

REAFFIRMING THE VERACITY OF CHRISTIAN EXCLUSIVISM AND
ANSWERING THE OBJECTIONS POSITED BY INCLUSIVISTS AND
PLURALISTS

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Introduction

Throughout the centuries, the church has affirmed the exclusivity of Christ, which states that there is no salvation outside the fringes of Christianity and Christ is the only way to salvation. Some of the earliest recorded endorsements of this expression can be found in the classic statements of Origen (c. 185–254) and Cyprian (c. 200–58) that “outside the church there is no salvation.”¹ However, a significant shift took place in the middle of the twentieth century when men like John Hick drifted away from the fundamental teachings of Christian faith and began to postulate that “God is at work within the total religious life of mankind. Christianity is only one of many streams and we must accept the independent validity of other faiths.”² In other words, Christianity is not the only way to salvation but rather many ways may lead to the same divine reality. This view is commonly known as religious *pluralism*.

Another salvific view which has rapidly become prevalent in the Christian institutions is often tagged as *inclusivism*. The adherents of this view contend that Christ is indeed the only savior of the world, but one does not need to have conscious and explicit faith in Jesus Christ to be saved. God always saves people through Christ, but it does not mean that He only saves those who consciously put their trust in the redemptive work of Christ. They often argue that many of the people who die without hearing the gospel cannot be sent to hell just because they did not hear the gospel. How could they hear unless someone reached out to them and proclaimed the gospel? So, in their logic, it would be unfair for God to judge those un-evangelized people by

¹ Daniel B. Clendenin, “The Only Way: Answering the Argument That All Religions Are More or Less True,” *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1998), 39.

² Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, ed. Gerald Bray, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 239.

sending them into hell, simply because they did not hear the gospel. Rather, He will judge them on the basis of the “light” they had. Therefore, these positions mentioned above represent a particular group of people.

Christian Exclusivism can be tagged as the conservative position, *inclusivism* as the Evangelical position, and *pluralism* as the liberal position. So, the primary purpose of this essay is not only to prove the validity of Christian *exclusivism* but also to defend this doctrine through countering the objections posited by the inclusivists and pluralists. First, we shall briefly explore the historical background of the term *exclusivism*. Second, we shall define what *exclusivism* means. Third, we shall provide biblical and confessional evidence to prove the truthfulness of exclusivism. Fourth, we will be examining certain objections raised against *exclusivism*. And finally, we shall demonstrate that *exclusivism* is a primary motivator for following the Great Commission.

1. Preliminary Remarks on Terminology

Sometimes it is asked who first introduced these terminologies such as *exclusivism*, *inclusivism* and *pluralism*. Harold A. Netland narrates that, “It is not clear who first introduced these terms, but in *God Has Many Names* (1980) John Hick distinguished these three basic approaches to other religions . . . The terms do, however, appear in Alan Race’s *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (1983) and they have been widely used since then.”³ Therefore, we can assert that since the 1980s, these terminologies have been used to define these three salvific approaches.

³ Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2001), 46.

Now we shall specifically discuss *exclusivism*. The term *exclusivism* is also known as *particularism* or *restrictivism*. Each author has his preference and reasoning for utilizing one of these terminologies, but they all correspond to the same truth. For instance, R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips prefer the term *particularism*. They argue that “Thus, our position is a version of Christian *particularism* that is sometimes called *exclusivism* or *restrictivism*. Since these labels tend to have misleading negative connotations—especially in suggesting a kind of unwarranted dogmatism—we will simply refer to our position as particularism.”⁴ Alister E. McGrath holds the same opinion and comments about *exclusivism*, “This term has now been generally abandoned, mainly because it is considered to be polemical. The approach is now generally described as ‘particularism,’ on the account of its affirmation of the particular and distinctive features of the Christian Faith.”⁵ Netland agrees with their suggestion as well, preferring the term *particularism*.⁶ Moreover, while discussing the historical background of the term *exclusivism*, he reveals, “It seems that the term *exclusivism* was introduced into the discussion not by adherents of the traditional perspective but rather by those who rejected this view and wished to cast it in a negative light. It is a pejorative term with unflattering connotations: exclusivists are typically branded as dogmatic, narrow-minded, intolerant, ignorant, arrogant and so on.”⁷ So both of these statements explicitly correspond to the fact that the term *particularism* is relatively less offensive than *exclusivism* or *restrictivism*, giving some

⁴ Geivett and Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, (Zondervan Academic, 2010). 214.

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction 3rd Edition*, 3 edition. (Oxford; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 546.

⁶ Netland, 46.

⁷ Netland, 46.

theologians reason to prefer *particularism*. On the other hand, men like Ronald H. Nash,⁸ D. A. Carson⁹ and Daniel Strange¹⁰ find no difficulty in using the term *exclusivism*. So, in this paper, we shall also use the term *exclusivism* despite the risk of offense because the author firmly believes that truth will always be offensive to those who reject it.

2. The Definition of Christian Exclusivism

Although earlier we briefly described *exclusivism*, it is also important to specify its proper definition. The reason it must be defined properly is that inclusivists often contend that “Christ is *ontologically* necessary for salvation, but that knowledge of Christ is not *epistemologically* necessary. People must respond in repentance and faith to whatever light they have, and should not, it is argued, be held responsible for the light they do not have.”¹¹ In other words, *inclusivism* underestimates the necessity of personal faith in Christ’s redemptive work. However, Christian *exclusivism* puts particular emphasis on both aspects. Ronald H. Nash defines *exclusivism* in the following words:

Christian exclusivism can be defined as the belief that (1) Jesus Christ is the *only* Savior, and (2) explicit faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation. This first claim denies that there are or can be other saviors, a fact that distinguishes it from pluralism. The second claim denies that people may be saved without conscious and explicit faith in Jesus Christ, which sets it apart from inclusivism. Christian exclusivists begin by believing that the tenets of one religion—in this case, Christianity—are true and that any religious beliefs that are logically incompatible with those tenets are false.¹²

⁸ Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 1994).

⁹ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, Revised ed. edition. (Zondervan Academic, 2002).

¹⁰ Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2002).

¹¹ Carson, 279.

¹² Nash, 11-12.

Apparently, these salvific approaches seem similar to each other because both are very *Christocentric*. However, if we carefully analyze both *inclusivism* and *exclusivism*, the fundamental difference will automatically emerge. Carson rightly points out the difference and states, “‘hard’ inclusivists put more emphasis on believing than on believing Christ.”¹³ This shows that though inclusivists affirm the *necessity* of faith they deny the *object* of faith, which is Christ Jesus. *Exclusivism* solely establishes the necessity of personal conscious faith in Jesus. Both the exclusivity of Christ and personal faith in Christ are hallmarks of *exclusivism*. Therefore, all those who put their faith in the redemptive work of Christ are not only redeemed but also regenerated both by the ministry of the Word (preaching) and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

3. Biblical Affirmations for Christian Exclusivism

Christian exclusivists firmly believe that their position is biblically warranted because there are numerous passages which explicitly teach it. One of the fundamental truths of the New Testament is that there is no salvation without believing in the person of Jesus Christ. So, in this section, we shall briefly discuss some of the passages that prove the validity of *exclusivism*.

First Affirmation: John 3:16-18, 36

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God . . . He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on Him.¹⁴

¹³ Carson, 279.

¹⁴ ESV.

These verses explicitly emphasize the fact that he who believes in the Son has everlasting life and he who does not believe is already condemned and shall not see life. W. Gary Crampton reiterates the same truth in the following words: “These verses could hardly be clearer. Those who believe in Christ have everlasting life, and those who do not believe in Him are condemned. Faith in Jesus Christ is a *sine qua non* of salvation. One cannot be saved without this faith.”¹⁵ The heart of these verses is the object of faith. By contrast, *inclusivism* “denies that Jesus must be the object of saving faith.”¹⁶ Geivett and Phillips also contend that Jesus Christ has to be the object of saving faith: they express their opinion while commenting on these verses:

Some inclusivists are strangely silent concerning this illuminating passage; others dismiss it as applying only to the evangelized—an interpretive distinction not found within the passage itself. Ironically, inclusivists must insist that in verse 18, believing in “the name” excludes Christological awareness, which would require dubious exegesis in the context of John 3. In any case, inclusivists must hold that *something* is the proper object of saving faith. Since these verses stress belief—and belief always has an object—what is the object of faith, if not Jesus?¹⁷

Second Affirmation: John 14:6

The second significant affirmation for Christian *exclusivism* also comes from the gospel of John. Here, the exclusivity of Christ is stamped from Christ’s own words, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Carson states that “This verse is important to the debate because it not only affirms that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, but it articulates an exclusion principle: ‘No one comes to the Father except through me.’”¹⁸ It is essential to mention here that this verse especially troubles the pluralists

¹⁵ W. Gary Crampton, “*Christian Exclusivism*,” accessed May 14, 2020, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/PDF/The%20Trinity%20Review%200196a%20ChristianExclusivism.pdf>

¹⁶ Carson cites John Sanders in his book *The Gagging of God*, 296.

¹⁷ Geivett and Phillips, 234.

¹⁸ Carson, 304.

because it dramatically smashes their salvific approach. It completely eliminates any possibility of any other way to salvation. In this single verse, Christ unequivocally states that He is the only means of salvation.

Moreover, Ronald Nash comments that “pluralists do not like the fourth gospel. Because it contains so much material that conflicts with their position, pluralists dismiss the authenticity of this gospel and the words it attributes to Jesus. Jesus, they contend, could never or would never have uttered the many “offensive” statements that appear in the fourth gospel. No one who believes such statements could possibly be a pluralist.”¹⁹ Carson mentions that the inclusivist, John Sanders, takes a different stance and contends, “He agrees that the text insists that all who are saved achieve salvation only because of the work of Christ. But he denies that anything is said or implied about epistemological recognition of that fact.”²⁰ Carson rightly responds to the inclusivists and affirms his commitment to Christian exclusivism in the following words:

This is the distinction I mentioned earlier, common among inclusivists, between ontological necessity and epistemological necessity. There is a certain mechanical logic in the argument that has a superficial appeal, but it is fatally flawed (see below, on Rom. 10:9-10). On the face of it, in a book that constantly presents faith in Jesus as the only solution to the curse and wrath under which we operate (e.g., John 1:12; 3:15, 16, 36), John 14:6 is of a piece with this Johannine demand for faith in Jesus, and can be sidestepped by the inclusivists and pluralists only with the greatest implausibility.²¹

Another significant weakness of the inclusivists’ interpretation is their complete ignorance of the context of the text, where the immediate context of this verse also stresses *epistemological necessity*. And this is evident from the very words of Christ, “*Let not your hearts be*

¹⁹ Nash, 17.

²⁰ Carson, 304.

²¹ Carson, 304.

troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:6).²² “*Believe also in me*” are the noteworthy words. Kevin DeYoung also comments in his article on *Clarifying Inclusivism and Exclusivism*:

Look at the immediate context. Jesus begins the chapter by telling the disciples “believe in me” (14:1). Then verse 7 talks about knowing the Father by knowing the Son. Verse 9 makes clear that whoever sees Jesus has seen the Father. Verses 12 and 13 repeat the exhortation to believe in Jesus. The point of the whole section is that if you know/see/believe in Jesus you know the Father.²³

Therefore, we can infer that the inclusivists’ argument merely for *ontological necessity* holds no water because the immediate context calls for *epistemological necessity*. So, both the verse and the immediate context affirm Christian *exclusivism* rather than *inclusivism*.

Third Affirmation: Acts 4:12

The doctrine of Christian *exclusivism* is not only portrayed in the gospel of John but it is also taught throughout the book of Acts. However, exclusivists mostly quote Acts 4:12 in this regard, “*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*”²⁴ This verse explicitly excludes any possibility that people can be saved without the name of Jesus. Gary Crampton comments, “Peter’s words, as recorded by Luke, are as straightforward and exclusivistic as those that we read in the Gospel of John. Christ is the only Savior.”²⁵ However, Pinnock (inclusivist) does not agree that this verse should be read in an exclusivist fashion but he contends, “Acts 4:12 makes a strong and

²² ESV.

²³ “Clarifying Inclusivism and Exclusivism,” accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/clarifying-inclusivism-and-exclusivism/>.

²⁴ ESV.

²⁵ W. Gary Crampton, “*Christian Exclusivism*,” accessed May 14, 2020, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/PDF/The%20Trinity%20Review%200196a%20ChristianExclusivism.pdf>

definitively exclusive claim about the messianic, holistic salvation Jesus has brought into the world. It is a salvation that is incomparable and without rival. It is available through no other name than Jesus the Incarnate Son of God. But the text does not exclude from eternal salvation the vast majority of people who have ever lived on the earth.”²⁶ John Sanders, the inclusivist who also asserts that this verse “does not say one has to know about that work [of Jesus Christ] in order to benefit from the work.”²⁷ Moreover, inclusivists contend that this text is silent about the precise fate of the unevangelized or of adherents to other religions. But, does this verse deny the exclusivity of Christ and offer any possibility of salvation for the sincere adherents of other religions? No, indeed, this verse explicitly demonstrates that *there is no other name given among men by which we must be saved*. One must not underestimate the emphasis here on Jesus’ name. These words speak about the exclusivity of Christ, and they invite people to avail themselves of this exclusive offer through putting faith in Jesus’ name. But David G. Peterson rightly remarks:

People in a relativistic, multi-faith society find such an exclusive claim very difficult to accept. Alternatives have been proposed to weaken its impact, including the notion that Jesus somehow benefits sincere adherents of other religions, even though they do not acknowledge him as Saviour and Lord. But such approaches are not consistent with the teaching of Acts 2–3, that it is actually necessary to call upon the name of Jesus with repentance and faith to benefit from the salvation he offers.²⁸

Simon Kistemaker rightly interprets this text and makes a significant point:

The word must [*dei*] reveals a divine necessity which God has established, according to His plan and decree, to save us [the elect] through the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, this word [*dei*] signifies that man is under moral obligation to respond to the call to believe in Jesus Christ and thus gain salvation. He has no recourse to salvation other than through the Son of God.²⁹

²⁶ Carson cites Clark Pinnock in his book on *The Gagging of God*, 304-305.

²⁷ Geivett and Phillips cite John E. Sanders in their article on Particularism, 233.

²⁸ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 193.

²⁹ W. Gary Crampton, *Christian Exclusivism*,
<http://www.trinityfoundation.org/PDF/The%20Trinity%20Review%200196a%20ChristianExclusivism.pdf>

This interpretation clearly shows that the word *must* should not be overlooked because it calls for a certain response. Geivett and Phillips also believe that “Peter does not appear to be referring to Jesus merely as the ontological ground of salvation—that is, as the sole *source* of atonement. Rather, he is indicating what must be acknowledged about Jesus before one can be saved.”³⁰ Therefore, we can infer that this text not only talks about *ontological* necessity but also calls for *epistemological* necessity, because this text cannot be interpreted in isolation from other numerous passages in the book of Acts calling for believing in Jesus. So the inclusivists’ understanding of this text is solely based on a superficial reading of the passage.

Fourth Affirmation: Romans 10:9-10

Another key text of the New Testament that supports *exclusivism* is Romans 10:9-10. It puts particular emphasis on the content of faith. The apostle Paul writes: “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*”³¹ Again, the inclusivist John Sanders argues that this passage does not talk about the fact that those who do not fulfil the requirements are lost. He states, “It is clear from Romans 10:9 that whoever confesses Jesus as Lord and believes in his heart that God raised him from the dead will be saved. It is not clear that whoever does not fulfil these conditions is lost. Paul simply does not specify how much a person has to know to be saved.”³² This interpretation is quite astonishing because Paul’s words are crystal clear in his emphasis of the fact that one cannot be saved without confessing (verbally) and believing (consciously and cognitively) in

³⁰ Geivett and Phillips, 232-233.

³¹ ESV.

³² Carson cites John Sanders in his book *The Gagging of God*, 312.

Jesus Christ. Geivett and Phillips rightly respond to inclusivists, saying, “To be saved, a specific confession has to be made, and a specific set of truths must be believed (10:9-10). Hearing the gospel is, therefore, a natural prerequisite for the satisfaction of this condition. Jews and Gentiles alike need to hear about and believe in Jesus (10:14).”³³

4. Confessional Affirmation of Christian Exclusivism

The exclusivity of Christ has also been affirmed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines. These relevant Reformed documents, including the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms and Westminster Confession of Faith, fully endorse the doctrine of Christian *exclusivism*. The WSC (Q. 21) says, “*The only Redeemer of God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ . . .*”³⁴ The WLC (Q. 60), stresses, “*They who, having never heard the gospel, know not Jesus Christ, and believe not in him, cannot be saved, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, or the laws of that religion which they profess; neither is there salvation in any other, but in Christ alone, who is the Savior only of his body the church.*”³⁵ And most importantly, the WCF (10.4) states:

Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to 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 to be detested.³⁶

³³ Geivett and Phillips, 235.

³⁴ “Bible Presbyterian Church Online: WSC Question 21,” accessed May 15, 2020, https://www.shortercatechism.com/resources/wsc/wsc_021.html.

³⁵ “Westminster Larger Catechism: Q60,” *Reformed Brotherhood*, August 1, 2019, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://reformedbrotherhood.com/westminster-larger-catechism-q60/>.

³⁶ “Westminster Confession of Faith - Chapter 10,” accessed May 15, 2020, http://www.covenantofgrace.com/westminster_chapter10.htm.

The language of both the WLC and WCF is very strong, and it leaves no room for any possibility to assert that people from other religions will also be saved without putting conscious faith in Jesus. Robert Letham also comments, “A strong balancing assertion comes in WCF 10.4, supported by WLC 60, that the nonelect, and those not professing the Christian religion cannot be saved.”³⁷ These confessional references explicitly support the exclusivists’ position. R. C. Sproul also comments in his exposition of WCF 10.4:

What this affirms is that no matter how devout and obedient people are to their religion, they cannot be saved apart from the Christian religion. Let’s go a step further: the more devout someone is in the pursuance of idolatry, the more exposed he becomes to the wrath of God. And, to assert and maintain that they may be saved through these other religions is very pernicious, and to be detested. How do we get to a degree of wickedness beyond pernicious? Not only are they pernicious, they are very pernicious. This view is not only pernicious but to be detested.³⁸

The Thirty-Nine Articles (18), also maintains the exclusivity of Christ in the following words:

They also are to be had accursed that 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 out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.³⁹

Moreover, we should also remember that at the time of Reformation the so-called *solas* of the Reformation were asserted. These *solas* such as *sola Scriptura*, *sola Christus*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia* and, *soli Deo gloria* also find their compatibility more with *exclusivism* than *inclusivism* or *pluralism*. Therefore, we can assert that both confessions and Reformation *solas* affirm *exclusivism*.

³⁷ Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 882.

³⁸ R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess Volume 2: A Layman’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, First Edition edition. (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 2006), 33-34.

³⁹ “Anglicans Online | The Thirty-Nine Articles,” accessed May 15, 2020, http://anglicansonline.org/basics/thirty-nine_articles.html.

5. Objections Against Christian Exclusivism

Although *exclusivism* has historically been the position of the majority of Christians, it still faces strong resistance both from inclusivists and pluralists. In this section, we shall briefly examine some of these of the significant objections and try to prove that *exclusivism* is the only biblical position.

First Objection: Intolerance

One of the most significant charges raised against *exclusivism* is intolerance. Both inclusivists and pluralists reject *exclusivism* contending that it is an intolerant salvific position. Netland states how pluralists sarcastically react against *exclusivism*: “In popular consciousness tolerance and pluralism are linked in the perception that particularism (the view that one religion distinctively true and thus normative for all people) is inherently intolerant of other faiths whereas pluralism, which holds that all religions are equally legitimate responses to the religious ultimate, is appropriately tolerant.”⁴⁰ Joseph Runzo also accuses *exclusivism* of being “neither tolerable nor any longer intellectually honest in the context of our contemporary knowledge of others’ faiths.”⁴¹ How should we respond to such severe charges of intolerance?

Response: This accusation of intolerance against *exclusivism* is baseless because keeping any particular view does not make someone intolerant. If this is the logic, then this same charge can be thrown back at pluralists because they also adhere to a different position than the exclusivists. It is an irrational charge against *exclusivism*. Norman L. Geisler gives quite interesting remarks: “The very concept of tolerance implies an actual disagreement. We don’t tolerate that with which

⁴⁰ Netland, 142.

⁴¹ Nash cites Joseph Runzo in *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* 92.

we agree—we already affirm it. Tolerance suggests that there are opposing views in the first place; the very concept presupposes a nonpluralistic (i.e., exclusivist) view of truth.”⁴²

Moreover, Geisler contends, “Being intolerant about truth does not make it false any more than being tolerant about error makes it true. Studying under a dogmatic mathematician does not mean 7×3 isn’t 21, and studying under a broadminded mathematician does not mean $8 + 6$ is 15.”⁴³ Netland also makes an interesting distinction between three types of *toleration*:

legal, social and intellectual:

Legal toleration commits us always to protect people’s political rights . . . and social toleration advocates charity toward people who think and believe differently from the way we do; but this does not necessarily commit us to intellectual toleration if that means we should never conclude that a person holds to false ideas and, consequently, try to convince them that they are wrong and should change their views. The current cultural climate often fails to distinguish legal and social toleration from intellectual toleration.⁴⁴

All these responses clearly prove the fact that the charge of intolerance is completely baseless and logically fallacious. Therefore, we can conclude with the following words of Nash: “the moral attack on exclusivism appears shallow, unsound, hypocritical, and peevish and should be turned back upon the people who raise it. To assault people in such a personal way without justification is itself a moral failing; it is certainly more serious than wrongly accusing someone of defending a weak argument.”⁴⁵

⁴² Norman L. Geisler, 1288.

⁴³ Norman L. Geisler, 1288.

⁴⁴ Daniel B. Clendenin cites Netland in “The Only Way: Answering the Argument That All Religions Are More or Less True,” *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1998), 40.

⁴⁵ Nash, 95.

Second Objection: Unfairness

Another moral charge made against *exclusivism* is unfairness. The pluralists often contend that it is unfair to deny salvation to those who sincerely follow other religions.

Response: This objection is based upon the assumption that salvation is rewarded to those who make some sort of efforts at it. But, the Bible does not support such a hypothesis; instead, it teaches that salvation is solely a gift from God and our human efforts contribute nothing to it (Eph 2:8-9). In fact, this objection is posited not against the exclusivists but also against God and His freedom. James N. Anderson rightly responds:

The unfairness objection also reflects flawed assumptions about who gets to define salvation. Surely, it is up to our Creator—not us—to diagnose our problem and prescribe a remedy for it. The pluralist treats salvation as if it were like a hair treatment: you should be able to choose your color, your style, and so on, all according to your own preferences. Whatever works for you. But what if salvation is more like a medical treatment for a fatal disease? If there is only one medication that can actually cure the illness, it would be extremely foolish to advocate “medical pluralism”—a have-it-your-way approach to treatment—and it would be bizarre to accuse your doctor of unfairness for prescribing the only remedy that works.⁴⁶

This logical response from James Anderson helps us to contend that the doctor cannot be blamed for the treatment he offers. As a patient, one must follow the prescription he gives. However, the doctor can only be accused of being unfair if he knows the remedy but deliberately avoids prescribing it. Therefore, both inclusivists and pluralists should stop objecting to *unfairness* and be thankful to God for the medication He has prescribed in Jesus Christ.

Third Objection: Old Testament Believers Saved Without Conscious Faith in Jesus

The inclusivists often argue that, if explicit and conscious faith in Jesus is the prerequisite for salvation then why were OT believers saved without having conscious faith in Jesus Christ?

⁴⁶ “Is There Only One Way of Salvation?,” *Tabletalk*, last modified August 1, 2017, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2017/08/is-there-only-one-way-of-salvation/>.

John Sanders argues, “If knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation then how do we explain the salvation of the Old Testament believers, whose knowledge was quite limited concerning the Messiah, but, who yet were justified by faith in God’s Word?”⁴⁷ Clark Pinnock also believes that “a person who is informationally pre-messianic, whether living in ancient or modern times, is in exactly the same spiritual situation.”⁴⁸ This is often considered as the most persuasive argument. How should we handle this objection?

Response: If we carefully examine this argument, it shows that it is also based upon misinformation of the inclusivists. Several Old Testament passages contain prophecies concerning the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ. How could Moses, David, Isaiah and Micah have penned these prophecies without having belief in the coming Messiah? It is significant to mention here, through this argument, that the inclusivists’ main goal is to prove that if the Old Testament believers were saved without having explicit faith in Jesus, in the same manner many of the unevangelised will also be saved without having explicit faith in Jesus.

Daniel Strange rightly responds:

Firstly, the analogy that Pinnock draws between the salvation of Old Testament believers and the unevangelised is invalid. Old Testament believers confessed Christ as Christ was revealed to them in their place in the redemptive-historical index, and this cannot be compared to Pinnock’s idea of a cognitive or ethical ‘faith principle.’ Secondly, and following on from this, there is no biblical evidence to suggest that anyone has been saved apart from God’s special revelation.⁴⁹

Robert L. Reymond in his article on *The Very Pernicious and Detestable Doctrine of*

Inclusivism, also asserts:

⁴⁷ Nash cites Sanders, 127.

⁴⁸ Nash cites Clark Pinnock, 127.

⁴⁹ Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 197.

It is true that the elect Jews of the Old Testament would not have known myriad details about the Christ of the New Testament, such as the name of his mother and step-father or even his human name, [but] they did understand that the Messiah who was to come would die in their stead as their substitute and that they had to place their trust in his anticipated doing and dying for them for their salvation.⁵⁰

Nash makes another significant point, “The Old Testament sacrificial system foreshadowed the one, final sacrifice offered up by Jesus Christ (Heb. 9–10). The New Testament reports that the Old Testament saints looked forward to a mediator who would die (John 5:46; 8:56; 1 Peter 1:10–12) and how the gospel was preached to Abraham (Gal. 3:6).”⁵¹ Norman Geisler handles the issue in a philosophical manner:

There is a difference between what is *absolutely* necessary and what is *normatively* necessary. It does not appear from Scripture to be absolutely necessary for God to require all people in all times to have explicit belief in the death and resurrection of Christ for salvation. Nonetheless, there is no reason God cannot have decreed that such faith is normatively necessary after Christ came and was proclaimed to the world. Paul implies exactly this: “[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). What was implicit in the Old Testament became explicit in the New Testament: Jesus of Nazareth, born of the Virgin Mary, was the long anticipated Passover Lamb (cf. John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7). When Old Testament typology (implicit) became New Testament reality (explicit)—when the One prophesied became present—God apparently required that everyone must now “believe in the Lord Jesus” in order to “be saved” (Acts 16:31). Paul confirmed, “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:21).⁵²

These statements explicitly reiterate that OT believers never lived without the hope of coming Messiah, and their sacrificial system also pointed toward the coming Messiah. Therefore, the inclusivists’ argument fails to maintain its connection between the OT believers and unevangelised world.

⁵⁰ “The Trinity Foundation - The ‘Very Pernicious and Detestable’ Doctrine of Inclusivism,” accessed May 19, 2020, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=107>.

⁵¹ Nash, 127.

⁵² Geisler, 1282.

Fourth Objection: Holy Pagans

Inclusivists continue arguing that the Old Testament “holy pagans” like Melchizedek, Jethro, Job, Naaman, and, from the New Testament, the Magi and Cornelius also got saved despite their not belonging to the covenant community.⁵³ Nash mentions, “The person in this list who receives the most attention is Melchizedek.”⁵⁴ He notes that Pinnock believes, “Abram’s meeting with Melchizedek in Genesis 14 ‘makes the point that religious experience may be valid outside Judaism and Christianity.’”⁵⁵

Response: The inclusivists’ argument of “holy pagans” cannot be affirmed biblically, because a careful evaluation of these characters and their religious experiences can lead us to affirm the exclusivists’ position. Robert Reymond’s evaluation explicitly exposes that these texts do not support the inclusivists’ position:

A careful reading of the Biblical accounts regarding these men will demonstrate that they were hardly “holy pagans” . . . King Melchizedek was both a priest of “the most high God, owner of Heaven and Earth,” whom Abraham identifies as Yahweh (Genesis 14:22), and the Old Testament type of the New Testament Messiah’s kingly priesthood (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 7-10). He was certainly a worshiper of the one living and true God, and he doubtless trusted in God’s saving provision for him. Job too was a worshiper of Yahweh (Job 1:21) . . . Jethro, . . . through his relationship to Moses was brought to faith in Yahweh (Exodus 18:8-12), as was Naaman as well (2 Kings 5:15-18). . . Magi were probably pagan astrologers before their observance in the East of Messiah’s special star, from that point on they gave themselves to the task of finding the “king of the Jews” and worshipping him (Matthew 2:2, 10-12). We may be sure that the Holy Spirit instructed and directed all these people to place their faith in the future atoning work of the Messiah in their behalf.⁵⁶

⁵³ Carson, 298.

⁵⁴ Nash, 129.

⁵⁵ Nash, 132.

⁵⁶ “The Trinity Foundation - The ‘Very Pernicious and Detestable’ Doctrine of Inclusivism,” accessed May 19, 2020, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=107>.

These narratives from the Old Testament explicitly prove the fact that, although these figures were outside the covenant community, they ended up believing in the God of Israel. Moreover, Cornelius is a striking feature for inclusivists, and they contend that he was already saved before he believed in Jesus. Pinnock describes Cornelius as “the pagan saint *par excellence* of the New Testament, a believer in God before he became a Christian.”⁵⁷ Robert Reymond thinks the opposite and responds, “Cornelius is representative, then, not of people who can and are saved apart from faith in Christ (there is none!), but of the unsaved elect . . . the Cornelius incident teaches us, God will save through the mission enterprise by getting the good news of the Gospel to them just as he arranged for Peter to take the Gospel to Cornelius.”⁵⁸ Geivett and Phillips also contend that the Cornelius’ case does not support the inclusivist position:

The point of the entire episode was to show to everyone the ongoing and far reaching mission mandate of God (Acts 1:8). Peter and the church needed to learn that salvation was also for the Gentiles. (2) Cornelius's salvation was regarded as still future: "you will be saved" (11:14). (3) That salvation was tied to special revelation: This "God-fearer" received a vision with instructions to send for Peter and await his message (10:1-6, 22, 33; 11:14). (4) The result of Cornelius's action was not more information only, but redemption as well (11:15). (5) The focus of Cornelius's new faith was explicitly Christological (10:43, 48; 11:17).⁵⁹

We have thoroughly evaluated that the inclusivist case of Holy Pagans does not support their position; ironically, it affirms the position of exclusivity. These passages give no clue that the Bible endorses saintliness in other religions. These Gentile believers were not saved without encountering the God of Israel. Even New Testament figures like Magi and Cornelius had to

⁵⁷ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality Of Jesus Christ In A World Of Religions* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 1992), 165.

⁵⁸ “The Trinity Foundation - The ‘Very Pernicious and Detestable’ Doctrine of Inclusivism,” accessed May 19, 2020, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=107>.

⁵⁹ Geivett and Phillips, 242-243.

believe in Jesus Christ. Therefore, we can infer that these gentile believers do not affirm the inclusivist position but rather maintain the fact that God's salvation plan was not confined to any particular nation but included all the nations, but only through explicit and conscious faith in God (Yahweh).

Fifth Objection: God's Universal Salvific Will

The inclusivist's list of objections goes on, and they raise another point, contending that the Bible talks about the universal salvific will of God. If people are saved only by putting their explicit and conscious faith in Jesus, then many will be damned without having the opportunity to hear the gospel. So, the inclusivists make a point that this conflicts with the universal salvific will of God. They build their case on two New Testament passages: 2 Peter 3:9 and 1 Timothy 2:3-4. Geivett and Phillips also describe that "much inclusivist optimism regarding the possibility of salvation apart from knowledge of Jesus Christ is based on biblical references to God's universal salvific will."⁶⁰

Response: As far 2 Peter 3:9 is concerned, this does not endorse the inclusivist position but again, rather ironically, teaches about *exclusivism*. Geivett and Phillips assert:

The irony is that these verses, when studied in their contexts, support particularism more than they do inclusivism. (1) Second Peter 3:1-2 anchors the discussion of salvation in 3:9 solidly within special revelation. (2) This same passage offers an illustration of fewness, not wideness, in salvation (3:6). (3) One should consult the book of Acts for Peter's own account of the relation between 'repentance' and belief in the name of Jesus (e.g., Acts 2:38).⁶¹

D. A. Carson cites Ramesh P. Richard in *The Gagging of God*, who draws two conclusions from this verse: "First, instead of a universal salvific will, Peter submits a universal salvific welcome

⁶⁰ Geivett and Phillips, 239.

⁶¹ Geivett and Phillips, 239.

to anyone from any nation. Second, there is also a particularity axiom—the reception of forgiveness for everyone is through Jesus’ name and belief in Him.”⁶² Geivett and Phillips also comment on 1 Timothy 2:4 in the following words:

The passage identifies the target of God’s desire with two infinitives—for all “to be saved,” and for all “to come to knowledge of the truth.” This implies that God’s universal salvific will is for salvation to come through knowledge of “the man Christ Jesus” (v.5), not apart from knowledge of him. Furthermore, verses 5-6 observe that there is one God and one mediator, “who gave himself a ransom for all.” Finally, assuming that God’s will is coextensive with his salvific plan, inclusivists would, it seems, be compelled to argue that 1 Timothy 2:4 teaches universal salvation (that is, universalism) and not merely universal access to salvation. As has been observed, inclusivists confuse God’s wider heart with wider hope.⁶³

Howard Marshall also comments on 1 Timothy 2:4 as:

To avoid all misconceptions it should be made clear at the outset that the fact that God wishes or wills that all people should be saved does not necessarily imply that all will respond to the gospel and be saved. *We must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what he actually does will to happen, and both of these things can be spoken of as God’s will* (his emphasis).⁶⁴

John Piper uses a more theological tone to express the same truth:

Affirming the will of God to save *all*, while also affirming the unconditional election of *some*, implies that there are at least "two wills" in God, or two ways of willing. It implies that God decrees one state of affairs while also willing and teaching that a different state of affairs should come to pass. This distinction in the way God wills has been expressed in various ways throughout the centuries. It is not a new contrivance. For example, theologians have spoken of sovereign will and moral will, efficient will and permissive will, secret will and revealed will, will of decree and will of command, decretive will and preceptive will, *voluntas signi* (will of sign) and *voluntas beneplaciti* (will of good pleasure), etc.⁶⁵

⁶² Carson, 307.

⁶³ Geivett and Phillips, 239.

⁶⁴ “Are There Two Wills in God?,” *Desiring God*, last modified January 1, 1995, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/are-there-two-wills-in-god>.

⁶⁵ “Are There Two Wills in God?,” *Desiring God*, last modified January 1, 1995, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/are-there-two-wills-in-god>.

We have noticed that both these passages talk about God's desire to save all, but this does not imply that he will save all. He will save only those who put their faith in Jesus. We can understand the same truth through the analogy of a doctor and patient. A good doctor never wishes his patient to go through painful treatments like surgery or chemotherapy. But if it is indispensable for a patient to go through it, the doctor would neither be dominated by his wish nor restrict himself from prescribing the necessary treatment. God the Father never wished the Son to die on the cross, but this was the only remedy He had to prescribe to save fallen humanity. Therefore, we can conclude that God does not wish people to go to hell, but if they choose to go to hell, God cannot be blamed for it. God does desire to save all, but he saves only those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Sixth Objection: Exclusivism Itself Approves Inclusivism

Inclusivists contend that, although *exclusivism* denies that people could be saved without explicit and conscious faith in Jesus, when it comes to the matter of babies who die in infancy and mental incompetents, exclusivists waive the condition of explicit faith in Jesus. Nash citing Sanders describes, "If babies who die in infancy and mental incompetents will be in heaven without ever coming to explicit faith in Christ, then to be consistent they should grant the same privilege to 'innocent' people outside the bounds of Christianity who also die without ever hearing the gospel."⁶⁶ Nash admits that "it may prove to be the inclusivists' most powerful argument."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Nash cites John Sanders, 135.

⁶⁷ Nash, 135.

Response: Before examining this objection, the author asserts that this argument is merely an emotional appeal rather than a persuasive charge against *exclusivism*. First of all, it is significant to mention that most evangelicals have also affirmed the exclusivist stance at the Lausanne Covenant. Carson describes that “most of the evangelicals who signed the Lausanne Covenant would not argue that children who die in infancy and the mentally incapacitated are lost. Many of them would assert the opposite; some of them would say the Scriptures do not speak to that point clearly, but that they are willing to trust what we do know of the goodness and love of God.”⁶⁸ This shows that most evangelicals have been holding an optimistic view concerning the destiny of infants who die and of mental incompetents. However, Reformed churches hold a slightly different and more specific position on the issue. It must be noted that the Reformed exclusivists do not affirm that all infants who die and mental incompetents necessarily be saved; rather they teach specifically that *only the elect children will be saved*, and they draw this conclusion from WCF 10.3, which urges: “*Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.*” Whether or not all infant dying in infancy and all incapacitated persons are elect indeed is a matter for God alone. The Westminster Divines drew their conclusion from David’s words uttered at the death of his son who died in infancy, “*But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me*” (2 Samuel 12:23).⁶⁹ R. C.

Sproul comments:

The children of believers are numbered among the elect and are saved. Babies who die in infancy don’t go to heaven simply because they die in infancy. People assume that the

⁶⁸ Carson, 286.

⁶⁹ ESV.

reason they go to heaven is that they are innocent, but every baby is conceived in a state of original sin, is alienated from God, and is by nature a child of wrath. Nonetheless, we can be confident that the children of believers who die in infancy are elect. Our reason for this belief is the confidence that King David exhibited at the death of his baby (2 Sam. 12:23).⁷⁰

This statement explicitly demonstrates the fact that the only thing that distinguishes them from other children of the world is their spiritual status as children of believers. In other words, they enjoy the covenant privileges. This is why God does not see them merely as children but as the children of believers elected from eternity. And this gives us explicit hope that if believers' children who die in infancy will be saved. Again, we can make this assessment that the inclusivists' charge against exclusivists holds no evidence to connect infants who die in infancy and the unevangelized.

The Great Commission and Exclusivism Go Hand in Hand

Throughout this essay we presented numerous scriptural and confessional references to prove the validity of Christian *exclusivism*. But at the conclusion of this essay, we shall present a final argument that the Great Commission also affirms *exclusivism*. They are very much intertwined. The church always fulfilled the former because it always adhered to the later. From the dawn of Christianity, the church has been actively involved in missionary endeavors. These missionary endeavors were always made to proclaim and defend the uniqueness of Christ. Harold Netland states:

The New Testament writings emerged, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in contexts of mission and witness, as the early Christians moved about the Mediterranean world, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with all who would listen . . . From its inception Christianity has been a missionary religion, so that the church moved out from Jerusalem to Antioch, Rome and Alexandria within a matter of decades, establishing itself in north

⁷⁰ R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess Volume 2: A Layman's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, First Edition edition. (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 2006), 26.

Africa and India by the second century, as well as in what are now Spain, France and Britain by the fourth century.⁷¹

The early church's commitment and zeal for obedience to the Great Commission was very much tied to her firm belief in the exclusivity of Christ. Despite the hostile context, their love for Jesus and an unwavering enthusiasm for the proclamation of the gospel did not come to an end; they were even martyred for this great cause. Netland rightly points out:

One simply cannot understand the remarkable Protestant missionary effort of the nineteenth century, including the work of missionary pioneers such as William Carey, Adoniram Judson, David Livingstone and Hudson Taylor, without appreciating the premise underlying their efforts: salvation is to be found only in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and those who die without the saving gospel of Christ face an eternity apart from God.⁷²

The whole point of this discussion is to urge the fact that the church launched its missionary endeavors because it always adhered to the exclusivity of Christ, and it firmly believed that people are lost without hearing the gospel. Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, once made a remarkable speech to challenge the Student Volunteer Movement in Detroit in 1894: "There is a great Niagara of souls passing into the dark in China. Every day, every week, every month they are passing away! A million a month in China they are dying without God."⁷³ These great words of Hudson Taylor categorically affirm Christian exclusivism. Therefore, we can conclude that only the exclusivist view has been the real motivator for mission and evangelism throughout the centuries. Other salvific approaches such as *inclusivism* and *pluralism* cannot be affirmed because they inwardly (inclusivist) and outwardly (pluralist) discourage the mission and endorse the validity of other religions.

⁷¹ Netland, 323-324.

⁷² Netland, 27.

⁷³ Netland, 27.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have investigated the veracity of Christian *exclusivism*. We demonstrated that *exclusivism* has been the church's predominant attitude throughout its history.⁷⁴ We noticed that numerous biblical passages explicitly teach *exclusivism*. Moreover, it was argued that the doctrine of Christian *exclusivism* has also been affirmed in Reformation confessions. We also examined some of the significant objections launched against the doctrine, and we noted that the counter arguments given in support of *exclusivism* hold more water than the charges raised by the inclusivists and pluralists. The conclusion therefore, is that Christian *exclusivism* finds more scriptural and confessional support than *inclusivism* and *pluralism*.

⁷⁴ Ambrose Mong, *Dialogue Derailed: Joseph Ratzinger's War against Pluralist Theology* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), xxvi.