

THE SCANDALOUS EXCLUSIVITY OF JESUS CHRIST

A Research Paper

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by

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*On my honor, I have neither given nor taken improper assistance
in completing this assignment.*

THE SCANDALOUS EXCLUSIVITY OF JESUS CHRIST

Part One: The Dividing Line

Thomas, the disciple of Jesus, asked him how to know the way to eternal life. Jesus' response was simple and straightforward, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6 NASB). Through the use of the singular definite article, John makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is the one and only way—there is no other. Jesus states unequivocally that he alone is the truth—there are not multiple truths. Eternal life is found only in and through him. In the post-modern world, where there is zero tolerance for absolutes, it is an outrageous and scandalous claim. As Ravi Zacharias wrote, "Every word of that statement challenges the fundamental beliefs of the Indian culture from which I come, and in reality, actually stands against an entire world today."¹ Even within the walls of the Church, the exclusive claims of orthodox Christianity are being blurred and even challenged. According to Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the "most hated doctrine in all of the world today," is the "exclusivity of Christ in salvation."² Voddie Baucham, Pastor and Dean of Theology at African Christian University, observed, "Truth is under attack in our culture. The person who believes in ideas, concepts, values, or facts that are true for all people in all places for all times is rare indeed."³ While orthodox Christianity maintains the position of exclusivism, that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and

¹ Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of The Christian Message* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 4.

² Norm Miller, "Patterson cites 'most hated' doctrine: Exclusivity of Christ," *Baptist Press*. (June 15, 2004), <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/patterson-cites-most-hated-doctrine-exclusivity-of-christ/>

³ Voddie Baucham, Jr., *The Ever Loving Truth: Can Faith Thrive in a Post-Christian Culture?* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), ix.

that “there is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord,”⁴ there are an increasing number of professing Christians who argue for other means of salvation, including universalism, pluralism, and inclusivism. A discussion of these positions is absolutely necessary because of what is at stake—the eternal destination of men and women made in God's image. This paper will argue that the exclusivist position is stated explicitly in verses such as John 14:6, Acts 4:12, and Romans 10:9-15, and is the only biblically and theologically consistent position. This will be accomplished by examining the arguments for the three opposing positions and demonstrating their error by presenting the Biblical case for exclusivism and defending against the objections that exclusivism is narrow-minded and contrary to God's love and mercy.

Universalism

Universalism maintains that everyone will eventually embrace salvation, if not in this life, then after death.⁵ Universalism is not new; in fact, its proponents contend that it dates back to the Church's earliest days. John Wesley Hanson, the noted Universalist pastor, and historian claimed that universalism was, in fact, the prevailing doctrine for the first five hundred years of the Christian church and that there is nothing in the earliest Christian declarations and creeds that is incompatible with the belief that the gospel provides universal salvation for all of mankind.⁶ Similarly, Robb Bell, founding pastor of megachurch Mars Hill Bible Church, wrote in 2011, “At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God.”⁷

⁴ The Southern Baptist Convention, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, accessed August 28, 2020, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>

⁵ Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 217.

⁶ John Wesley Hanson, *Universalism the Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years* (Chicago: Universalist Publishing House, 1899), Kindle Edition.

⁷ Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 124, Kindle edition.

This view that, in the end, everyone will be saved is widely popular today, even among some evangelicals. Bell, who sees himself as part of what he calls the “deep, wide, diverse stream” of “historic, orthodox Christianity,” argues from Matthew 19, Acts 3, and Colossians 1 that God will ultimately save everyone and reconcile all things to himself.⁸

Universalists argue that everyone will be saved in the end because they believe Scripture teaches that God’s love will triumph over his justice. Nels Ferré, the son of a conservative Baptist minister in Sweden, found himself at odds with his father's exclusivist views and developed his own theology that emphasized God's love as its central theme.⁹ Ferré cites particular verses of the Bible (e.g., 1 Tim 4:10, Phil 2:10-11, and Rom 11:32) to assert that all human beings will ultimately be saved.¹⁰

Pluralism

Pluralism is the view that all religions (including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism) offer equally valid means of salvation.¹¹ In other words, religious pluralists advocate that all religions are equally valid; therefore, Christianity is merely one path to God. Piper noted, “The pluralists believe that Jesus is the provision that God has made for Christians, but there are other ways of getting right with God and gaining eternal bliss in other religions. The work of Christ is useful for Christians but not necessary for non-Christians.”¹²

The contemporary case for pluralism is based on three approaches: (1) Relativity—the idea that differing historic and cultural contexts make it impossible to judge the truth claims of cultures and religions; (2) Mystery—the belief that the infinite and ineffable nature of God-

⁸ Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, 122. Ellipses original.

⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 1028.

¹⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1029.

¹¹ Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 163.

¹² John Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God: Must You Hear the Gospel to be Saved?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 24-25.

Mystery calls for religious pluralism and denies that any one religion has the “only” or “final” word; (3) Justice—a “liberation theology of religions” that views pluralism as the only ethical way to advocate for equity and justice in our intolerant and oppressive world.¹³

British theologian and pluralist advocate John Hick presented his most mature exposition of his pluralism in his Gifford Lectures, *An Interpretation of Religion*. Hick hypothesized that throughout the multitude of religious traditions and experiences, an “infinite Real, in itself beyond the scope of other than purely formal concepts, is differently conceived, experienced and responded to from within the different cultural ways of being human,” and that salvation occurs within these various traditions as the “transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.”¹⁴

Religious pluralists do not regard any scripture as absolutely authoritative. Hick, a self-professing Christian, denies the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible and confessed, “I do not think that it is possible to settle theological issues with ‘The Bible says...’”¹⁵ Hick argues, “I thus see theology as a human creation. I do not believe that God reveals propositions to us, whether in Hebrew, Greek, English, or any other language. I hold that the formulation of theology is a human activity that always, and necessarily, employs the concepts and reflects the cultural assumptions and biases of the theologians in question.”¹⁶ Therefore, pluralists believe that all religious truths are relative.

Inclusivism

Inclusivism is the view that salvation is only through the person and work of Jesus

¹³ John Hick, and Paul F. Kittner, editors, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1987), vii-xii

¹⁴ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 14.

¹⁵ John Hick, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm, and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), Kindle edition. Ellipses original.

¹⁶ Hick, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*

Christ, but that conscious faith in him is not necessary, and that Christ may save some who have never heard His gospel based on their response to whatever light they have received.¹⁷ Arguing from Romans 1-2 and 10:18, Millard Erickson says that those who have never heard of Christ may still be saved by responding to what God has revealed of himself in nature. Erickson says there are several elements of the gospel message revealed in nature, namely:

(1) The belief in one good powerful God. (2) The belief that he (man) owes 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 upon his mercy.¹⁸

He then postulates, “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. Their salvation was not based upon works. It was, as with all who are saved, a matter of grace.”¹⁹

According to John Hick, inclusivism is possibly the most commonly held view by Christian thinkers today.²⁰ Clark Pinnock, Professor Emeritus of Christian Interpretation at McMaster Divinity College, cites four reasons for the appeal of inclusivism. First, he says, inclusivism is more hopeful, and hope is attractive. Christians want to believe that grace will win out over sin in the course of human history. Second, Pinnock submits that inclusivism removes the dark aspects of the traditional view that suggest that God plays favorites or (at best) arbitrarily restricts his grace, leaving entire people groups with no hope of salvation. Third,

¹⁷ D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 278.

¹⁸ Millard Erickson, “Hope for Those Who Haven’t Heard? Yes, But . . .,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (April 1975): 124-25. <https://missionexus.org/hope-for-those-who-havent-heard-yes-but/>

¹⁹ Erickson, “Hope for Those Who Haven’t Heard? Yes, But . . .,”

²⁰ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 88.

Pinnock finds inclusivism's "honest willingness to acknowledge sanctity in persons and religions other than Christian" particularly attractive. Fourth, Pinnock argues that inclusivism offers a more coherent version of orthodoxy in that "it affirms the universality of God's salvific will more coherently than exclusivism because of its acknowledgment of the universal prevenience of divine grace."²¹

Still, some theologians take a more diplomatic approach. Some, such as John Stott, argue that the most Christian stance is to remain neutral on this point. They contend that although God has issued dire warnings about individuals' responsibility to respond to the gospel, he has not made clear how he will handle those who have never heard it. In Stott's words, "We have to leave them in the hands of the God of infinite mercy and justice, who manifested these qualities most fully in the cross."²² The implication is that the answer to the question, "what must we do to be saved?" is not sufficiently answered in Scripture.

Part Two: The Case for Exclusivism

Jesus stated unequivocally in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." (John 14:6 NASB). Similarly, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter said, "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" (Acts 4:12 NASB). Furthermore, in Romans 10:9-17, Paul makes it abundantly clear that salvation is impossible without first hearing the gospel and responding in faith.

The Gospel According to John

In John 14, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to his Father to prepare a place for them and reveals that they already know the way to where he is going (John 14:2-4). When

²¹ Clark Pinnock, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*

²² John Stott, quoted in David Edwards, *Evangelical Essentials, with a Response from John Stott* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 327.

Thomas' response reveals their lack of understanding. Jesus replies, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6 NASB). This "I am" statement reveals that Jesus is uniquely the way to God precisely because He is the truth of God and the life of God. There is no other reason for using the definite article with all three terms—the way, the truth, and the life—other than to exclude all other claims of alternative ways, truths, or life.²³ Jesus further insists that there is no access to the Father outside of him. When Jesus said, "no one comes to the Father but through Me," he did not mean that people in other parts of the world and other religions who do not know about Jesus can get to God because Jesus died for them. Proper hermeneutics demands that "through Me" must be interpreted and understood in the context of John's Gospel as a whole as believing in Jesus through the Word preached through his disciples (see John 6:35; 7:38; 11:25; 12:46; 17:20).²⁴ John tells us that his purpose in writing is so that people may believe certain propositional truths, namely that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus as portrayed in his Gospel, and that through personal faith in Christ, they may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).²⁵

Furthermore, in Gethsemane, Jesus prayed explicitly for those whom the Father had given him and identifies this select group as "those also who believe in Me through their word" (John 17:20 NASB), meaning necessarily the verbal and written proclamation of the gospel by the apostles.

The disciples know God and know the way to God precisely because they *know Jesus*. The evangelist makes it abundantly clear that Christianity is not just one more religion among many. On the contrary, the only way to God is only through a personal relationship with the One alone who can insist, *No one comes to the Father but through me*.

²³ R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*.

²⁴ Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God*, 114.

²⁵ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 663.

No Other Name

The explicit necessity of both hearing the name of Jesus and trusting in him for salvation is seen in Peter's Spirit-filled declaration that, "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" (Acts 4:12 NASB). Carson contends that this verse is one of the most exclusivist texts in the New Testament.²⁶ Indeed, the two clauses of this verse present a forceful case for exclusivism. In the first clause, "there is salvation in no one else," Peter eliminates the possibility of salvation in any person other than Jesus. Bock points out that in the original Greek, the phrase "There is no one else" appears before the subject "salvation" to emphatically demonstrate that Jesus alone holds the means to provide salvation, even for Jews who have access to God's Word.²⁷ However, it is the second clause—"for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"—that demonstrates in no uncertain terms that Peter is proclaiming the necessity of faith in the *name* of Jesus for salvation for all people everywhere.²⁸

The use of the word "for" (*γάρ*) indicates that the second clause was added to clarify Peter's initial assertion. Peter then uses four terms in this clause to demonstrate the exclusive and particular nature of the gospel. First, the use of the all-inclusive phrase "under heaven" indicates that the exclusion of all other names extends to even the remotest place on earth. Second, Peter indicates that the exclusiveness of salvation in the name of Christ applies to everyone. He extends the necessity of the name to all people everywhere by use of the phrase "given among men." He does not say, "given to the Jews," or "given to Christians," he says given to "men" (*ανθρωπος* - mankind). Third, Peter uses the term "must" (*δει*), meaning a "necessity established by the counsel and decree of God, esp. by that purpose of his which relates to the

²⁶ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 304.

²⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 194.

²⁸ Geivett and Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*.

salvation of men by the intervention of Christ.”²⁹ The point being, it is nearly impossible to argue that Peter would accept that the salvation of which he speaks in this verse does not require knowledge of the person of Jesus.³⁰ Fourth, the use of the term *name* indicates that specific knowledge concerning Jesus as Savior is necessary for salvation. Peter is not just saying that there is no other source of power by which you can be saved under a different name; rather, he excludes such a possibility explicitly. Piper astutely observed, “The point of saying, “There is no other name,” is that we are saved by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus. Calling on his name is our entrance into fellowship with God. If one is saved by Jesus incognito, one does not speak of being saved by his name.”³¹

The Great Qualifier

Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul said, “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.” (1 Cor 9:16 NASB). Paul’s heart beat with the fervent zeal of a missionary evangelist.³² Later, in his letter to the Romans, Paul reveals the reason for the urgent need to preach the gospel. He begins by quoting Joel 2:32, “for “WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED”” (Rom 10:13 NASB), followed by a series of rhetorical questions: “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 10:14–15 NASB).

Paul’s assertion in verse 13 presents a universally applicable qualifier: everyone *who calls on the name of the Lord* will be saved. However, people cannot believe in him if they have

²⁹ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, Massachusetts, 2002), 126.

³⁰ Geivett and Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*.

³¹ Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God*, 94.

³² Geivett and Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*.

never heard of him, and it is impossible to hear about him unless the gospel is preached, and the gospel cannot be preached unless evangelists are sent. These steps are absolutely necessary because nobody responds correctly to the light they have been given. Without exception, all people everywhere reject God's revelation revealed through nature and turn against him (Rom 1:18-32). Schreiner confirms, "Romans 10:14-17 verifies this interpretation, for it excludes the idea that salvation can be obtained apart from the external hearing of the gospel."³³

Indeed, the most natural reading of this passage is that apart from the faithful efforts of missionaries and evangelists, no unbeliever will have the opportunity to hear the gospel and embrace it in order to be saved. There is not even a hint of an alternative means of salvation for those who have never heard. On the contrary, if another alternative offered hope to the unevangelized, Paul's argument here would be misleading at best, if not outright deceptive.³⁴

Objections to Exclusivism

To borrow from Carson, "Exclusiveness is the one religious idea that cannot be tolerated. . . One cannot fail to observe a crushing irony; the gospel of relativistic tolerance is perhaps the most "evangelistic" movement in Western culture at the moment, demanding assent and brooking no rivals."³⁵ There are seemingly endless objections to religious exclusivism, two of the most common: it is narrow-minded and contrary to God's love and mercy.

A Narrow Way

In the foreword to Neal Punt's book, *A Theology of Inclusivism*, Richard Mouw, President and Professor of Christian Philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote, "The

³³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 568.

³⁴ Geivett and Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*.

³⁵ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 33.

majority of those questioned view Christianity as a narrow-minded, mean-spirited religion.”³⁶ Indeed, to say that personal faith in Jesus is the only way to God is to invite criticisms of being narrow-minded, bigoted, outrageous, and arrogant. Punt, however, sees a wideness in God’s mercy and argues that God’s sovereignty extends beyond the preaching of the gospel. In response to Romans 10:14-15, Punt counters that just because God has entrusted the church with the preaching of the good news, it does not mean that he is unable or unwilling to save people who have never heard the good news proclaimed by another human being. He argues that God is entirely within his sovereign right to save anyone he chooses.³⁷

Were it not for the overwhelming biblical evidence that God has ordained a particular method for saving people, this argument would seem valid. However, God must remain faithful to his revealed Word. Jesus said, “the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt 7:13–14 NASB). That narrow way is through the preaching of the gospel. God in his sovereignty is accomplishing the salvation of those he has chosen through the preaching of the gospel (Rom 10:14-15), opening the hearts of the elect to receive the gospel (Acts 16:14), granting them repentance (Acts 11:18), and cleansing their hearts by faith (Acts 15:9).³⁸

God Is Loving and Merciful

Another common objection to religious exclusivism is that it seems out of character for a loving and merciful God. Appealing to verses such as 1 John 2:2 and Romans 11:32, the argument is made that God’s mercy extends to all people; therefore, all people will either be saved or at least have the opportunity to be saved. According to Pinnock, religious exclusivism “distorts the nature of God and the heart of the good news,” and asks people “to believe in a God

³⁶ Richard J. Mouw, foreword to *A Theology of Inclusivism*, by Neal Punt (Allendale, MI: Northland Books, 2008), Kindle edition, 6.

³⁷ Neal Punt, *A Theology of Inclusivism* (Allendale, MI: Northland Books, 2008), Kindle edition, 76.

³⁸ Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God*, 110.

who deliberately sets in place a plan of salvation that denies access to salvation for the majority of human beings.”³⁹ This objection can be traced back to Pelagius, who recoiled at Augustine's view that divine assistance is necessary to do what God asks of us. Pelagius held that responsibility always implies ability; therefore, every human must have the ability to achieve salvation.

However, this objection completely misunderstands the depravity of man and the holiness of God. The problem with lamenting about the fate of the innocent person who never heard the gospel, but may have believed if given the opportunity, is that no such person exists. Romans 3 says unequivocally that there is no one who is righteous, no one who understands, no one who seeks after God, no one who does good, and that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:10-18, 23). Furthermore, Romans 1 says that everyone is without excuse because they reject even what they know of God, and according to Romans 6:23, everybody has earned the wrath of God. Fair would be God condemning the entire human race to eternal torment in Hell for their rebellion against Him. It is by God's grace alone that anyone is saved.

Conclusion

The exclusivist position that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and that there is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, is the only biblically and theologically correct position. The only way to defend the positions of universalism, pluralism, and inclusivism is to impose philosophical and personal convictions on the Word of God. There is only one way, and one name under heaven by which it is necessary to be saved. Sproul affirmed:

The Apostles had healed by the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the One whom the people had crucified but whom God had raised from the dead. Why? So that all Israel might know that this is the only name there is under heaven through which men may be saved. If you are a Christian, you should be prepared to die for that affirmation. If you are not, you are playing

³⁹ Clark Pinnock, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*

at religion, and you have missed the Son of God.⁴⁰

Universalism, pluralism, and inclusivism, are not only in error, they are in direct contradiction to the gospel as preached by Jesus and all of the authors of the New Testament and are therefore accursed. The apostle Paul warned, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” (Gal 1:8 NASB). Too many Christians have forgotten what Peter said about Jesus Christ, that he is “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense” (σκανδαλον, *skandalon*) and that people “stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.” (1 Pet 2:8 ESV). The gospel of Jesus Christ is scandalous and offensive to those who do not know him. It is meant to be.

⁴⁰ Sproul, *Acts*, 71-72.

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EVALUATION PAGE

Quality of Writing Student Self- Evaluation							
Thesis	Method	Argumentation/ Organization	Sources/ Information Literacy	Theological Communication	Grammar / Mechanics	Style	Format
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4

Quality of Writing Reviewer Evaluation							
Thesis	Method	Argumentation/ Organization	Sources/ Information Literacy	Theological Communication	Grammar / Mechanics	Style	Format