workings in and upon the souls of men, that are antecedent and *dispositive* unto it.”<sup>718</sup> He states that these dispositions “are only *materially* so, not such as contain grace of the same nature as is regeneration itself.”<sup>719</sup> He states that “a *material disposition* is that which disposeth and some way maketh a subject fit for the reception of that which shall be communicated, added, or infused into it as its form.”<sup>720</sup> He uses the drying of wood in preparation for being set afire as an example. James Buchanan likewise describes the preparatory work of the Spirit in similar words: “There is often a preparation of mind going before conversion, by which the mind is fitted for its great change,—just as wood, by being dried, becomes ready for catching fire when the torch is applied to it.”<sup>721</sup>

Owen distinguishes this from a “*formal disposition* . . . where one degree of the same kind disposeth the subject unto farther degrees of it; as the morning light, which is of the same kind, disposeth the air to the reception of the full light of the sun.”<sup>722</sup> The latter would be analogous to the relationship between a human embryo or fetus and a born child. This does not seem to reflect what is taught in Scripture, for a person is not described as having spiritual life until he experiences the new birth through the gospel (James 1:18; I Pet. 1:23). The parable of the soils provides a good illustration of God’s work of preparation. Jesus used the illustration of good soil that has been made fit to receive the word of God when it is sown. But until the word is sown there is no life in the soil. Abraham Kuyper endorsed a similar view as Owen’s, and compared the heart that

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<sup>718</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>719</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>720</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>721</sup> James Buchanan, *The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 163.

<sup>722</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 3:229.

has been prepared for the reception of the gospel to a field that “has been plowed, fertilized, harrowed, and cleared of stones . . . .”<sup>723</sup>

This preparatory work of the Spirit is consistent with what Jesus referred to as the “convicting” work of the Holy Spirit, regarding “sin, righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:5–11). D. A. Carson discusses the meaning of the word “convict” (*elenxei*), showing that it means “something like ‘to bring someone to an acknowledgement of personal guilt.’”<sup>724</sup> He goes on to say: “The verb occurs eighteen times in the New Testament . . . . Arguably, in every instance the verb has to do with showing someone his sin, usually as a summons to repentance . . . .”<sup>725</sup>

Leon Morris says,

Apart from the Holy Spirit men do not really know the truth about sin or righteousness or judgment . . . . The Spirit convicts the world in two senses. In the first place He ‘shows the world to be guilty’, *i.e.* He secures a verdict of ‘Guilty’ against the world. But in the second place we should take the words to mean also that the Spirit brings the world’s guilt home to itself. The Spirit convicts the individual sinner’s conscience. Otherwise men would never be convicted of their sin.<sup>726</sup>

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<sup>723</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Rev. Henri de Vries (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 292.

<sup>724</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 534.

<sup>725</sup> *Ibid.*, 534.

<sup>726</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 697–698.



B. F. Westcott comments:

Whatever the final issue may be, he who ‘convicts’ another places the truth of the case in dispute in a clear light before him, so that it must be seen and acknowledged as truth. He who then rejects the conclusion which this exposition involves, rejects it with his eyes open and at his peril . . . . The Spirit will convict the world ‘concerning, in the matter of . . . sin, of righteousness, of judgment.’ He will not simply convict the world as sinful, as without righteousness, as under judgment, but He will shew beyond contradiction that it is wanting in the knowledge of what sin, righteousness, and judgment really are; and therefore in need of a complete change . . . .<sup>727</sup>

This convicting work of the Spirit is the essential ingredient in preparing an individual’s heart for reception of the gospel message of salvation. It is dramatically illustrated in the instance of the people who listened to Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost: “Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). It is also described in Paul’s words to the Corinthian church: “But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you” (I Cor. 14:24–25).<sup>728</sup> These are the kinds of things that characterize those whom the Spirit convicts, and whose hearts he is preparing to receive the gospel.

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<sup>727</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Authorized Version with Introduction and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 228.

<sup>728</sup> Owen cites these passages, as well as others in his discussion of the Spirit’s preparatory work.

The question that begs to be asked at this point is whether this preparatory work of the Spirit might be carried out independently of the special revelation of God's word. In other words, is it possible that the Spirit may use the witness which God has given through nature and through conscience to achieve some of these preparatory works? As God used the Law as a "tutor" to point the Jewish people to Christ (Gal. 3:24), might he also use the conscience and the "law written on the heart" (Rom. 2:14–15) to point Gentiles to their need for a Savior, as well? M. Blanchard believes this is the case: "According to Romans, what the Jew had learned through the Law written on tables of stone the Gentile had learned through the law written on his conscience . . . . The law in the conscience produced the same result as the law written on stone. It made men conscious of their sin and their need of a savior. In both cases, the law served as a Custodian to lead men to Christ, and found its fulfilment (sic) in Christ."<sup>729</sup>

Herman Witsius also believed that the Spirit uses general revelation to prepare the heart for the gospel. We recall his statement regarding the call of God through natural revelation:

(T)hat calling serves to prepare the way for a further, a more perfect, and a more explicit call by the Gospel, and as a prelude of a fuller instruction. For as grace supposes nature, and makes it perfect, so the truths revealed in the Gospel are built on those made known by the light of nature . . . . And thus the knowledge he learns from nature being sanctified by the Spirit, better prepares the mind for

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<sup>729</sup> M. Blanchard, "Christianity as Fulfilment and Antithesis," *Indian Journal of Theology*, 17 (1968), 11. Millard Erickson states a view similar to this: "(T)he law written within, could serve the same function as the Mosaic or written law." Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved? The Destiny of Those Who Do Not Hear of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 152.

embracing those truths which, though they surpass, are yet so far from destroying, that they perfect nature.<sup>730</sup>

We do know from biblical passages examined previously that God has revealed certain truths through nature and conscience (Ps. 19; Acts 14:17; 17:24–20; Rom. 1:19–20; 2:14–16). There are also examples in Scripture of God dealing directly with nations that were outside the covenant community. God on occasion preached through his prophets to Gentile nations during Old Testament times, appealing to their conscience, even though they did not possess the revelation he had given to Israel. He sent Jonah to Nineveh to call them to repentance. He apparently preached to surrounding nations through the prophet Amos (Amos 1). In these cases God appealed to the conscience and to the law written on the hearts of the inhabitants of these nations. The Psalmist wrote: “He who chastens the nations, will He not rebuke, even He who teaches man knowledge?” (Ps. 94:10).

A. A. Hodge wrote in this regard, concerning God’s common grace: “‘Common grace’ is the restraining and persuading influences of the Holy Spirit acting . . . through the natural light of reason and of conscience, heightening the natural moral effect of such truth upon the understanding, conscience, and heart. It involves no change of heart, but simply an enhancement of the natural powers of the truth.”<sup>731</sup> The notion that the Holy Spirit uses the revelation generally available to all in preparing the hearts of some people to receive the gospel when it is made known, is consistent with the teaching of God’s word.

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<sup>730</sup> Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 1:315–316.

<sup>731</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Monergism Books, n.d.), 510.

Might it be possible that God also uses elements of truth in other religions to prepare some people for the gospel? Bruce Demarest believes that he does. He states: “On the basis of God’s universal general revelation and common enabling grace, undisputed truths about God, man, and sin lie embedded to varying degrees in the non-Christian religions.”<sup>732</sup> Daniel Strange suggests the same. He writes: “God in his wise irony causes something of the true religion, for example animal sacrifice as a type of propitiation, to be taken over and corrupted by pagan religions in the form of human sacrifice. That human sacrifice becomes a fuller type of Christ’s oblation on the cross than the animal sacrifice types. Thus what Satan intends as a cruel and evil perversion is used by God towards the redemption of a people when the gospel reaches them.”<sup>733</sup>

Referring to the moral and legal teachings of other religions, Strange also writes: “So while non-Christian religions can never be constituted as a ‘lawful’ conduit of saving grace, the pervasive legalism often encountered within them *can* be used pedagogically by God to teach respect for his law, which providentially becomes fortuitous preparation for seeing Christ as the fulfillment of the law and realizing that law cannot give the perfection needed to live in God’s presence.”<sup>734</sup> Jeffrey Niehaus, referring to parallels between non-Christians religions and Christianity, writes: “Truth in such forms could have no saving power. But it did prepare a matrix of thought, a background of theological understanding, so that when God did truly appear and did such things as the pagans

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<sup>732</sup> Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*, 259.

<sup>733</sup> Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 324.

<sup>734</sup> Daniel Strange, *ibid.*, 326.

claimed for their gods . . . his revelation would come to a people who had some theological preparation for it.”<sup>735</sup>

Gerald McDermott suggests the same in these comments: “Perhaps the religions will serve this function: as providential preparations for future peoples to receive the full revelation of God in Christ. This does not mean that there is direct continuity from the religions to Christ, but it does mean that the religions may be used by Jesus to prepare their devotees to understand and receive himself—just as the practice of animal sacrifice instituted by the Triune God (and copied by nearly every world religion thereafter) prepared the Jews to be able to understand and receive Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away their sins.”<sup>736</sup>

Given this understanding of God’s common grace, there is every reason to believe that the Holy Spirit does use these modes of general revelation, including truths embedded in other religions, in preparing people’s hearts for the eventual reception of God’s word. David F. Wells wrote: “Religions may play a preparatory role; they may be the means by which men and women seek the biblical God, and God himself may be leading them through their needs and desires.”<sup>737</sup>

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<sup>735</sup> Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 29. Quoted by Daniel Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*, 325.

<sup>736</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, “What If Paul Had Been from China? Reflections on the Possibility of Revelation in Non-Christian Religions,” in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001), 32.

<sup>737</sup> David F. Wells, *God the Evangelist: How the Holy Spirit Works to Bring Men and Women to Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 23.

Winfried Corduan likewise states that “the religions clearly derived from original theism contain elements that can be seen as preparatory for the gospel.”<sup>738</sup> Here Corduan refers to the idea that there are truths embedded in other religions, not only from general revelation, but also from the original revelation God gave to humanity in the beginning. Herman Bavinck refers to this original revelation: “Pagan religions . . . do not rest only on the acknowledgement of God’s revelation in nature but most certainly also on elements that from the most ancient times were preserved from supernatural revelation by tradition even though that tradition was frequently no longer pure.”<sup>739</sup> This original revelation is often referred to as *prisca theologia* (“ancient theology”).

Gerald McDermott describes the process of transmission of this original revelation, referring to the writings of Jonathan Edwards on this subject:

In his own appropriation of the *prisca theologia*, Edwards said that the heathen learned these truths by what could be called a trickle-down process of revelation. In the ‘first ages’ of the world the father of the nations received revelation of the great religious truths, directly or indirectly, from God himself. These truths were then passed down, by tradition, from one generation to the next. Unfortunately, there is also a religious law of entropy at work. Human finitude and corruption

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<sup>738</sup> Winfried Corduan, “Buddha, Shiva, and Muhammad: Theistic Faith in Other Religions?” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2.2 (Summer, 1998), 48. He does, however, state that “they also contain beliefs inimical to the gospel, and so the gospel cannot merely be the fulfillment of such religions.” *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>739</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 1:342. W. G. T. Shedd says something very similar: “The relics of monotheism found outside the pale of revelation, in various countries and civilizations, are traceable to two sources: 1) to the monotheistic structure of the human mind . . . and 2) to the influence of the primitive revelation from God made in the line of Seth, fragments of which have floated down among the races of mankind.” He thus sees these “relics of monotheism” as the result of both general and special revelation (the *prisca theologia*). William G. T. Shedd and Alan W. Gomes, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd edition (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2003), 197. Quoted in Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 255.

inevitably cause the revelation to be distorted, resulting in superstition and idolatry.<sup>740</sup>

Daniel Strange comments on this phenomenon: “(T)here is a historical *remnental* revelation within religious traditions, which, though entropically distorted over time, . . . gives us a comparative theological explanation of ‘commonalities’ and ‘continuities’ between religious traditions, for example certain events, themes and archetypes.”<sup>741</sup>

Don Richardson gives a number of examples of cultures where there are startling evidences of biblical concepts and stories passed down from ancient times. One example he provides is that of the Karen people in Burma (Myanmar) who preserved traditions very similar to the Genesis record of the fall, and who believed that one day Y’wa, the supreme God, would send them a book by “white brothers” which would show them the way of deliverance from all that oppressed them.<sup>742</sup> Richardson makes a strong case for Christian missionaries introducing the gospel in terms consistent with what elements of this original revelation have been preserved in a given culture. He points to the fact that when missionaries spoke of the God of the Bible using the native name for the Creator in Korea (“Hananim” or “The Great One”), their message was warmly received by many.<sup>743</sup> In light of these facts, it is all the more easy to comprehend that God does use elements of non-Christian religions in preparing many people for the gospel.<sup>744</sup>

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<sup>740</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religions, and the Non-Christian Faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94.

<sup>741</sup> Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 120.

<sup>742</sup> Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts: Revised Edition*, 73–85.

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, 62–71.

<sup>744</sup> Don Richardson’s thesis is that God, in addition to biblical traditions passed down from ancient times, has planted “redemptive analogies” in various cultures—concepts which provide starting points for understanding the Christian message when it arrives. In

M. Blanchard provides insight into how God may use other religions to prepare some people toward this end.<sup>745</sup> He states that Christianity may be both a “fulfillment” and an “antithesis” to other religions. The Christian faith does not fulfill other religions in the same sense in which it fulfills the prophecies and anticipations of the Old Testament. As Christopher Wright points out regarding the antithesis between Christianity and other religions: “Christians are not at liberty to . . . regard the Scriptures of other religions or cultures as equivalent and adequate preparations for Christ.”<sup>746</sup> However, according to Blanchard, the Christian faith may be considered a “fulfillment” in that it fulfills desires that find themselves expressed in some aspects of other religions—for example, “the desire to find propitiation for sin, the hope that God by His grace will provide an atonement for sin.”<sup>747</sup> Furthermore, Blanchard states, “Christianity fulfils (sic) or satisfies the religious desires and aspirations of a people . . . the desire for reconciliation with God, the desire for fellowship with God, the desire for forgiveness of sin.”<sup>748</sup> Christianity fulfills these desires in a way no other religion does—through personal faith in the sacrificial death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God. And this is what makes the Christian faith unique.

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addition to his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*, see also his books: *Peace Child* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1974); and *Lords of the Earth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1977). He says that these analogies are “redemptive” not “redeeming”—“contributing to the redemption of a people, but not culminating it.” *Eternity in Their Hearts*, 59.

<sup>745</sup> M. Blanchard, “Christianity as Fulfilment and Antithesis,” *Indian Journal of Theology*, 17 (1968), 5–20.

<sup>746</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 385.

<sup>747</sup> Blanchard, “Christianity as Fulfilment and Antithesis,” 14.

<sup>748</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



D. A. Carson wisely comments that:

(I)n the bible, the fulfillment of the old covenant in Jesus Christ (e.g., Matt. 5:17-20) is the fulfillment of what systematicians have called special revelation, and ‘fulfillment’ itself means not the satisfaction of religious and personal aspirations, but the arrival of the eschatological event to which the old covenant Scriptures pointed in promise and type. Although the bible as a whole can sometimes speak of the gospel and of Jesus as bringing to fruition the *aspirations* of pagans who surround the covenant community, it does not speak of the gospel or of Christ as fulfilling their *religion*. Nor would the adherents of such religions see themselves in such light; indeed, they would be insulted at the suggestion.<sup>749</sup>

Winfried Corduan points out that even non-Christian religions which may be described as teaching “salvation by grace through faith” (such as Jodo Shin-Shu) are not at all equivalent to the Christian way of salvation. He states: “(I)t should hardly need to be pointed out that escaping the cycle of reincarnation and its attending suffering is distinct in all respects from the Christian understanding of salvation as reconciliation with God based on the propitiation of Christ.”<sup>750</sup> Emil Brunner was right in his estimation of the difference between Christianity and other faiths: “However different all these types of modern religions may be from one another, on one point they are agreed: guilt, the negative human situation caused by disobedience, and forgiveness of guilt, the new

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<sup>749</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 31.

<sup>750</sup> Winfried Corduan, “Buddah, Shiva, and Muhammad: Theistic Faith in Other Religions?” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 2.2 (Summer, 1998), 44.

situation caused by God's act of removing the obstacle and healing the breach, play no part in them."<sup>751</sup>

Christianity does not fulfill non-Christian religions in the way it fulfills the Old Testament faith. But it does fulfill some of the desires that are evident among adherents of these religions. And in this way, by using elements of other religions to instill a search for forgiveness of sin (for example) the Holy Spirit may use other religions as a means of preparing some people for the gospel.<sup>752</sup>

If he does, then we would expect this preparatory work to be marked not by a proud or self-righteous attitude, but rather by a humble conviction regarding sin, righteousness and judgment.<sup>753</sup> That is, he or she would have a heightened awareness of moral righteousness, as well as one's sinfulness before a holy God, and the need for deliverance from judgment. This is supported by Jesus' parable which he addressed to

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<sup>751</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Scandal of Christianity* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), 20. Quoted in Mark Shaw, "Is There Salvation Outside the Christian Faith?" 51.

<sup>752</sup> I once heard the testimony of a former Muslim who had grown desperately weary of trying to fulfill the demands of her religion, and cried out to God that if he did not reveal himself to her, she would cease being a Muslim. She said that Christ appeared to her that very night, and simply said, "Come to Me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." She had never read a Bible before. But the next day a Christian co-worker commented to her that she seemed troubled. She related to him her story, and he pointed her to the text in the Bible which Jesus had quoted to her. In this way, her growing frustration with trying to fulfill the requirements of Islam was used to prepare her to trust in Christ as her Savior, much as the Law was used to prepare people for the gospel. I regret that I am not able to document the source of this testimony. We may be correct in suggesting that God can use other religions to prepare people for the gospel in one of two ways. With some, it is the partial truths contained in another religion which prepares a person for reception of the fullness of the gospel. For others, however (as it apparently was in the case of this woman), it may be the burden of "dead works" (cf. Heb. 6:1; 9:14) that leads a person to seek the rest and peace that are found in Christ as Savior.

<sup>753</sup> This reflects the words of Jesus that he had "not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Lk. 5:32), as well as his invitation to those who are "weary and heavy laden" to come to him (Mt. 11:28–30).

those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous” (Lk. 18:9). It was not the Pharisee who went away justified, but the tax collector who said, “God, be merciful to me the sinner!” (Lk. 18:13–14).

Paul states that even apart from God’s special revelation, men “know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death” (Rom. 1:32). We know from this passage that men naturally “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (v. 18). But there is every reason to believe that the Holy Spirit uses this innate knowledge in bringing conviction to many in preparing them to hear and embrace the gospel. The Apostle Paul characterized his own proclamation of the gospel as appealing to “every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (II Cor. 4:2).

We have seen in the previous discussion of Paul’s speech in Athens, that one of the purposes of God’s common grace and general revelation of himself is that people might “seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him” (Acts 17:27). Though no one seeks for God on his own initiative (Rom. 3:11), the Holy Spirit can certainly use God’s general revelation to prompt people to do so under his influence. D. A. Carson states: “God’s purpose in his ordering of history is to incite human beings to pursue him.”<sup>754</sup> Herman Bavinck states the same view: “In general revelation such objective teaching is adequate to its purpose. What God intends by it is to provoke man to

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<sup>754</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, 500. Carson does entertain the remote possibility that some may have been moved to seek God through general revelation and call out to him for mercy: “(I)t *may* be the case that God has in some cases opened the eyes of some people to recognize the existence and graciousness of their Maker and turn to him in repentance and faith, imploring him for mercy. But the text does not say that this has taken place . . . . The least that must be said is that the passage offers no comfort for the view that there are millions and millions of pagan anonymous Christians out there.” *Ibid.*, 309.

seek Him, to feel Him out and find Him (Acts 17:27), and, not finding Him, yet be without excuse (Romans 1:20).”<sup>755</sup>

Heinrich Heppe was another who recognized the role of general revelation in preparing people for the gospel. He states regarding the role of the pangs of conscience among the as yet unevangelized: “(T)hey are a preparation for faith, since by His prevenient grace God leads the elect out of darkness into light by causing a serious longing for redemption to proceed from these terrors of conscience, and then holding before them the promise of grace in the Gospel and causing what is offered them from without to be brought into their hearts by the H. Spirit . . . .”<sup>756</sup>

Reformed theologian J. Oliver Buswell believed that the convicting work of the Holy Spirit was universal in its extent, and always preceded the regenerating work of the Spirit through the gospel. He believed that among the means the Holy Spirit uses are “the light of nature” and elements of truth from “primitive revelation” that remain embedded in other religions.<sup>757</sup> He states: “That the Scripture indicates the light of nature as a factor in the convicting of the lost would seem indisputable.”<sup>758</sup> He also states: “The scriptural

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<sup>755</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Col, 1956), 66.

<sup>756</sup> Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 513–514.

<sup>757</sup> James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1963) 2:157–160. William Crockett and James Sigountos are correct in stating: “General revelation, then, creates in them a desire to reject their pagan religions; it does not help them see the saving significance of their own.” William V. Crockett, James Sigountos, “Are the Heathen Really Lost?” in *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, 260.

<sup>758</sup> Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:159. This is not to say that the law written on the heart and the conscience reveals the full extent of man’s sin. Only the word of God can accomplish this, by the Spirit. But it is to say that there is no reason to deny that the Holy Spirit may begin his convicting work by bringing to bear on the heart of an individual his failure to live up even to what he knows of God’s law in his heart (Rom. 2:15), preparing him for the full disclosure of the extent of his sin and the remedy provided by Christ,

teaching on primitive revelation must be considered as a factor in the convicting work of the Spirit. There is generally among primitive peoples some trace or tradition of knowledge of the true God.”<sup>759</sup>

Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson also recognize this preparing grace of God when they state: “Before the missionary ever arrives on the scene, God has been at work, communicating himself to unbelievers . . . . Missionaries do not start from scratch, but build on the point of contact God has already made with the unbelievers through general revelation as they urge them to turn to Christ in faith.”<sup>760</sup>

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through God’s word. I will not give a full exposition of the text in John 16 regarding the convicting work of the Spirit here. But I concur with those who see the Spirit’s convicting work in its fullest and most complete sense as being composed of his bringing to bear on the heart of man an awareness of his own sinfulness (which is supremely evidenced in his failure to believe what God has revealed in Christ), of the fact of Christ’s righteousness, as demonstrated by his ascension to the Father, and of the reality of judgment for sin, as demonstrated in Christ’s victory over Satan at the cross. When the gospel is fully proclaimed, the Spirit will make known to a person that Christ has taken the judgment for sin that he deserves. The Spirit’s convicting work in this complete sense can only be accomplished through the preaching of the word. But I believe Buswell is right in believing that the Spirit’s convicting work can begin even before the word of God is made known to an individual. God has written the law on his heart (Rom. 2:14–16), and he has given man an awareness that sin is deserving of judgment (Rom. 1:32). For a discussion of the convicting work of the Spirit, see Neil R. Livingston, *A Calvinistic Concept of Prevenient Grace*, Th.M. thesis presented to Dallas Theological Seminary (Dallas, TX, 1961), 52–66. I have relied in part on his discussion. Though he does not address Buswell’s thesis, that the convicting work of the Spirit is universal (and likely would not have concurred with him), his discussion of the text in John 16 is very helpful. It is very interesting that when the Apostle Paul preached the gospel in Athens, he mentioned that Christ would “judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:30–31). It is the awareness that God will judge this sinful world by the standard of his righteousness that the Spirit brings home to the hearts of people in preparing them to hear about the saving work of Christ.

<sup>759</sup> Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:160.

<sup>760</sup> Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, “Answers to Notable Questions,” in *Faith Comes By Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 248.

Rev. Dwight L. Niswander tells the following story which illustrates how God can use general revelation in preparing someone for the gospel:

I heard an Alliance missionary several years ago tell of a man who walked in obedience to truth without knowing of the written revelation of God's Word. He was among people who had never heard the name of Christ. The missionary stated that on an occasion when he was preaching he was impressed with this listener whose face expressed openness and interest without the usual look of guilt. The subject of Christ as Saviour brought him delight and joy . . . Later when he talked with the missionary the man spoke of three crises in his life. The first was his becoming aware of the perfection and wonder of the universe. Nature revealed to him the awesome wonder of the Mighty One. The next crisis was a serious condemnation and conviction of sin. His knowledge of the grandeur of nature brought to light his own imperfections. He realized then the close relationship between the physical laws and the moral laws and the holiness of God. In the third crisis he became an earnest seeker for God's answer to this confusion in his heart and mind. He testified that when he sought God's forgiveness he was conscious of a Saviour's presence. "And now," he continued, "since I have heard you speak, I recognize in Jesus the Person who has made atonement for my sins."<sup>761</sup>

One might ask whether this man experienced salvation when he sought God's forgiveness and became "conscious of a Saviour's presence." I would say that he was in a somewhat similar state as Cornelius prior to his hearing the gospel through the testimony of the Apostle Peter. He was prepared by the Spirit for the gospel. Though (unlike Cornelius) he was not yet a recipient of God's special revelation, he was a recipient of God's general revelation. And this was used by the Holy Spirit to convict him of his sin,

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<sup>761</sup> Dwight L. Niswander, "Are the Heathen Lost?" *The Alliance Witness*, July 2, 1958, 7. I was pointed to this article by its reference in J. Oswald Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?*, 67–68. Used here by permission.

and of his need for God's forgiveness. And (like Cornelius) he was seeking God's forgiveness for his sins. As Cornelius had been assured through an angel that he would be saved through the message that Peter would later bring (Acts 11:13–14), it's possible that through his being "conscious of a Saviour's presence," God gave this man an inner awareness that the means of salvation would eventually come to him. And when the missionary came, it did.

It should be pointed out again, however, that general revelation is inadequate in and of itself as a means of salvation, from the very fact that nothing can be deduced from it that would lead us to know that God has provided a way of redemption. As Daniel Strange notes: "Unlike special revelation, general revelation simply does not contain the truth content necessary for saving faith, and so is not an appropriate vehicle for the Spirit's saving work of regeneration."<sup>762</sup> Certainly, it does point to God's greatness in creating the world and his goodness in providing for our needs (which should elicit our worship and our thanks to him), but it also reflects the fact that something has come between the creation and its Creator. As Paul says in Romans 8:20, the creation has been "subjected to futility." This is reflected in the prevalence of disease, the many destructive forces in nature, of sin, and death. General revelation can tell us that there is a God, and that our relationship with him is broken; but it cannot tell us how that relationship can be mended or restored. Thus, though the Holy Spirit might use what can be known about

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<sup>762</sup> Daniel Strange, *His Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 222. Strange quotes John Murray on this page in his book (p. 222, n. 23): "It is to be remembered that the efficacy of faith does not reside in itself. Faith is not something that merits the favour of God. All the efficacy unto salvation resides in the Saviour . . . , it is not faith that saves but faith in Jesus Christ; strictly speaking, it is not even faith in Christ that saves but Christ that saves through faith." From John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1955), 112.

God and about ourselves through nature and conscience to awaken in people a thirst for a way of redemption, there is nothing within general revelation itself to quench such a thirst.

Mark Shaw states it well: “Man’s knowledge of God through nature teaches only law (i.e. what you must do to earn God’s favour). But special revelation equals the gospel of salvation by faith alone.”<sup>763</sup> While the Holy Spirit may use natural revelation to prompt someone to *seek* for God, it is only through the gospel that God may be *found*.<sup>764</sup> General revelation may be used in part by the Holy Spirit to prepare someone for salvation, but only the gospel can point the way to the salvation which God has provided through Christ. Adolf Hoenecke states: “In the stirring of the conscience, in the consideration of the universe, in the contemplation of the blessings and wisdom of God in his rule of the world, there can be a call to inquire about God (Ro 1:20; 2:14, 15; Ac 17:27) . . . . Through this kind of call, an obscure longing for the true salvation can be inspired but no more.”<sup>765</sup>

It is common among inclusivists to argue that since the Holy Spirit is universally present, his saving work must also be present—even where Christ is not known. Clark Pinnock writes: “Counting against restrictivism is not only God’s nature as Father and the universality of the atonement of Christ but also the ever-present Spirit, who can foster

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<sup>763</sup> Mark Shaw, “Is There Salvation Outside the Christian Faith?” 56.

<sup>764</sup> This is the strong implication of Paul’s statement that God’s works in the creation and in history have as one of the purposes “that (men) should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him” (Acts 17:27). And we know that God rewards those who seek him (Heb. 11:6b). The fact that general revelation alone (apart from the work of the Holy Spirit) is ineffective in itself in instilling in people a desire to seek God (apart from God’s grace) is not due to the inadequacy of that revelation, but to the darkness of the human heart (Rom. 1:21–23).

<sup>765</sup> Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 3:229. Cited above in note 391.



transforming friendships with God anywhere and everywhere. Spirit is present in the farthest reaches of this wonderful, ambiguous world.”<sup>766</sup> While it is true that the Spirit is at work in the lives and hearts of people prior to their learning about Christ, it is more consistent with the witness of Scripture to see this universal work as falling within the limits of his convicting ministry in preparing people for the gospel (John 16:7–11). Jesus said that the Spirit would “testify about” him (John 15:26b), and “glorify” him (John 16:14). Though the Spirit may use general revelation and truths in other religions in his convicting work to *prepare* people for salvation, the Scriptures tell us that he uses the good news about Jesus Christ in actually accomplishing his saving work in the lives and hearts of those who believe.

#### Extraordinary Means of Preparation

As suggested already we should not think that where the gospel has not yet been made known, that God is limited to using only the general revelation that is available to all people, or truths embedded in other religions. For God is also able to use extraordinary means in preparing people for the coming of the gospel. An account recorded by Baptist theologian Augustus H. Strong illustrates this point. He writes:

The Missionary Review of the World, July, 1896: 519–523, tells the story of Adiri, afterwards called John King, of Maripastoon in Dutch Guiana. The Holy Spirit wrought in him mightily years before he heard of the missionaries. He was . . . a heathen and a fetish worshiper. He was convicted of sin and apparently converted through dreams and visions. Heaven and hell were revealed to him. He was sick unto death, and One appeared to him declaring himself to be the

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<sup>766</sup> See Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 186–187.

Mediator between God and man, and telling him to go to the missionaries for instruction. He was persecuted, but he won his tribe from heathenism and transformed them into a Christian community.<sup>767</sup>

This example is reminiscent of the Lord's dealings with Cornelius in preparing him for the coming of the Apostle Peter. It illustrates the fact that God is ready to go beyond what general revelation can provide in not only preparing someone for the truth of the gospel, but also in directing them to the gospel by extraordinary means.

Missionary Martin Goldsmith writes:

I am interested how often one hears missionary stories of men and women who have earnestly and humbly sought eternal life and then have seen a vision or received a dream. Again and again they have seen the figure of Jesus in their dream or vision. Some have even been told that his name is Jesus. I think of a man who had never even heard of the Christian religion, but he was given a vision in which he saw a man dressed in white with holes in his hands . . . . (C)an we recognize such stories as one of God's means to keep his promise that those who seek will find?<sup>768</sup>

J. Oswald Sanders relates the account given by a missionary nurse with Overseas Missionary Fellowship:

A couple came to our home in Thailand about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. As I saw them come down the path with troubled faces, I presumed here was another patient anxious lest he might have leprosy. As I got up from my desk and went to meet them, I wondered which of the two it might be. Nor did I think anything else as the woman began to speak . . . . "There is a matter which is troubling me, and I think you are the one who can help me." So sitting down beside her I said, "Yes?"

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<sup>767</sup> Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1907), 844.

<sup>768</sup> Martin Goldsmith, *What About Other Faiths?*, 137–138.

expecting to hear a tale of leprosy. But instead, this is what she said. “I had a dream about a man called Jesus. Could you tell me who he is?” A weary nurse became acutely alert. The caller related her dream and then asked what it could mean. She knew nothing of Jesus except that once she had heard this name. For five years she and her husband had been seeking peace, and together they had tried to live a holy life after the precepts of Buddha, but peace had not come. Their neighbours called them mad for seeking so earnestly . . . . In a moment I asked the Lord for guidance, and then for the next three hours we turned from passage to passage of Scripture, and the Holy Spirit guided and gave understanding. It was a thrill beyond telling, to see this simple couple perceive the deep things of the Word of God . . . . The following Monday afternoon they came again. Their opening words in chorus were, “We have found peace and joy now as we never had before.”<sup>769</sup>

I believe the evidence compels us to conclude that where God has been at work preparing human hearts to receive the gospel, we can have confidence that he will see that they receive the gospel in time, whether by ordinary or extraordinary means. As Buswell states: “I believe that God will somehow get the Gospel to every soul who is willing to believe.”<sup>770</sup> Wesley Gustafson expresses the same opinion: “God will lead to a knowledge of Christ every man who responds to the impulses of the Holy Spirit which are present in every heart . . . . He did it in the case of Cornelius. He did it for the Ethiopian eunuch. He did it for Paul. He may direct the seeker to a Christian or the Christian to the seeker. We can trust God to work out the program for those who

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<sup>769</sup> J. Oswald Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?*, 69–70.

<sup>770</sup> Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:161.

are responding to His pleadings.”<sup>771</sup> This is in keeping with the statement of Jesus: “So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given . . . .” (Lk. 8:18).

I believe the statement by Christopher Little in reflecting on God’s ability to use many different modes of communicating the gospel is accurate: “God continues to use today the various modalities of special revelation that he has employed throughout salvation history in order to contact, communicate with, and redeem those among the unevangelized who desire to know and have fellowship with him; and, as a result, no one has ever been lost, in any age, whether past, present, or future, who sincerely wanted to be saved.”<sup>772</sup> As John Calvin commented: “(F)or as his mercy is infinite, it cannot be but that it will extend itself to all by whom it shall be sought.”<sup>773</sup> God will redeem, through the gospel, all whose hearts are prepared to receive him.

Buswell makes the following statement regarding the relationship between the Spirit’s work of preparation and his work of bringing people to salvation through faith in Christ: “Where He, by the Holy Spirit, has brought any one of His elect to a point of conviction and readiness to accept the Gospel, He will move, through processes which may be unknown to us, to bring the light of the knowledge of the grace of God through Himself to such a person.”<sup>774</sup> This belief is certainly consistent with the verses of Scripture which promise that those who seek will find (e.g., Prov. 8:17b; Jer. 29:13; Mt. 7:7–8). Of particular note among these is the statement in I Chron. 28:9b, “(F)or the Lord

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<sup>771</sup> Wesley L. Gustafson, “The Heathen—damned?” *His Magazine*, March, 1951, 8.

<sup>772</sup> Christopher R. Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized*, 131.

<sup>773</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Apostle Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 395.

<sup>774</sup> Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 1:355.

searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find him . . . .”<sup>775</sup>

Buswell cites accounts which give anecdotal evidence of this fact:

A certain idol-maker in interior Siam many years ago was convinced that his hand was greater than the idols which he made. He gave up his craft and began to worship “the God who made my hand.” In a very strange and unexpected way a group of missionaries found this man, preached the Gospel to him, and he was saved. A small tribe in the Sudan became convinced that their idols and fetishes were no Gods. They began to assemble themselves at noon each day and to pray to the God who made the sun. Again, through strange coincidence, missionaries found these people in the act of prayer, preached the Gospel to them, and they accepted Christ as their Saviour.<sup>776</sup>

John Ellenberger cites several similar examples of people who responded in an extraordinary way to what they knew of God prior to their hearing the gospel. He writes:

For example, there was the Chinese youth in Jakarta, Indonesia, who refused to dust the household idols “because they don’t care whether they get dusted or not, and probably they don’t hear us when we pray to them either.” Another was the Dayak leader in Kalimantan, also in Indonesia, who realized that his charms and fetishes were creations of his own hands, and resolved to worship instead the deity that created his hands. In another part of the world, a Lobi man from Burkina Faso, West Africa, claimed God had told him to put away his fetishes and wait for a messenger who would come to tell him the true way. In Laos, southeast Asia, a Hmong female shaman prophesied about the coming of a messenger who would tell them of the true God.<sup>777</sup>

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<sup>775</sup> This promise was given personally to Solomon; but its application is obviously universal in scope.

<sup>776</sup> Ibid., 1:354.

<sup>777</sup> John D. Ellenberger, “Is Hell a Proper Motivation for Missions?” in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, eds. William V. Crocket and

Ellenberger draws special attention to the story of a man who evidenced a positive response to what he knew of God, but who never heard of Christ before he died. He writes: “Deen, a leader from Irian Jaya, Indonesia, when he heard the gospel message, led a people movement of his kin-group to follow Christ. This was partly because of the earlier influence of his step-father, Mugumende, who had been a spiritual seeker, but died without hearing of Christ. ‘If Mugumende had been here when the gospel came to our valley,’ his step-son told me, ‘he would have been the first Christian (instead of me).’”<sup>778</sup> This case would seem to lend support to the belief of many that a person such as Mugumende may have ultimately come to know Christ at the time of his death, as discussed above.

George W. Clark also recounts similar instances where missionaries found people in remote places who gave evidence of having been prepared by God to receive the gospel. He writes:

In 1820, when the American missionaries first visited the Sandwich Islands they found that the inhabitants had thrown away their idols and they seemed to be waiting for the gospel, among whom it had great success. The Karens of Burmah had traditions of the coming of the white foreigners who would restore the true

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James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 223. He cites the following sources for this information. For the Chinese youth in Jakarta, he cites a personal interview with Eddy Susanto, Jayapura, Indonesia, December 1975. For the Dayak leader he cites a personal interview with Ruth Rudes, missionary of the Christian and Missionary Alliance to Indonesia, August, 1990. For the Lobi man he cites Robert S. Roseberry, *The Niger Vision* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1934), 117. For the Hmong shaman he cites G. Linwood Barney, “The Meo—An Incipient Church,” in *Readings in Missionary Anthropology*, ed. William Smalley, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978), 469.

<sup>778</sup> Ellenberger, “Is Hell a Proper Motivation for Missions?” 224. He cites Alice Gibbons, *The People Time Forgot* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 212–217.

religion, and many appeared ready for the reception of the gospel when the missionaries came among them.<sup>779</sup>

The commentator Albert Barnes makes a similar comment: “It has been discovered by missionaries among the heathen that individuals have, in a remarkable way, been convinced of the folly of idolatry, and were seeking a better religion; that their minds were in a serious, thoughtful, inquiring state; and that they *at once* embraced the gospel when it was offered to them as *exactly* adapted to their state of mind, and as meeting their inquiries. Such was extensively the case in the Sandwich Islands . . . .”<sup>780</sup>

Don Richardson, in his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*, tells the story of a group of people who were seeking God:

Deep in the hill country of south-central Ethiopia live several million coffee-growing people who, though divided into quite different tribes, share common belief in a benevolent being called *Magano*—omnipotent Creator of all that is. One of these tribes is called . . . the Gedeo people. Few of the Gedeo . . . actually prayed to Magano. In fact, a casual observer would have found the people far more concerned to appease an evil being they called Sheit’an. One day Albert Brant asked a group of Gedeo, “How is it that you regard Magano with profound awe, yet sacrifice to Sheit’an?” He received the following reply: “We sacrifice to Sheit’an, not because we love him, but because we simply do not enjoy close enough ties with Magano to allow us to be done with Sheit’an!” . . . . At least one Gedeo man, however, did pursue a personal response from Magano. His name—Warrasa Wange . . . . His method of approach to Magano—a simple prayer asking Magano to reveal Himself to the Gedeo people! . . . Warrasa Wange got speedy response. Startling visions took his brain by storm. He saw two white skinned

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<sup>779</sup> George W. Clark, *Notes on the Acts of the Apostles*, 170–171.

<sup>780</sup> Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: explanatory and practical*, 11 volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949–1950, originally published 1832–1852), III:79.

strangers . . . . Warrasa saw the two whites erect flimsy shelters for themselves under the shade of a large sycamore tree near Dilla, Warrasa's hometown. Later they built more permanent shiny-roofed structures. Eventually these structures dotted an entire hillside! Never had the dreamer seen anything even faintly resembling either the flimsy temporary structures or the shiny-roofed permanent ones. All dwellings in Gedeo land were grass-roofed . . . . Then Warrasa heard a voice. "These men," it said, "will bring you a message from Magano, the God you seek. Wait for them." . . . In a final scene of his vision, Warrasa saw himself remove the center pole from his own house. In Gedeo symbolism, the center pole of a man's house stands for his very life. He then carried that center pole out of the town and set it in the ground next to one of the shiny-roofed dwellings of the strange men . . . . Warrasa understood the implication—his life must later stand in identification with those strange men, their message, and with Magano who would send them . . . . Warrasa waited. Eight years passed . . . . Then, one very hot day in December, 1948, blue-eyed Canadian Albert Brant and his colleague Glen Cain lurched over the horizon in a battered old International truck. Their mission—to begin missionary work for the glory of God among the Gedeo people. They had hoped to gain permission from Ethiopian officials to locate their new mission at the very center of the Gedeo region, but Ethiopians friendly to the mission advised that such a request would meet certain refusal due to the current political climate . . . . "Ask only to go as far as this town called Dilla," the advisors said . . . . (When they arrived in Dilla, they spotted a sycamore tree, where they set up their tents.) Three decades later Warrasa (now a radiant believer in Jesus Christ, Son of Magano), together with Albert Brant and others, count more than 200 churches among the Gedeo people—churches averaging more than 200 members each! With the help of Warrasa and other inhabitants of Dilla, almost the entire Gedeo tribe has been influenced by the gospel . . . !<sup>781</sup>

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<sup>781</sup> Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts: Revised Edition*, 54–56.



Here is an example of God's preparing a people for the gospel in an obviously extraordinary way.

It should be noted that there are traditions among some people that their own prophets had foretold the coming of the gospel in the future. Daniel Kikawa writes of the Karen people of Burma who had a "revelation . . . that white foreigners would bring the 'book' that their people had lost long ago. This book would bring them back to the true worship of Y'wa (their name for the one true God) and set them free from the 'Nats' (demons). The revelation also specified that these white foreigners would come from across the sea in ships with 'white wings.'"<sup>782</sup> Kikawa also recounts prophecies given among the Hawaiian people that the true God would come to them at the site of a specific rock on the shore. He writes: "When the missionaries arrived at Kailua, they landed their skiff on that very rock!"<sup>783</sup>

All of these testimonials bear witness to the thesis that God may use a variety of means in preparing people for the gospel—from natural or general revelation, to truths embedded in non-Christian religions, to extraordinary communications with those whose hearts he is preparing for faith in Christ.

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<sup>782</sup> Daniel I. Kikawa, *Perpetuated in Righteousness*, 160. This does not necessarily imply that these prophets were saved individuals. God revealed truths about Israel and about the Messiah through the prophet Balaam, even though Scripture does not depict him as a redeemed person (Num. 22–24, 31:8, 16; Rev. 2:14). The apostle Paul even quotes a Cretan whom he refers to as "a prophet of their own" (Titus 1:12). Likewise, the high priest Caiaphas unwittingly uttered a prophecy about Christ (John 11:49–53). He was obviously not a redeemed person at the time.

<sup>783</sup> *Ibid.*, 163–164.

## Probation After Death?

Another matter needs to be addressed is whether there might be an opportunity for people to respond to the gospel not only at the time of death, but *after* death.<sup>784</sup> Some have proposed that this will be the case, based primarily on the statements in I Peter that Christ “made proclamation to the spirits now in prison” (3:19), and that “the gospel has . . . been preached even to those who are dead” (4:6). On a surface reading, one might conclude that these statements are meant to communicate that after his death, Jesus descended into the “underworld” to give people an opportunity to come to faith in him. The implication is that a similar opportunity is provided to people who have died since then, as well.

The commentator John Lange was a proponent of this view: “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.”<sup>785</sup>

C. E. B. Cranfield is another who espoused this view:

(I)t 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

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<sup>784</sup> I am making a clear distinction between the idea that the gospel may be revealed to a person at the moment of death, and the idea that an opportunity for salvation may be granted to people *after* they have died. The case for an opportunity after death has been recently advocated by James Belby in his book, *Postmortem Opportunity: A Biblical and Theological Assessment of Salvation After Death* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021).

<sup>785</sup> John Lange, *The First Epistle General of Peter* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1868), 66–67.

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.<sup>786</sup>

Support is also often sought in the statement of Jesus that the sin against the Holy Spirit “will not be forgiven . . . either in this age or in the age to come” (Mt. 12:32). The thought is that other sins beside the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit might be forgiven—if not in this age, then “in the age to come.” That this statement suggests that some sins might be forgiven in the “age to come” is difficult to substantiate, particularly in light of other passages (noted below) which clearly state that this does not occur. It is much more likely that Jesus’ statement is hyperbolic. He is simply saying, in the words of R. T. France, that “the consequences of the unforgivable sin apply not only to this life but also to the life to come, when judgment will finally have been given.”<sup>787</sup> In other words, it is a sin that puts one beyond the possibility of forgiveness for the remainder of a person’s life, and into in the life to come (if it were even hypothetically possible to be forgiven then).

The two passages in I Peter deserve careful attention.<sup>788</sup> The first passage states that Christ “having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which

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<sup>786</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, “The Interpretation of I Peter 2:19 and 4:6,” *The Expository Times* 69 (Sept., 1958), 372.

<sup>787</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 484.

<sup>788</sup> My discussion of the passages in I Peter relies in part on the following sources: Justin W. Bass, *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ’s Descent into the Underworld*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014); Matthew Y. Emerson, *“He Descended to the Dead”: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2019).

also he went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah . . . .” (I Pet. 3:18b–20a). I personally accept the interpretation of this passage, that after his death (while his body was in the tomb) Christ went in his spirit to the place where spirits who had been disobedient during the days of Noah were imprisoned. The word “spirits” almost always refers in the New Testament to angelic or demonic beings, rather than humans.<sup>789</sup> Peter states in his second letter that “God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell (Tartarus) and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment . . . .” (II Pet. 2:4). The spirits referred to in the I Peter passage are most likely these same angels referred to here. The place where these angels are imprisoned (Tartarus) is used in other passages to refer to the place where Satan will be held (Rev. 20:7), and where fallen angels (Jude 6) are held, but never as a place where humans are kept after death.<sup>790</sup> It was to these spirits that Christ “made proclamation.”

It’s significant that the verb “proclaim” in this passage is *ekeruxen*. This is a generic verb for proclaiming a message. Though this verb is used at times in the New Testament for proclaiming the kingdom or the gospel, when Peter refers to the preaching of the gospel in this letter, he uses the verb *euangelizo* (1:12, 25; 4:6). While Peter does not specifically tell us what Christ proclaimed to these spirits, it is most likely that he announced the victory that he had accomplished over them through his death. This would be in keeping with what Peter says in I Pet. 3:22, that prior to his ascension to heaven,

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<sup>789</sup> Cf. Mt. 8:16; 10:1; Mark 1:27; 5:13; 6:7; Luke 4:36; 6:18; 7:21; 8:2; 10:20; 11:26; Acts 5:16; 8:7; 19:12, 13; I Tim. 4:1; I John 4:1; Rev. 16:13–14.

<sup>790</sup> Comments on this passage are based in part on the notes in the ESV Study Bible for I Peter 3:19. *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 2410–2411.

“angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.” He proclaimed, then, his victory over his adversaries in the spirit world. This is also reflected in Jesus statement that “all authority” had been given him “in heaven and on earth” (Mt. 28:18), as well as his statement to John that He had “the keys of death and of Hades” (Rev. 1:18). This passage, therefore, does not lend support to the idea that people receive an opportunity to believe after death.

The second passage is I Peter 4:6, which states: “For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.” Though some believe Peter is referring to those who were spiritually dead at the time of this gospel proclamation, it seems preferable to understand Peter as referring here to those who were physically dead. In the previous verse, he referred to the fact that God will judge “the living and the dead.” This clearly refers to those who are physically dead; and it is unlikely he would use this word in a different sense in the next sentence. Some also believe that though the people referred to here were physically dead at the time of his writing, the proclamation occurred while they were yet alive.

Others believe that Peter is referring to all those who had died up to his time (“judged in the flesh as men”), and whose souls resided in the underworld. It was to these persons that Christ proclaimed the gospel during his descent to this realm while his body was in the grave. If so, then what is not specified here, is whether the deceased in view here are believers only, or if nonbelievers are also in view. Neither is it specified as to whether this gospel proclamation was for the purpose of giving the unbelieving dead an opportunity to repent and believe so as to be saved.

What does seem clear from this verse is that, judging by its opening word (“For”), Peter’s purpose is to encourage his readers to follow his previous admonition to live the rest of their lives according to the will of God (4:2), and not to be intimidated into returning to their old sinful ways of living by those who persecute and “malign” them (lit. “blaspheme” them), so as to avoid persecution. He reminds them that these will “give an account to Him (God) who is ready to judge” all people (the living and the dead). What he is saying in verse six, then, is that the gospel assures us that even though we are “judged in the flesh” (suffer death, perhaps even by being martyred, at the hands of those who are maligning us), the gospel was preached so that, even after our dying, we might still “live in the spirit” according to the will of God (*zosi de kata theon pneumatī*), just as was true of Jesus, who was “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” according to 3:18. If “the dead” to whom the gospel was preached are those who believed the gospel during their lifetime, but who are now dead, then this would certainly fulfill Peter’s purpose in this verse. They may have died, but they will live eternally with God. He is urging his readers to take encouragement from their example, to remain faithful unto death.

Even if Peter does have in view a proclamation of the gospel in the underworld to those who had already died, the question remains as to whether this is a proclamation of the gospel to those who had already believed during their lifetimes, or whether it also has in view those who had not believed during their lifetime. If it is the former, then Christ would have proclaimed to them the wonderful news that the redemption that they had been anticipating had been finally accomplished through his death. They would henceforth be brought from the place where believers resided up to that time, to dwell

with Christ in heaven! If it is the latter, then it might be suggested by some that Christ may have also preached the gospel to those who had not believed during their lifetimes, so as to give them an opportunity to now believe and be made alive in the spirit. This, however, seems quite divorced from Peter's purpose in this paragraph. How would knowing that the dead are given an opportunity to repent (or more accurately, that some had been given such an opportunity at some point of time in the past, according to v. 6), provide his readers with encouragement in the face of persecution? This question is especially acute in view of the fact that in the previous verse (v. 5) he had written that their persecutors would one day "give an account" to God as their judge for their treatment of believers—not that they might yet repent in the afterworld. Furthermore, the notion that there is an opportunity for repentance after death is lacking in the rest of the New Testament, as we will show below.

It seems best, then, to understand v. 6 as stating that believers can be encouraged in the face of persecution by knowing, not only that their persecutors will give an account to God (v.5), but also that those who have believed the gospel, though they may die in the flesh (perhaps even by martyrdom), nonetheless they will live forever in the spirit.

The view that these passages do not imply a post-mortem opportunity for salvation, is supported by the clear statements of other passages in Scripture. Foremost among these is the statement in Hebrews 9:27 that, "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." The implication is that it is on the basis of what we have done during this life, prior to death, that we will be judged by God.

We are also told that God will judge believers at the "judgment seat of Christ" on the basis of their "deeds in the body" (II Cor. 5:10). We are told as well, that God will

judge non-believers “according to their deeds” during this lifetime as recorded in God’s “books” (Rev. 20:12–13; cf. Dan. 12:1–2). It is during this life that we are under probation, and the character of our heart is being displayed in our deeds. It is in the life to come that we receive the judgment appropriate to our character and our deeds.

Support for the view that there is no possibility of redemption after death is also found in the statement by Abraham to the man in Hades in Jesus’ parable about the rich man and Lazarus: “And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us” (Luke 16:26). That is, the barrier between those who are saved and those who are lost is uncrossable and permanent.

In addition, the statement of Jesus warning some of the scribes and Pharisees in John 8:21 and 24 that they would “die in their sins” suggests that death brings an end to the opportunity for repentance and faith. The writer to the Hebrews makes a similar statement regarding those Israelites whose “bodies fell in the wilderness” and were not able to enter God’s rest “because of unbelief” (Heb. 3:17-19). These words are admittedly sobering, and are difficult to read without being moved to praying for opportunities to share the hope of the gospel with those whose lives are at risk.

It may understandably be asked why the judgment for sins committed during a finite lifetime on earth is eternal in duration.<sup>791</sup> Herman Bavinck has some insightful

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<sup>791</sup> The eternal duration of hell finds support in the statement in Mt. 25:46 that both eternal life and eternal judgment are everlasting in duration. For a full discussion of the eternal duration of hell, see: Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1995); *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004). For discussion of the psychology of why people in hell would



words regarding this matter: “(T)he thing to be considered here is not so much the ‘duration of the sinning’ as ‘the will of the sinner, which is such that it would always wish to sin if it could.’ He who commits the sin is a slave to sin: he will not and cannot do otherwise than sin . . . . In terms of his interior desire, he would not want anything other than to live forever so that he could sin forever.”<sup>792</sup> In other words, the judgment is eternal, because the sinning is eternal.

Bavinck’s comments are supported by the statement in Revelation 22:9: “Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and the one who is filthy, still be filthy . . . .” In other words, there is no change in the character of those who are eternally separated from the Lord.

Proponents of the inclusivist view often deride particularists for having a minimalist view of how many people attain salvation.<sup>793</sup> In my opinion, this is an unfortunate criticism of particularism. Christopher Little has made the observation that we need to consider the goodness of God in our estimation of his ways of administering his redeeming work in the world. He states:

In view of his goodness . . . , he chose to create that particular world in which the maximum number of people could go to heaven and the minimum number of people could go to hell. This is not to say that there will be more redeemed individuals than damned. We simply want to emphasize that the innate goodness of God led to the creation of the one world in which the potential for salvation among humanity would be greatest, given the constraints of human free will . . . .

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persist eternally in willful impenitence, see Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

<sup>792</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:711–712.

<sup>793</sup> Pinnock characterizes those who hold to a particularist viewpoint as those who embrace “the fewness doctrine which accepts that only a small number will be saved.” Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 13.

The goodness of God, then, demands us to recognize that our world is that particular world in which God is able to redeem the highest possible number of people.<sup>794</sup>

I believe his observation has merit. If God is good (and we know that he is), then he would create a world in which the greatest good would in the end be realized. We do not know all of the factors that must have been involved in God's choosing to create this world. But we know that his goodness was one of the controlling factors.

#### The Problem of the "Pseudoevangelized"

A final matter which should be addressed before drawing conclusions about the matter under discussion is that of the "pseudoevangelized." James Beilby has introduced this term to describe those who fall between the category of those who have been evangelized and those who have not.<sup>795</sup> One example of a person who would fit into this category which he notes is Kunta Kinte, the central figure in the book by Alex Haley, entitled *Roots*.<sup>796</sup> Beilby describes Kunta Kinte's experience as follows:

Born in 1750 in Juffure, Gambia, Kunta was taken captive by white slave traders at age seventeen and brought over to America. While in America, Kunta hears about his slave owners' God. This God, Kunta is told, thinks that African slaves

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<sup>794</sup> Christopher Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized*, 97. It should be noted that it is not at all impossible that there will be more people in heaven than in hell. Consider the millions who have died during childhood (or who perished in their mother's womb). Jesus' statement in Matthew 7:13-14 that there are few who find the way to life, may only have in consideration those living at the time, particularly in Israel.

<sup>795</sup> James Beilby, *Postmortem Opportunity: A Biblical and Theological Assessment of Salvation After Death* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 10-15.

<sup>796</sup> Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

are not quite human and that the enslavement, rape, and torture of Africans by white Christians is perfectly acceptable. Kunta Kinte utterly rejects this God, not just because he is a devout Muslim, but because the Christian “gospel” he hears is morally repugnant. Moreover, all Christians should agree with Kunta’s assessment of this “gospel” and should regard Kunta Kinte’s rejection of this bastardized “gospel” as not only eminently rational, but even morally praiseworthy. Has Kunta heard the name of Jesus and rejected it? Yes, but only in the most superficial sense. He has heard *the name* “Jesus” and he has heard some information *about* Jesus, but the gospel that he has heard is certainly not good news—not for him and I suggest not even for his white slave owners, for a God who blesses their actions is neither good nor worthy of worship.<sup>797</sup>

A second example of a “pseudoevangelized” person which Beilby notes is a woman he names “Micha.” He describes her experience in these words:

Micha is born in South Korea to a prostitute who gave her up for adoption to an American couple. Her adoptive parents, however, divorced shortly after her adoption and after years of neglect and abuse, Micha ended up in the foster care system. Sadly, while from the outside Micha’s situation with her foster family seemed to be a vast improvement, it was not. Her foster father sexually abused her, and when she told her foster mother, she accused Micha of seducing her husband and told her that she didn’t want to talk about it anymore. In high school, Micha started attending church and mustered up the courage to tell her youth pastor, who she had come to

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<sup>797</sup> James Beilby, *Postmortem Opportunity*, 11.

trust and respect, of her experience at home. But instead of helping her, her youth pastor took advantage of Micha's vulnerability and began abusing her as well. Moreover, he was spiritually abusive as well and sought to justify his actions on biblical and theological grounds. Having been rejected and abused by every person that was supposed to love and protect her, Micha considered ending her life but chose instead to survive. To survive, Micha refuses to trust anybody and she masks her pain with drugs and alcohol.<sup>798</sup>

Beilby concludes this section by stating:

The details associated with each situation vary widely, but there is no doubt that there are many, many Michas out there. They may have heard the gospel in one sense, but their childhood experiences have rendered them unable to genuinely grasp the idea of an all-powerful loving God and unable to drop their protective defenses to allow them to trust anybody.<sup>799</sup>

The validity and significance of Beilby's comments cannot be denied. There are many factors which influence people's spiritual condition and capacity to hear and trust God. They should not at all be denied or underestimated. And we can have confidence that our omniscient and compassionate God neither denies nor underestimates them as well. As is well known, Jesus uttered a severe warning to any who would cause "little ones" to stumble in their faith (Mt. 18:6).

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<sup>798</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>799</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

We should also remember that “God is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18), and that God honors faith that is “as small as a mustard seed” (Mt. 17:20). One thinks of the man who approached Jesus with his afflicted son, who said to him, “I do believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). God is capable of overcoming any obstacle to faith, and healing any heart that cries out to him—even if at the moment of one’s departure from this world.



## Chapter 12

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this work has been to investigate the question of whether salvation is possible apart from explicit faith in Christ for those who are unevangelized during this lifetime. Part I, surveyed the views held on this question among Christians dating back to the early church fathers. Part II, examined this question from a biblical perspective. In this section, we first presented the biblical evidence usually appealed to by proponents of inclusivism—the view that the unevangelized may be saved by responding to what light they have about God through creation and conscience, as well as by truth that may be contained in non-Christian religions. We then sought to evaluate the evidence used to support this view.

The first line of evidence was that people during Old Testament times were saved without any knowledge of Christ. While acknowledging that this was true in a comprehensive sense (since Christ had not yet come), nonetheless the salvation of these people was always based on faith in the revealed promises of God (which did include the promise of a coming Redeemer). These promises went far beyond anything that could have been gleaned from reflecting on God's general revelation.

The second line of evidence was that people outside the covenant community (such as Melchizedek in the Old Testament and Cornelius in the New Testament) appear to some to have been redeemed apart from explicit faith in the God of Israel or in Christ. A careful examination of the texts, however, revealed that in no case were any of these individuals saved apart from knowledge of the true God.

The third line of evidence focused on a number of individual texts which seem to support the inclusivist view. The arguments based on these passages were found to be unconvincing—particularly that they support the idea that salvation may come through a person’s reflecting on natural or general revelation.

Having evaluated the evidence for inclusivism, the biblical evidence for the particularist viewpoint was then presented. After noting several classic passages which state that salvation comes only through faith in Christ (e.g., John 14:6; Acts 4:12), we examined a long list of passages which tell us that people are saved through hearing and believing the word of God. This list is impressive and extensive, and cannot be ignored. We then noted a number of passages in the New Testament that contrasted the condition of people prior to their coming to faith with their condition after salvation. We saw that the contrast is between being in a state of darkness and coming into the light, between death and life, between blindness and sight. There is no indication from these passages that people were redeemed by God prior to their believing in Christ. It is my conclusion that this represents the view taught in the New Testament, that people are saved only through hearing and believing the gospel about Christ, placing their faith in him as their Savior and Lord (Rom. 10:9–10). We saw that this is true even of people who are described in the New Testament as being “devout” or “God fearers” prior to their conversion. (People who had been redeemed under the Old Testament economy, and came to faith in Christ, were seen to have moved from a faith that anticipated God’s redemption through the Messiah, to one that rested in the fulfillment of that promise and its accomplishment through Jesus.)



This is not to say that the Holy Spirit is not at work in a person's life prior to his hearing the gospel. We examined a number of passages which support this view. But the major flaw in the inclusivist position is that it fails to properly distinguish between God's *preparing* work and his *saving* work. Though God is at work preparing the hearts of persons to ultimately respond to the gospel, convicting them of their need for salvation, and instilling in them a hunger and thirst for God's grace, they are still alienated from God and without eternal life, until they come to know Christ personally. Cornelius, and the Ethiopian eunuch were seen to be examples of people whom God so prepared. It was only after hearing of Christ and believing in him that their sins were forgiven, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit and of eternal life, and their hearts were cleansed.

Though God often uses his word in preparing someone for faith, where his word is known, it is not at all inconsistent with the testimony of Scripture to believe that he also uses his general revelation through creation and conscience, as well as truths in non-Christian religions. But this preparatory work is distinct from his work in bringing someone to salvation through faith in Christ. As noted in the chapters above, God's preparation of the heart is similar to that of plowing a field in preparation for the sowing of seed. God's preparing work may instill a thirst for redemption; but only the gospel can quench that thirst. The Holy Spirit may work through general revelation to draw people to seek for God; but only in the gospel may he be found in a saving sense.

We also saw that God's normal means of communicating the gospel is through a human messenger (Rom. 10:14–15). This is not to deny, however, that he may at times use extraordinary means of communicating with people in leading them to faith (whether through an angel, or through a vision or dream). But even then, his normal practice is to

direct an individual to a person through whom the gospel can be communicated. This communication, of course, could come by means of the written word (or through other media), as well.

Finally, we saw that it is only during this lifetime that people may come to faith. It was suggested that God may communicate directly with people at the moment of death, at which time those whose hearts he had been preparing may come to saving faith. And we presented the testimony of others who have believed this to be the case. We obviously would have no direct evidence of persons to whom the Lord revealed the gospel at the point of death, and then took them immediately home to heaven. But that this may be the case with some people (perhaps many people) is entirely possible. And it is consistent with the goodness and mercy of God to believe that it may be so.

One factor which was not extensively examined, but which is of significant importance, is whether the behavior of the apostles (even apart from their explicit teaching) gives any indication as to what they personally believed about these matters. The following statements of the Apostle Paul are particularly significant. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). Paul here states his conviction that it is through the gospel that people are saved. In his first letter to the Corinthians he states: “For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me” (I Cor. 9:16–17). Paul felt a personal responsibility to proclaim the gospel message, having been commissioned to do so by the Lord—having a “stewardship entrusted to” him. As he states in his letter to the

Romans: “And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation; but as it is written, ‘They who had no news of Him shall see, And they who have not heard shall understand’” (Rom. 15:20–21). Paul’s passion was to make Christ known where he was not yet known. This obviously was the result of his conviction that the gospel was essential to people’s salvation. As he wrote in his second letter to Timothy: “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned. For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory” (II Tim. 2:8–10). Paul not only believed the gospel was essential to people’s salvation, and that he had a personal responsibility to proclaim it where it was not yet known, but he was willing to suffer extreme hardship so that the elect could receive the gospel and through it obtain salvation.

Geivett and Phillips have stated this fact well: “(I)t is difficult to account for the evangelistic mandate, and for the sufferings God’s witnesses are called upon to endure, on the supposition that the unevangelized do not need to hear in order to be saved. To be saved, a specific confession has to be made, and a specific set of truths must be believed.”<sup>800</sup>

A reading of the Book of Acts tells us that God himself directs his messengers to place them in touch with those whom he has prepared to receive the gospel. Consider his

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<sup>800</sup> Geivett and Phillips, “A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach,” in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, 235.

sending Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), and Peter to Cornelius (Acts 10–11), as well as his sovereign direction of Paul and his companions to the places where they ministered (Acts 13:1–3; 10:7ff). As Buswell states: “Christ brings conviction and prepares the hearts of His elect, and He also superintends the steps of the missionaries as they go forth seeking to save the lost, and brings the two together.”<sup>801</sup> God is the “Lord of the harvest” (Mt. 9:38; Lk. 10:2), and he is the one who “sends” his messengers to preach the gospel (Rom. 10:15). The verb used for “send” in the Matthew and Luke passages is *ekballo*. It is a strong word that is often used of “casting out” demons (Mt. 7:22; 8:16). It seems to be stronger even than the word used in some other contexts, such as Romans 10:15 (*apostello*).<sup>802</sup> The Lord is the one who sends his messengers where he wants them to go.<sup>803</sup>

But it is also true that we are responsible to take the gospel to the nations (Mt. 28:18–20). The Apostle Paul confessed before King Agrippa that he had not been “disobedient to the heavenly vision” in which he was commissioned by the Lord to preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 26:19). And he wrote to the church at Corinth: “for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (I Cor. 9:16). Both of these truths are taught in Scripture, and must be held in balance—the truth of God’s sovereign direction of the gospel ministry, and our responsibility to obey his commission to be his messengers to all nations. In the words of Christopher Little:

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<sup>801</sup> Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:158–159.

<sup>802</sup> Bock states concerning the use of *exballo* in Luke 10:2 that it is “a strong, graphic term that shows that God calls and equips . . . .” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 2: 9:51–24:53*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 2:995. He translates the verb as “thrust out.”

<sup>803</sup> The fact that the Lord was able to see that the prophet Jonah ultimately arrived in Nineveh to proclaim the message God had given him, illustrates how he is able to guide even reluctant or unwilling messengers to their appointed place of ministry.

God's redemptive program can be compared to a coin. On one side is divine sovereignty and on the other human responsibility. Both are necessary and mysteriously linked so that people can hear the gospel concerning Christ, exercise faith, and be saved. God does what he desires according to his sovereign will established from the foundations of the world, and we do what we have been called to do in view of our love for and dedication to him. As a result, his redemptive program is carried on and brought to fulfillment.<sup>804</sup>

Others have noticed the balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the account of the Apostle Paul's shipwreck at sea (Acts 27). At one point during the voyage, an angel appeared to Paul, telling him that God had determined to save all those who were sailing with him in the vessel (Acts 27:24). Yet, on a subsequent day, when some of the sailors attempted to abandon the ship, Paul said to the ship's leaders: "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved" (Acts 27:31). God had sovereignly determined that they would all be saved. Yet, their salvation would not be realized apart from their compliance with the command to remain in the ship. And Paul's warning to them was very real. It was the means God used to restrain the sailors from abandoning those who remained on the ship.

How these two realities may coexist is beyond our complete understanding. But they are both true, nonetheless. I believe that God will see that salvation will come, through faith in Christ, to every person who genuinely seeks him, and is prepared by God to receive him. But it is also true that we are responsible to obey Christ's command to take the gospel to every creature. And his command is very real.

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<sup>804</sup> Christopher R. Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized*, 136.

Andy Chambers speaks of the importance of holding these twin realities in balance in these words:

This mystery calls the church to humility before God. On the other hand, it does not excuse the church from obedience to Christ's command to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19). We should agree with Scripture when it tells us that people will not believe unless we go to them with the gospel (Rom 10:14–15) and plead with them to repent and be saved (Acts 3:19; 17:30). The message we preach is the means by which God saves those who believe (I Cor 1:21). Yet, we should also humbly confess with Scripture that God draws and opens the heart of sinners to hear and believe the gospel (John 6:44; Acts 16:14). The church that accepts this mystery without having to understand it fully will have a high view of God, and it will be possessed with an urgency that compels it to take the gospel to the ends of the earth by any means available.<sup>805</sup>

Though God may use extraordinary means of communication in the process of bringing the gospel to some people, the fact remains that even in the examples we have in Scripture of where this was the case (the experience of Paul comes to mind), a human messenger was still an essential link in the chain of communication. The same seems to be the case also in accounts we have of similar experiences outside of the biblical record. Even though it is possible that God may communicate the gospel to people apart from any human involvement whatsoever, we know that for good reasons it is his desire to use a human messenger. This is true, even if at times he uses other extraordinary means to communicate the gospel. We should be motivated to obey the Lord in taking the gospel to

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<sup>805</sup> Andy Chambers, *Exemplary Life: A Theology of Church Life in Acts* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Co., 2012), 157–158.

the world, not only by our love for him, but by our love for people who still need to enter into life.

The issue of the fate of the unevangelized is far more than hypothetical in nature. It is not just a point of theological interest. But it is a matter of utmost importance. This can be seen, I believe, in the influence the teaching of Vatican II on the status of the unevangelized has had on the evangelistic efforts among Roman Catholics. Stephen Bevens writes: “And, perhaps more radically, with Vatican II’s acknowledgement of the possibility of salvation outside of explicit faith in Christ . . . , many Catholics—including missionaries—no longer saw missionary activity as an urgent need. If people could be saved by following their own consciences in the context of their own religions, why try to convert them?”<sup>806</sup>

John Lamont also observes:

The trouble with the Council’s approach to mission is that although it stresses that Catholics must seek to convert unbelievers, it gives no adequate reason for doing so. It does give Christ’s command to evangelize as a reason, but it gives no proper explanation of why that command is given, or of the good that the commandment is supposed to promote. This, of course, means that the command is unlikely to be followed; and it has in fact been largely disregarded since the Council.<sup>807</sup>

It takes little imagination to believe that the same may be true among many professing evangelicals who have embraced a similar theology regarding the fate of the

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<sup>806</sup> Stephen Bevens and Jeffrey Gros, *Evangelization and Religious Freedom: Ad Gentes, Dignitatis Humanae* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 58–59.

<sup>807</sup> John Lamont, “What Was Wrong with Vatican II,” *New Blackfriars* 88.013 (January 2007), 89.

unevangelized as that proposed in Vatican II. My prayer has been that this work might serve as a preventative against such an outcome.

We must never forget that the most significant need any person has is for a living relationship with God through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, and what he has done in our behalf. People may have all of their material, physical, political and social needs met. But if they do not know God in a personal way, and the salvation he offers, they really have nothing at all. Let us never forget.

In bringing this work to a close, I suggest the following practical implications of this study. First, to those who object to the fairness of God in requiring faith in Christ for salvation, we can confidently respond that God's word assures us that God will see that Christ is made known to every person whose heart is prepared to receive him. The Scriptures tell us: "(F)or the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him . . . ." (I Chron. 28:9b).<sup>808</sup> It is not beyond his ability to bring this about, whether through ordinary or extraordinary means.

Second, we must take seriously our Lord's commission that we make the gospel known to every creature. And, as the example of the Apostle Paul reminds us, we must be prepared to suffer whatever hardships this may require of us. The proclamation of the gospel is not an optional activity for a few. It is the commission our Lord has given to us all.<sup>809</sup>

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<sup>808</sup> This promise was originally given to Solomon; but its application is clearly universal in scope.

<sup>809</sup> For an example of how God uses the gospel to transform even entire nations, see Rochunga Pudaite, *The Book That Set My People Free* (Colorado Springs: BFW Press, 1988). It is the story of the conversion of the Hmar people of India through their reception of God's word.



Third, we should take courage, knowing that the Lord himself has promised to go with us as we carry out his commission. He said, “(L)o, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20b).

Fourth, we can be encouraged as well, knowing that the Lord not only goes with us, but he has gone before us to prepare the hearts of many people to respond in faith when the gospel is made known. It is clear from the Book of Acts that the fact that the Lord had gone before his messengers to prepare the hearts of people to whom he had called them to preach the gospel, was a significant encouragement to them in their ministry (Acts 18:10). The same should be true for us. We can be encouraged in carrying out our witness for the Lord among the unevangelized, knowing that he has gone before us, and has been at work in the hearts of many people preparing them to be receptive to the truth of the gospel. As he said to the Apostle Paul, “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9b–10).<sup>810</sup>

Fifth, we should begin our endeavor by giving ourselves to prayer for those who do not yet know the Lord. Jesus told his disciples: “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest” (Mt. 9:38). This is where world evangelization begins—with prayer. It is no coincidence that the first missionary journey of Paul was born in the context of prayer. It was while they “were ministering to the Lord and fasting” that the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to take the gospel to those who had not yet been reached (Acts 13:2–3).

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<sup>810</sup> As Justin Martyr said, “You can kill us, but not hurt us.” Justin Martyr, *First Apology, Chapter II*. [www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm) (Accessed January 16, 2021.)

The same has been true throughout the history of the church. One thinks of the “haystack prayer meeting” of five students at Williams College in 1806, which resulted in the launching of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.<sup>811</sup> The same is true today.<sup>812</sup>

Sixth, we can begin by praying for those in our own personal circle of family and friends who do not know the Lord. But we can go beyond this, by learning about and praying for people groups throughout the world who are still in need of an effective Christian witness. One way to do this is by consulting the “Joshua Project” which has a wonderful website devoted to familiarizing readers with people groups who are as yet beyond the reach of the gospel.<sup>813</sup>

Seventh, we must take time to prayerfully and thoughtfully learn to communicate the gospel, and our own personal testimony of how Christ has changed our life, to those who do not yet know him. There are many resources available to help us do this.<sup>814</sup> Many people have found it helpful also to always carry with them some printed resources that

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<sup>811</sup> “The History of the Haystack Prayer Meeting.” An account of this event may be found at [www.globalministries.org/the\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_haystack\\_pray\\_10\\_10\\_2014\\_12](http://www.globalministries.org/the_history_of_the_haystack_pray_10_10_2014_12) (Accessed January 5, 2021.)

<sup>812</sup> During my first visit to the city of Patna in the State of Bihar in India (often called the “Graveyard of Christian Missions”), I met a missionary couple. The wife had grown up in a Shiite Muslim family in Africa. But when she and her twin brothers were young children, a missionary met them and vowed to pray for their family daily. He did so for eighteen years, before these three children came to place their faith in Christ. They continued in the faith, in spite of the strong objections of the rest of their family. Today, this wife and her husband serve the Lord among some of the most unreached people in the world.

<sup>813</sup> The “Joshua Project” website is: [www.joshuaproject.net](http://www.joshuaproject.net)

<sup>814</sup> One excellent resource to consult in learning to share the gospel is “Spread Truth.” Log onto their website at [www.spreadtruth.com](http://www.spreadtruth.com)

can be given to people who are interested in knowing more about the Lord.<sup>815</sup> And let us not forget the numerous ways that the internet can be used to make the gospel known to people throughout the world!

Eighth, we must be faithful to help those who do trust in Christ to grow in their new faith, and to become part of his family through a healthy local church, where the Bible is taught. As many have pointed out, the Lord instructed us not simply to “make converts,” but to “make disciples” (Mt. 28:18–20).

Ninth, we must be diligent to cultivate our own relationship with Christ on a daily basis, through our own regular study and meditation on his word, through a life of prayer, and through worship and fellowship with God’s people. Only as we “abide in him” and trust in him can we know that he will be working through us, guiding us, and using us. As he said, “(F)or apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5b).

The words of Paul to the church at Colosse are worthy of repetition in this regard: “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak. Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” (Col. 4:2–6).

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<sup>815</sup> An excellent resource is the “Living Water” edition of the Gospel of John, which can be obtained for a modest donation from The Living Water Project, P.O. Box 2, Glide, OR 97443. See their website: [www.livingwater.org](http://www.livingwater.org)



## Appendix 1

### *An Exposition of Romans 15:14-33*

I believe it is appropriate as we near the end of this work, to provide an exposition of what is perhaps the clearest passage giving insight into the motivation of the Apostle Paul in devoting himself to the ministry of expanding the reach of the gospel during his generation. I will identify seven principles of a Spirit-led ministry to the unevangelized drawn from Romans 15:14-33.

The first principle is found in v. 14. *I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.* Paul is here describing his readers, assuring them that his writing about the gospel in such depth and at such great length in this letter was not meant to imply that they were spiritually deficient, or lacking in competence to minister to one another, or to others. He says they are. But in describing them he also summarizes three qualifications for personal ministry. I will briefly give them in reverse order.

The first is giftedness in ministry. That is, they were *able to instruct* or minister to others. There are indeed some basic gifts and skills to be developed in ministry. Paul has highlighted one . . . instructing, or admonishing, or teaching, preaching, and exhorting. But he could have included others, such as counseling, encouraging, comforting. There is always more to learn in developing our gifts and skills for ministry, and God has gifted each one uniquely.

The second is knowledge, and specifically knowledge of God and of God's truth. When God calls us to ministry, He calls us to a lifetime of learning. We will never feel

like we know it all, or even that we know enough. But we can always be learning more about him and from him.

The third qualification for ministry is perhaps the most important: personal character. That is why Paul puts it first: *full of goodness*. A life increasingly characterized by purity of heart and life. Character is what we are when we're alone (though we're never really alone). And it's what we are not just on the outside, but on the inside as well, in our thoughts and motives. This is the kind of change the Holy Spirit is bringing about in all of us who belong to the Lord. We can gain all the knowledge and training in the world; but if we lack character we will be not only useless, but even potentially dangerous!

So this is the first principle of ministry: **Ministry flows out of our God-given gifts, our knowledge of Him, and our personal character.**

The second principle is contained in vv. 15-16. *But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.* Here Paul describes his ministry as that of a priest, offering sacrifices acceptable to God. But unlike Old Testament priests who offered animal sacrifices in behalf of people, in Paul's case the sacrifices were the people themselves, and particularly Gentiles, the non-Jewish people to whom God had called him to minister. He saw himself as bringing people into relationship with God through the gospel message . . . offering them as though a sacrifice or gift to him. And so his ministry, and any Spirit-led ministry, is a gospel-focused ministry. It's through embracing the gospel that people's lives are transformed by the

Holy Spirit, and made acceptable to God. So this, then, is the second principle of ministry: **It is a gospel-focused ministry.** There are many other worthy endeavors in life. But if the gospel is not at the center of what we are doing, we are falling short of God's intentions. Paul said that the gospel ministry is "of first importance" (I Cor. 15:3).

The third principle of ministry is found in vv. 17-19a. *In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God . . . .* Paul is saying that he was rejoicing in what Christ was accomplishing through him in effecting spiritual change in the lives of other people, particularly the Gentiles. That's what thrilled Paul . . . when he saw people who had not known God, come to know him . . . when people who had been indifferent toward God, come to love him . . . when people who were destined for an eternity without God, are redirected to heaven. This is a work only God can accomplish by the Holy Spirit. This is a very liberating thought . . . that this work is not something that we must accomplish for God, or that we are even able to accomplish for him. But it is something he accomplishes *through* us. So this is the third principle of ministry: **Ministry is about what Christ accomplishes through us.**

But notice something very important here—*how* Christ accomplishes this work through us. He says that it is *by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God.* That is, the Holy Spirit powerfully works through both ordinary and extraordinary means. As to the means that we might call "ordinary" he mentions first our words. This has reference both to our general conversation with people, but also to our communication of the Christian message. St. Francis of Assisi is

sometimes quoted as exhorting his followers to “preach the gospel at all times; if necessary use words.”<sup>816</sup> It’s unlikely that he ever said this. But the statement itself does not reflect a biblical concept. The gospel can be reinforced by our conduct, but it can only be communicated by our words—whether written or spoken. But he does also use our life—our *deeds*. It’s our life that lends credibility to our message.

Our words and our deeds—these are the ordinary means that the Holy Spirit uses in bringing people into relationship with God. But he also uses the extraordinary means of *signs and wonders*. These are the miraculous works that the Holy Spirit sometimes uses particularly in powerfully extending the reach of the gospel into as yet unevangelized areas.

The fourth principle of ministry is found in vv. 19b-21. *(S)o that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum* (what would later become known as Yugoslavia) *I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.”* Not that Paul was unconcerned about those who had already responded to the gospel. The fact that he took time to revisit the churches he founded, and wrote extended letters to them about specific issues they were facing, shows that he was very concerned about them. And when we read his letters, we find that he had deep relationships with many individuals in these churches. But he was particularly caught up in what theologians call the “Mission Dei”—the Mission of God.

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<sup>816</sup> See the article by Glenn Stanton on the website of The Gospel Coalition: “FactChecker: Misquoting Francis of Assisi.” July 10, 2012. [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org) (Accessed February 1, 2024.)



God the Father sent the Son. The Father and the Son sent the Spirit. And the Spirit sends the church into the world. And so this is the fourth principle of ministry: **A Spirit-led ministry is an outgoing ministry.** This has always been true of God's work in the world, that he impels his people to move out of their comfort zone to make contact with people who do not yet know him.

The fifth and sixth principles of ministry are embedded in vv. 22-29. *This is the reason why I have been hindered from coming to you* (that is, he had placed a priority on ministry to those as yet unreached.) *But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*

Here Paul is outlining his plans for ministry, which involved going first to Jerusalem to bring an offering to Jewish believers who were suffering need. But then he hoped to return to his westward mission, by going to Spain. And he hoped to be helped by the Roman believers in providing for his journey. Paul exemplifies the fifth principle of ministry: **A Spirit-led ministry pursues a God-given plan of action . . . and acts on**

**it.** We see here Paul's relentless pursuit of this plan to take the gospel in a westerly direction. For sure, there were many detours, seeming setbacks, and unexpected delays. But he had an overall purpose, and he persisted in it. So that at the end of his life he could say, "I have finished my course" (II Tim. 4:7). He wasn't distracted by his own impulses or preferences, or by what everyone else wanted him to do. He was convinced of what God had called him to do, and he kept with it until God took him home to heaven.

There is a sixth principle here: **A Spirit-led ministry is sensitive to people's ordinary needs.** We see this in Paul's desire and plan to bring an offering for the relief of Jewish believers in Palestine who were enduring famine. This has always been true of the most effective ministries of outreach, that they have been characterized both by the proclamation of the gospel and of God's word, and by the demonstration of compassionate concern for the ordinary needs of people.

The seventh and final principle of ministry in this passage is found in vv. 30-33. *I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.*

*The seventh principle is:* **A Spirit-led ministry is dependent on the prayers of God's people.** Notice that Paul asks his readers to pray for three things. First, that he be delivered from those in Jerusalem who opposed his ministry. And there will always be those who oppose the ministry of the gospel—at times quite violently. Satan does not want to see the gospel advance in the world, and he will use any means at his disposal to

oppose it. But second, he asks his readers to pray that his ministry might find a positive reception among those for whom it was intended. For it is only the Lord who not only can open doors for the gospel, but who can also open people's hearts to receive it. Thirdly, Paul asks that his readers pray that he might at last come to Rome and find refreshment in their company. The ministry is a demanding and at times exhausting enterprise. And the Lord knows that we need seasons of refreshment. And we have the Apostle's example in telling us that it is entirely legitimate to pray for such seasons of renewal—just as we have Jesus' example of encouraging his disciples (after they had concluded their traveling ministry) to “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while” (Mark 6:31).

So, in this passage we have seven principles of a Spirit-led ministry.

- 1) A Spirit-led ministry flows out of our God-given gifts, our knowledge of God, and our personal character.
- 2) A Spirit-led ministry is a gospel-focused ministry.
- 3) A Spirit-led ministry is what Christ accomplishes through us, by both the ordinary means of word and deed, and the extraordinary means of signs and wonders.
- 4) A Spirit-led ministry is an outgoing ministry—always seeking to extend the gospel to those who have not yet heard.
- 5) A Spirit-led ministry pursues a God-given plan of action . . . and acts on it.
- 6) A Spirit-led ministry is sensitive to people's ordinary needs.
- 7) A Spirit-led ministry is dependent on the prayers of God's people.

What a wonderful privilege God has given us of being his messengers! As the Scripture says, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!” (Rom. 10:15b). And what a powerful motive God has given us to align ourselves with his redemptive purpose in the world—the “love of Christ” which compels us (II Cor. 5:14). Whether this be understood as our love for Christ, or his love for us, or even his love through us, it is the primary motive that God uses in drawing us out of our comfort zone, and “thrusts” us into the field of spiritual harvest. Paul wrote: “Let all you do be done in love” (I Cor. 16:14).

One day, when we give account to the Lord for our lives, we will not be asked what our view was of the fate of the unevangelized. But it is more than likely that we will be asked what we *did* about the fate of the unevangelized. May we live our lives in such a way that we may hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Mt. 25:33).  
Amen.

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18b–20).

Rick Rood  
December 2024

## Appendix 2

### *Why Missions?*<sup>817</sup>

#### Introduction

Our nation will be going to the polls to vote for our nation's leaders in a couple days. And I want to encourage you to vote, if you have not done so already. And to keep biblical convictions in mind as you do. But I want to focus our attention this morning on a topic that is really even far more consequential than the election, or even than the future of our country (as vitally important as that is). And that is the Mission of God. Not the mission of the Republican Party or the Democratic Party. But the Mission of God. Not that the mission of our political parties is inconsequential. But from the eternal perspective, the mission of God is of even greater consequence.

You are launching today your church's missions conference. And I felt it would be good to begin by simply addressing the question, "Why missions?" That might seem like a simple question to answer. After all, our Lord told us to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. We call it the "Great Commission." Isn't that reason enough? Well, yes it is. But in the back of some of our minds, we may be thinking, "You know, I'm all for missions. But it's really inconvenient. And it's costly. And it might even be dangerous. So, I'm just going to leave that to others." So, I would like to explore with you how we can answer the question, "Why missions?", and then to consider a few ways we can become involved in the Mission of God. I want to begin by taking a look at some of the backstory behind our Lord's commission. The first part of our message will be a bit of a history and theology lesson. So bear with me. I think it will be worth our time.

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<sup>817</sup> I am including this sermon as an example of how the call to engagement in mission might be presented to a congregation. This message was first delivered at East White Oak Bible Church in Carlock, IL, November 2, 2024, as part of their missions conference. It was delivered a couple days before our nation went to the polls for the general election, as will be noted by comments in the introduction.

## The Biblical Basis for the Mission of God

In the beginning days of our race, there was no “mission field” and no need for missions. The Lord was fully known to our first parents. And even after they turned away from God, and he had promised that he would act to redeem humanity through a descendent of Eve (Gen. 3:15), they still knew him. But it didn’t take long for the spiritual and moral condition of our race to descend into serious decline. For sure, there were some who maintained faith in the true God, and “called on the name of the Lord” (as we are told in Gen. 4:26). But in time the decline of our race was so serious that the text says that the entire earth was “corrupt...and filled with violence” (Gen. 6:11). And so, according to the biblical narrative, God judged the entire race by destroying it through the flood, with the exception of Noah and his family.

After the flood, there was a new beginning for our race, through Noah and his children. But it didn’t take long for the downward spiral to begin again, culminating in the erection of the Tower of Babel as a statement of human pride and hubris. So God acted again. But this time, he acted to restrain the corruption of our race, by creating a multitude of languages to separate them into many different nations. It was as a result of this scattering that the many nations of the world were formed. We have what we call the “Table of the Nations” in Genesis chapter 10. It was, no doubt, the Lord’s intention from the beginning that the many people groups of the world would arise naturally, as people obeyed his command to scatter throughout the earth. We know by witnessing his creation in the natural world that God loves diversity. And this is no less true of his design for humanity. God just accelerated the process at Babel.

Now, there’s evidence that the knowledge of the Lord was preserved among the nations. There was, for example, during the lifetime of Abraham, Melchizedek, who was a priest of “God most high” in what would later become Jerusalem. You may also know that many cultures give evidence of an original monotheism.<sup>818</sup> In fact, many believe that the Genesis story is reflected for example, in some of the ancient characters in the

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<sup>818</sup> Winfried Corduan, *In the Beginning God: A Fresh Look at the Case for Original Monotheism* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2013).

Chinese language.<sup>819</sup> But over time, the various nations drifted further and further from the Lord, into various forms of idolatry. This spiritual and moral decline is described in graphic terms in the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. The psalmist also speaks of the “nations who forget God” (Ps. 9:17). And the New Testament records that God “permitted all the nations to go their own ways” (Acts 14:16). This doesn’t suggest that it was impossible for individuals in these nations to find salvation. Job certainly did. But it does mean that there were no nations that embraced the Lord as their God. They descended into a spiritual abyss, that often entailed immoral practices, and even human and child sacrifice, which we find described in the Old Testament, and is well attested as well at many places throughout the world.<sup>820</sup>

Now, at this time, rather than judging the entire race again, God created a new nation out of the family of Abraham—the nation Israel. And among God’s promises to Abraham was that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3; 22:18)—these nations that had been created through the confusion of languages at Babel. In fact, when God established the nation Israel at Mt. Sinai, he said that she would be a “kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Just as a priest is a mediator between God and man, Israel would be the mediator between God and the nations of the world. It would be through Israel that other nations would come to know the true God. To facilitate this purpose, the Lord placed Israel in a very strategic position, at the crossroads of three continents. The Lord said through the prophet Ezekiel: *This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her* (Ezek. 5:5).

Later, when Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, he uttered these words: *Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Your name’s sake (for they will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name, to fear You, as do*

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<sup>819</sup> Ethel R. Nelson, Richard E. Broadberry, Ginger Tong Chock, *God’s Promise to the Chinese* (Dunlap, TN: Read Books, 1997).

<sup>820</sup> Demosthenis Vasiloudis, “Human Sacrifice in Ancient Cultures: An Historical Overview” <https://www.thearchaeologist.org/blog/human-sacrifice-in-ancient-cultures-a-historical-overview> December 28, 2023. (Accessed November 24, 2024.)

*your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by Your name.... so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no one else* (I Kings 8:41-43, 60). During his reign we are told that, *Men came from all the peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom* (I Kings 4:34). Who knows how far Israel's influence reached in ancient times? Centuries later, when the Lord spoke through the prophet Isaiah, he said: *Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other* (Isa. 45:22).

I share these things, simply to point out that, far from being an afterthought in the mind of God, from the beginning it was always God's plan to see that the way of salvation be made known among all the nations of the world; and he has always had a strategy for doing so. During Old Testament times, it was through the nation Israel. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well, *Salvation is of the Jews* (John 4:22b).

Of course, when the nation Israel did not receive Jesus as their Messiah, God set them aside as the agent through whom he would reach the nations, and formed a new people we know of as the church. And he gave us the commission to make the gospel known in every nation, beginning at Jerusalem (Mt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8).

Now, when we come to the end of the New Testament, we read of the culmination of God's purposes for the world, and the establishment of his rule on earth through Jesus. When that happens, his kingdom will replace every existing political entity on our planet (including our own).<sup>821</sup> And when it is described, we read that God's kingdom will be composed of people from every people group and nation (Rev. 5:9-10; 7:9). And we even read in Rev. 21 that *the glory and honor of the nations* will be brought into the new Jerusalem. When the kingdom of God comes in its fullness, it's going to have a very international and multicultural flavor. Every national group will contribute something uniquely glorious and honorable to the spiritual enrichment of God's kingdom. This is one of the wonderful blessings of being involved in missions—that we are spiritually enriched by our exposure to brothers and sisters in other cultures.

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<sup>821</sup> Daniel 2:44-45.



So this is God's purpose in history, the establishment of his kingdom on earth, composed of people redeemed from every nation. This is what theologians call the "Missio Dei" or the "Mission of God." When we engage in missions, we are participating in the fulfillment of God's purpose for the world. It's the purpose that is most on God's heart. And it's a purpose which cannot fail. I can't think of any enterprise more inspiring than this—than joining in partnership with God in the fulfillment of his mission in the world.

### **How do we participate in the Mission of God?**

If this is the purpose God is most passionate about, a question that we must ask is how do we participate in the fulfillment of the Mission of God? I'd like to suggest this morning three ways in which God can use us. Ways that are indispensable to its fulfillment.

The first is by devoting ourselves and our resources to the proclamation of the gospel message in every culture. This includes Bible translation, scripture distribution, proclamation through radio, television, the internet, in every way feasible. Because it's through the gospel that people are brought into relationship with God, and delivered from his judgment on our sin. And what is the gospel? It's that Jesus Christ is God's Son, and that he has made payment for our sins through his death in our place on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead. And that through placing our trust in him and what he has done for us, our relationship with God can be mended. I once counted at least 42 passages in the New Testament that explicitly state that salvation comes through hearing and believing the gospel. They are so numerous and familiar that we hardly need to repeat them here. But this fact is also supported by the many passages that describe those who have not yet come to know Christ as being "in darkness," or "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). According to Jesus himself, even a person as religious as Nicodemus, a teacher in Israel, needed to be born again through faith in Jesus to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

People often ask, well what about people who never hear of Christ? Couldn't they be saved simply by receiving what they can know about God through what we call

“general revelation” through the creation and their conscience? The simple answer is “not really.” People must know more than can be gleaned by simply reflecting on what God has revealed of himself through the creation or through our conscience, or even through any other religion. This is not to say that God’s general revelation is useless or pointless. Far from it. The Holy Spirit can certainly use creation and our conscience to *prepare* people for the gospel, (and I believe he does), by convincing them that there is a creator, and awakening in people’s hearts an awareness of our sins, and a desire for his forgiveness of our sins, and a hunger for a relationship with him. He can even use truths in other religions to do that. He uses these truths to prepare people’s hearts for the gospel, much as a farmer plows the soil of a field to prepare it for the sowing of seed. But it’s only through our hearing and believing the gospel that we can come to know God personally, and that our thirst for forgiveness and for a personal relationship with God can be quenched. This is the clear teaching of God’s word.

We also know that God’s normal means of communicating the gospel is through a human messenger, whether that communication is spoken or written. Someone might ask, well couldn’t God just reveal the gospel to someone directly, without our having to go to all the trouble to communicate across cultures? Certainly he could. And who’s to say that he never has? I knew a nurse at the hospital where I served in the Dallas area for many years, who was from Africa, and a former Muslim, who told me that she came to faith through a vision of Jesus. The apostle Paul was converted through a direct revelation of Jesus on the Damascus road. But remember that the Lord directed a believer in Damascus by the name of Ananias to seek out Paul and to establish him in the faith. And this is God’s normal method, that even where he might use extraordinary means in someone’s conversion, he also employs human messengers in the process.

Now, what is amazing is that God knows how to put people at the right place and at the right time, to be used by him in communicating the saving message to people whose hearts are prepared to receive him. We learn this from the book of Acts. For example, remember how the Holy Spirit directed Philip to intercept the Ethiopian eunuch just at the moment when he was reading from Isaiah chapter 53 about the sacrificial death of the servant of the Lord. And the text says that Philip explained to him how this passage

was speaking of Jesus.<sup>822</sup> We know this also from the experience of Peter who was extraordinarily directed to the home of Cornelius, whom the text says had been praying, I believe praying that God would quench his thirst for salvation and for forgiveness. And he did, through Peter's preaching the gospel to him.<sup>823</sup>

Many years ago, when I was a senior in college, at Seattle Pacific University, I sat down over lunch at a table in the student union.<sup>824</sup> There was a fellow sitting across from me I had never met. As we talked, I learned he was a transfer student to this Christian college. I asked him how things were going for him there. He said, "You know, I'm taking one of these Bible classes, and other students keep talking about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I'm not sure I know what they're talking about." Well, I almost swallowed my sandwich whole. But I briefly shared with him how he could come into a relationship with God through faith in Christ. And I asked him if this is something he wanted to do now. He said, "Yes, it really is." We prayed there together in the student union. Over the course of that year we got to know him and his wife. But then we moved to Dallas, and lost track of them. However, six years later we were travelling by air to San Francisco to see my parents on Christmas eve, 1977. And as we were making our way across the then huge terminal that was very crowded, suddenly someone collided with us from behind. We turned to see who it was. It was this couple we had come to know several years prior. We asked them where they were going. They said, "We're headed to the Philippines as missionary school teachers." Many years later I learned through a seemingly random encounter with a friend, that he ultimately became a pastor in Idaho. We would have never known. But I realized that God had orchestrated our meeting this couple, both at the beginning, and then when they were on their way out of country. God loves to do that kind of thing. And I believe he does it far more often than we will ever know in this lifetime. If we are seeking to walk with the Lord, I believe we should simply always assume that he will be bringing us across the path of people who need a touch from him in some way.

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<sup>822</sup> Acts 8:26-40.

<sup>823</sup> Acts 10.

<sup>824</sup> This story is recounted in my book: Rick Rood, *Our Story . . . His Story: One couple's encounter with the Grace of God in the Crucible of Affliction* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2014), 26-28, 35.

A number of years ago I had the privilege of getting to know and working with the young lady in Vietnam. She was our translator for teaching sessions that we had for indigenous Christian workers in the north of Vietnam on several occasions. She and her husband serve a church in the port city of Haiphong where he is pastor, and she does translation work for those of us who visit there. She told me how her family fled Vietnam many years ago, when she was a young child. And they lived for seven years in a refugee camp in Hong Kong, hoping to be transferred to another country. But they were eventually sent back to Vietnam for reasons I do not understand. But during the years they were in the refugee camp, they attended Bible classes sponsored by Christian workers at the camp. And she and her family became believing Christians. God has been using her and her husband ever since to serve his people in the north of Vietnam.

You probably have never heard of Samuel Isaac Joseph Shereschewsky.<sup>825</sup> He was born in Lithuania in 1831 into a Jewish family. But someone gave him a Hebrew copy of the New Testament, and he became convinced through reading it that Jesus was the Messiah. He later emigrated to the United States where he joined a Presbyterian church and attended Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He then gave himself to serve as a missionary in China. He would eventually devote himself to translating the Bible into a form of Mandarin that could be read by people in China who lacked formal education. In spite of the fact that he contracted what was apparently Parkinson's disease, he completed this task while sitting in a chair for over twenty years, able to use only two fingers to type out the last two thousand pages of his translation of the Bible, which was published in 1899. Four years before his death he said, "I have sat in this chair for over twenty years. It seemed very hard at first. But God knew best. He kept me for the work for which I am best fitted."<sup>826</sup>

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<sup>825</sup> "Samuel Isaac Joseph Shereschewsky," Wikipedia. 12 January, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel\\_Isaac\\_Joseph\\_Shereschewsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Isaac_Joseph_Shereschewsky) (Accessed October 24, 2024.)

<sup>826</sup> This quote is from The Daily Article of the Denison Forum: Jim Denison, "Thousands attend mass worship event at Mississippi State University: Choosing what we want most over what we want now," 21 October, 2024, [www.denisonforum.org](http://www.denisonforum.org) (Accessed October 21, 2024.)

You know, the history of Christian missions is the story of individuals and even nations being transformed through the spreading of God's word, and the proclamation of the gospel. I read many years ago the book entitled "The Book that Set My People Free."<sup>827</sup> This is the story of the evangelization of the Hmar people in northeast India. They were notorious for their headhunting practices and worship of spirits. No one dared wander into their territory. But in the early 1900s a Welshman by the name of Watkin Roberts read about them, and became convinced that the Lord wanted him to reach out to these people. He became a missionary to India, and had the Gospel of John translated into the language of a neighboring people group. Through this group, the gospel was given to the Hmar people. A village chief wrote to Watkin Roberts and asked him to come and explain it. Roberts asked permission of the British government to go. But they refused. They said it was too dangerous . . . and that the invitation was deceptive. They just wanted his head! But he went anyway. He spent only five days there. But the chief and two others believed in Christ. And gradually others did also. Within two generations, the entire Hmar people were evangelized. And today over 98% of the four million Hmar people identify as Christian. Some time after his encounter with the Hmar chieftain, Roberts had to leave India. And it wasn't until 46 years later, while living in Toronto, Canada, that he learned of the fruit of his efforts through a young man from the Hmar people who was studying at Wheaton College. But his experience is a dramatic illustration of the power of the gospel to change entire nations.

Some years ago I was involved in an auto accident, and had to go talk to an insurance adjustor. He told me that he was a recent university graduate. While talking with him I felt led to ask about his spiritual background. He said that he was an atheist or at least an agnostic. I just listened to him. But after our conversation, I felt the Lord was urging me to return to his office and leave for him a copy of Josh McDowell's little book *More Than a Carpenter*.<sup>828</sup> I also left my business card with my phone number. Well, several years later, I received a call from this young man. He told me that he had recently gone through a divorce, and in the midst of his pain he picked up the book I had left for

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<sup>827</sup> Rochunga Pudaite, *The Book that Set My People Free* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1988).

<sup>828</sup> Josh McDowell, *More Than A Carpenter* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Elevate, 2024).

him and read it through. He called a friend of his whom he knew to be a Christian, and he put his faith in Jesus. He was calling me to thank me for leaving this book for him. Though it had sat on his shelf for several years, when he was most aware of his need, he read it, and the Lord touched his life.

I share these stories simply to illustrate that the first way God uses us in the fulfillment of his Mission is by becoming involved in the proclamation of the gospel, making Christ known where he is not yet known . . . and that he is able to place us at the time and place where he knows he can best use us in his mission in the world. Whether it's around the world, or across the street.

But a second major way is through the demonstration of Christian character, and especially of Christ-like compassion. I say Christ-like, because if you read through the gospels, the most frequently mentioned emotion of Jesus is his compassion. Of the 24 times that Jesus' emotions are described in the gospels, compassion is mentioned in 7 of them (nearly twice as often as any other emotion). And when the church has been at her best, she has exhibited the same kind of compassion to those who are suffering in various ways.

Historians have documented that in the second and third centuries, when epidemics ravaged the Roman Empire, it was the Christians who went out of their way to minister to the sick and dying, even at their own peril.<sup>829</sup> In the Greco-Roman world, compassion and mercy were considered pathological qualities. But not for the Christians. And this is one reason why the early Christians made such an impact on their culture. John Chrysostom was an outstanding preacher in the city of Antioch in the fourth century. It is said that his church provided 3,000 meals for impoverished people in the city every day!<sup>830</sup> Christians in the fourth century were responsible for the creation of the first public hospital in Western Europe.<sup>831</sup>

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<sup>829</sup> Peter Barnes, "Plagues Throughout Christian History and Some Christian Responses," October 23, 2020. <https://banneroftruth.org> (Accessed October 23, 2024.)

<sup>830</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 54.

<sup>831</sup> John Dickson, *Bullies and Saints: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 106-09.

Several years ago I had the privilege of ministering in Delhi, India with Sushil and Sara Tyagi. Sushil leads a ministry called “Nicodemus Trust.” In addition to pastoring a church in Delhi, they also sponsor a school in a Muslim community there, entirely staffed by Christian teachers. It was my privilege to meet with them and encourage and pray for them. It’s their purpose to serve the needs of this community of Muslim families by providing education, and exposing them to the Christian faith, by their lives and by their teaching. They’ve been there since 2005! And these Muslim parents are very grateful.

I read some time back of a ministry to Muslims in Africa that established a school to meet the educational needs in a Muslim community.<sup>832</sup> Within two years, seven churches had been planted. The local Muslim leaders were so outraged over this that they hauled the ministry leader into a Muslim court. But when he told the court about how God had helped them provide the community not only with a school, but also with mobile medical clinics, dentists, safe water programs, and seed banks, many of the Muslim clerics who had wanted him deported instead walked away with his business card or with plans for further conversations about what they were doing to help their community.

How God uses the demonstration of Christian character and compassion was brought home to me one day when leading a worship service at a healthcare facility where I served as chaplain for many years. During the service a young lady from Sudan, and whom I knew to be a Muslim, raised her hand and said, “I want to become a Christian.” I asked her if we could talk privately back in her unit after service. I asked her what had brought her to the place of wanting to take this significant step. She said to me, “I have some friends who are Christians; and I’ve been *watching them* (observing their character) for a long time; and I want what they have.” I said to her, “I’m sure you know, coming from your background, what this will likely mean for you.” She said to me, “Yes, I know. But I’m old enough to make my own decision. And this is what I want to do.” I

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<sup>832</sup> This story is recounted in the book by Glenn Sunshine, Jerry Trousdale, *The Kingdom Unleashed: How Jesus’ 1<sup>st</sup> Century Kingdom Values Are Transforming Thousands of Cultures and Awakening His Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2018). It was summarized in the daily radio program of the Colson Center for Christian Worldview: *Breakpoint*, “Unleashing the Kingdom,” 20 August, 2018. (Accessed August 20, 2018.)

prayed with her and gave her a New Testament, and attempted to put her in touch with some believers from her country. But I later learned that she left our area and moved to another city in Texas where she knew some Christians from her homeland.<sup>833</sup>

One of my colleagues at the hospital told me of a man in his church who was dying. He had very few family members to support him. And so the church family resolved to sit with him around the clock during his last days, until he passed on to heaven. After he died, his son told the church that he was returning to the faith that he had abandoned in his youth. And he said that the reason was because of the compassion he saw demonstrated by the people in his father's church.

God uses the proclamation of the gospel, as well as the demonstration of Christ-like character and compassion in leading people to himself. But thirdly, he uses our prayers. Jesus told us to pray that God would raise up and send out workers to advance the gospel (Matthew 9:38). The Apostle Paul tells us to pray that God will open doors for the gospel, and make it clear how he should communicate it (Colossians 4:2-4). The Mission of God advances on the prayers of God's people.

In the eighteenth century, a government official in the area of Germany known as Saxony by the name of Count Von Zinzendorf had a tremendous burden for the advance of the gospel into as yet unreached areas of the world.<sup>834</sup> He started a prayer chain for missions that ran 24 hours a day, every day . . . for over a hundred years! As a result, some 300 Moravian missionaries were sent to all parts of the world during that time. According to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, a group of them on board a ship crossing the Atlantic was used by God in his conversion.

The first time I had the privilege of going to India, I went to the city of Patna in the State of Bihar (which is known as the "graveyard of Christian missions" because of the resistance the gospel has met there over the years). While there I met a missionary

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<sup>833</sup> This story was recounted in my book: Rick Rood, *A Day in the Life of a Chaplain: Bringing Grace and Hope to Hurting People* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2022), ch. 12.

<sup>834</sup> The story can be found at: "A Prayer Meeting that Lasted 100 Years," by Leslie K. Tarr. Christian History Institute. <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org> (Accessed October 21, 2024.)



couple. The wife told us how she had grown up in a Shiite Muslim family in Africa, but that she and her two twin brothers had come to know Christ, and had remained faithful to him in spite of the strong objections of their family. In fact, her parents even employed the services of a renowned Muslim apologist to try to dissuade them from their Christian faith. She told me that a missionary with the Africa Inland Mission had met them when they were young children, and had vowed to pray for their family every day. It was after eighteen years of his praying daily for them that she and her brothers came to know Christ personally. And now, this couple has been serving the Lord among some of the least reached people in the world for the past several decades.

Many of you know the name of William Carey, the first Protestant Christian missionary to India. But not many people know about his sister Polly, who played a vital part in his ministry in India, while remaining back in England.<sup>835</sup> When she was twenty-five years old, she contracted a degenerative spinal disease. She soon became paralyzed, except for her right arm, and was bedridden for fifty-two years! Yet for those fifty-two years she upheld her brother's work through her daily prayers and her frequent letters of encouragement. She could do little else with her life. But she engaged in the most significant work of all. She prayed.

I want to encourage you to look on line for the Joshua Project, which will give you information about how to pray for the nations and people groups of the world. You may feel led to focus on one particular country or group of people, or perhaps one each week or month, and devote yourself to becoming informed about their needs, and begin to pray for them daily.

## **Conclusion**

You know, unless you are of Jewish descent, every person in this room who is a believing Christian is so because someone once crossed a cultural barrier to bring the gospel to your ancestors. In my own case, on my father's side our family is of Swedish

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<sup>835</sup> The story of Polly Carey can be found in the article "Women Who Impacted the World for Christ—Polly Carey," <https://2cherish2commend.com/2011> (Accessed October 21, 2024.)

descent.<sup>836</sup> My ancient ancestors served gods with names like Odin, Frigg, Thor, Balder, and Tyr. But back during the 9<sup>th</sup> century, in spite of strong resistance, Christian missionaries began making inroads into Sweden, until after about 150 years, the faith took root in the hearts of many of our forebears. Thank God that those whom he had sent did not give up. The fact that there are Swedes today who know the Lord isn't because we are of a higher spiritual aptitude than other people; but it's due to the fact that those early missionaries persevered in reaching out to our forebears centuries ago.

If the fact that we know the Lord is due in part to the willingness of people long ago to cross cultural barriers to bring the gospel message to our forebears, can we really do any less? One day may it be that people as yet unborn might walk up to us in heaven and thank us that we had a part in reaching out to their forebears who are alive today, with the hope of the gospel, and with Christ-like acts of compassion, and through our prayers. May it be so. Amen.

Prayer. Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus, and for invading our lives with your cleansing and renewing grace. May you use us in furthering your mission in the world through the communication of the gospel, through compassionate service, and through our prayers, by the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

Rick Rood

October 2024

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<sup>836</sup> The story of Christianity's entrance into Scandinavia may be found at "Christianization of Scandinavia," 30 September, 2024. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org> Wikipedia. (Accessed October 21, 2024.)

### *About the Author*

Rick Rood is a native of Seattle, Washington, and was raised mostly in the Bay Area of California. He graduated from Seattle Pacific University in 1972 with a B.A. in history, and from Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) in 1976 with a Th.M. in Old Testament. He also completed work toward a Ph.D. in theological studies at DTS (all but dissertation). He has served as a pastor, seminary instructor at DTS, in ministry to international university students, and since 1996 has served as a hospital chaplain. He has also served on the global faculty of ACTS International ([www.actsinternational.net](http://www.actsinternational.net)), a mission devoted to providing training for indigenous Christian workers in underserved areas of Asia. He developed an interest in the fate of the unevangelized while serving in ministry to international students in the late 1980s, and with Probe Ministries (an apologetics ministry) during the 1990s. He has authored two other books: *Our Story . . . His Story: One Couple's Encounter With the Grace of God in the Crucible of Affliction* (Xulon Press, 2014), and *A Day in the Life of a Chaplain: Bringing Grace and Hope to Hurting People* (Resource Publications, 2022). He may be reached at [richardrood6@yahoo.com](mailto:richardrood6@yahoo.com)



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