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MINISTRIES

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A Nobody Trying to Tell Everybody About Somebody,

Pastor Mark Driscoll

“What are the major Christian answers to the question do people who have never heard about Jesus go to hell?”

There is no simple, single, consensus-inducing answer to this question within Christianity. Everyone would make a good argument for the positions they hold, and most, if not all, would be able to find Scripture to help support their position. Some of the more direct answers come in one of two forms. The first is, “No, because God is a God of love, and since he desires that all men be saved, he will not condemn those who never heard about Jesus to go to hell.” This answer focuses upon the love of God for all people and holds out the hope that this love is salvific, and not just well intentioned. The second answer is, “Yes, because God is a God of justice He will not let the sinful deeds and latent wickedness of man go unpunished.” This punishment will be based on the degree of clarity to His revealed will they have received.” The “degree of clarity to His revealed will” speaks to the varying ways in which all men can know something of God and what He wants from His creation – his general will, partially revealed will (Old Testament) and fully revealed will (General, plus Old Testament, plus New Testament, with Jesus and His work at the center). Proponents of this answer would hold out that it is because God is gracious and merciful that He has also provided a means of salvation through the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for sin upon his own shoulders. From these answers, we can label the two ends of the spectrum as *inclusivism* – people will be saved regardless of their response to the gospel – and *exclusivism* – a favorable response to the gospel is necessary for salvation.

Seeing through this issue with careful insight are two editors of a recent book entitled, *Faith Comes by Hearing*, edited by Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson.¹ This book is written to address the topic of *inclusivism* in particular, but the major question they seek to answer is: “Is there any basis for hope that those who do not hear of Christ in this life will be saved?”² In Morgan’s chapter, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, he offers a critique of the prevailing three-fold taxonomy of answers to this question and provides a more nuanced nine-fold spectrum in its stead. What follows is largely a distillation of this spectrum with other pertinent responses and quotes where needed.

The taxonomy that has largely dominated the discussion on this issue in recent history is this³:

Exclusivism: Jesus is the only Savior of the world, and one must believe God’s special revelation culminating in the gospel of Christ to be saved.

Inclusivism: Jesus is the only Savior of the world, but one does not have to believe the gospel to be saved.

¹ Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Faith Comes by Hearing* (Downer Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

² Morgan, “Inclusivism and Exclusivism”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 26.

³ Morgan, “Inclusivism and Exclusivism”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 18.

Pluralism: All paths are valid and lead to God.

This taxonomy, though accurate, is not exactly helpful. A major reason for this is that it provides “perspectives on two separate questions: the salvation of the unevangelized and world religions,” which, although they are related, are nevertheless distinct.⁴ To help clear the way for more fruitful engagement on this issue, Morgan distinguishes nine different points along the spectrum of the inclusivism/exclusivism debate. What follows is a summary of these nine categories answering the question, “Is there any basis for hope that those who do not hear of Christ in this life will be saved?”⁵

1. Church exclusivism

This view holds that, “outside the church there is no salvation.”⁶ Originally formulated by the church father and bishop of Carthage Cyprian (ca. 200-258) with a reference to heretics and those who rejected the church’s teaching, it later was broadened to include other groups more generally outside the auspices of the Catholic Church, including Jews and pagans. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council declared, “There is indeed one universal Church of the faithful outside which no one at all is saved.”⁷ This is the view that has dominated the Roman Catholic church up until the time of the Second Vatican Council, and would be hard to find many evangelical traditions subscribing to this position.

2. Gospel exclusivism

This position answers the question, “No, they must hear the gospel and trust Christ to be saved.”⁸ The gospel is the only means by which anyone is saved. John Piper is one representative of this view. In his book, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, Piper writes:

...the message throughout [Scripture] is that with the coming of Christ a major change has occurred in redemptive history. Saving faith was once focused on the mercy of God known in his redemptive acts among the people of Israel, and in the system of animal sacrifices and in the prophecies of coming redemption...

But now the focus of faith has narrowed down to one Man, Jesus Christ, the fulfillment and guarantee of all redemption and all sacrifices and all prophecies. It is to his honor now that henceforth all saving faith shall be directed to him.⁹

While general revelation may be part of the process, it is ultimately used to lead into and prepare people for the hearing and responding to the gospel message.

⁴ Christopher W. Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 22.

⁵ Christopher W. Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 26-39.

⁶ Christopher W. Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 27.

⁷ Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* p. 36, quoted in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, Eds., *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 27.

⁸ Christopher W. Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 27.

⁹ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), p. 163.

What follows is a variation on this, but for now it will be helpful to clarify that what is implicit in this view is that one comes to saving faith in the believing of the gospel as communicated through believers and their proclamation of the gospel.

3. Special revelation exclusivism

This view is different from Gospel exclusivism in that the means of communication can be different than the ordinary means of interpersonal communication. In this understanding, God can choose “to send them special revelation in an extraordinary way – by a direct revelation from the Lord through a dream, vision, miracle, or angelic message.”¹⁰ This position does not downplay the “ordinary” means of evangelism and missions to bring people to salvation, but it purposely allows for “extraordinary” means to accomplish this as well. William Shedd was a proponent of this view, who cited several Reformed confessional statements, such as the Second Helvetic Confession (1556)¹¹ and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646).¹² A more recent proponent, Timothy George, also looks to the Second London Confession (1689), a Baptist confession very similar to the Westminster Confession of Faith on this point, for support on the issue of “elect infants and ‘other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.’”¹³ The agreement of this position with the previous is that it is still the gospel message, which is communicated and received as necessary for salvation; the difference is in the means and method of that communication.

4. Agnosticism

Though this phrase is often used in questions pertaining to the existence of God, its basic meaning, and the way it is used here, is that no one can know for certain the answer. Two prominent theologians who hold this view are J.I. Packer and Millard Erickson. With some subtle differences, proponents of this position “often maintain that though a theoretical possibility exists that those who have never heard the gospel could respond to God via general revelation, there is little biblical warrant to expect that people actually do.”¹⁴ Packer writes

We may safely say (i) if any god pagan reached the point of throwing himself on his Maker’s mercy for pardon, it was grace that brought him here, (ii) God will surely save anyone he brings thus far (cf. Acts 10:34f; Rom 10:12f); (iii) anyone thus saved

¹⁰ Christopher W. Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 28.

¹¹ “We recognize that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry, for that is in his power (1.7). Quoted in Christopher W. Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 29.

¹² “God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at his pleasure,” (5.3), Christopher W. Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 29.

¹³ Timothy George in “Forum Discussion on Inclusivism,” in *Who Will Be Saved? Defending the Biblical Understanding of God, Salvation, and Evangelism*, ed. Paul R. House and Gregory A. Thornburry (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 200), pp. 145-48.

¹⁴ Christopher W. Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, p. 31.

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.*¹⁵

With this in mind, it is clear that the normal means of salvation in the preaching of the cross are preferred and even expected, but one cannot rule out the exceptional means of the salvation of some simply because we cannot know for certain. The question is not so much “Can they be saved this way?” but “Will they be saved this way?” to which the agnostic answers, “Its possible, but not probable.” Though some would be more optimistic in this camp, such as John Stott¹⁶, it is acknowledged that Scriptural warrant is not explicit, and that the desire for salvation of those outside of the gospel message is little more than a hope.

5. General revelation inclusivism

This view answers, “Yes, people can respond favorably to God through sufficient knowledge of him in general revelation.” One proponent of this view clarifies his position by distinguishing between Jesus’ saving work as ontologically necessary, but not epistemologically necessary; that is to say, “inclusivists affirm the particularity and finality of salvation only in Christ but deny that the knowledge of his work is necessary for salvation...people can receive the gift of salvation without knowing the giver or the precise nature of the gift.”¹⁷ Some delineate that even though they believe non-Christians can be saved through means of general revelation, there is a distinction between other religions, namely that “other religions should be seen as God’s instrument in their salvation.”¹⁸

6. World religions inclusivism

This is a subtle difference from general revelation inclusivism in that it adds the element of other religions as viable for salvation “since their religion contains truth from general revelation and possibly remnants of special revelation.”¹⁹ Within this position is the popular form called “Anonymous Christianity”, wherein a man is judged by what he has embraced in his heart, regardless of religious and theoretical commitments. Karl Rahner, a Roman Catholic theologian and proponent of this view typifies this position:

¹⁵ J.I. Packer, *God’s Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 210.

¹⁶ “I believe the most Christian stance is to remain agnostic on this question...The fact that God, alongside the most solemn warnings and about our responsibility to respond to the gospel, has not revealed how he will deal with those who have never heard it...[H]owever, I am imbued with hope. I have never been able to conjure up (as some Evangelical missionaries have) the appalling vision of the millions who are not only perishing but will inevitably perish. On the other hand...I am not and cannot be a Universalist. Between these extremes I cherish the hope that the majority of the human race will be saved,” David L. Edwards and John R. Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 327.

¹⁷ John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), pp. 215-16.

¹⁸ Christopher Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 33. Terrance Tiessen is included in this variation.

¹⁹ Christopher W. Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms”, in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, p. 34.

Therefore no matter what a man states in his conceptual, theoretical and religious reflection, anyone who does not say in his heart, 'there is no God'...but testifies to him by the radical acceptance of his being, is a believer...And anyone who has let himself be taken hold of by this grace can be called with every right an 'anonymous Christian.'²⁰

Another formulation of this view is to say, as Hans Kung has, that there is an "ordinary" way of salvation through various world religions and an "extraordinary" way through the means within Christianity.²¹

7. Postmortem evangelism

The idea of postmortem evangelism is that because God desires that all men be saved and not eternally damned, there will be an opportunity for non-Christians to receive forgiveness after death. This view though admirable requires some theological gymnastics to be considered to be viable. One proponent, J.P. Lange, argues, "Holy Scripture nowhere teaches the eternal damnation of those who died as heathens or non-Christians; it rather intimates in many passages that forgiveness may be possible beyond the grave, *and refers the final decision not to death, but to the day of Christ.*"²²

8. Universalism

This is the classic view of universalism, wherein the belief is that "everyone will ultimately be saved."²³ Proponents of this view include John A.T. Robinson, Jan Bonda and Madeleine L'Engle, the later of whom writes:

No matter how many eons it takes, he will not rest until all of creation, including Satan, is reconciled to him, until there is no creature who cannot return his look of love with a joyful response of love...I cannot believe that God wants punishment to go on interminably any more than does a loving parent. The entire purpose of loving punishment is to teach, and it lasts only as long as is needed for the lesson. And the lesson is always love.²⁴

9. Pluralism

This last category is the belief that all religions are equally valid, so there is nothing special or unique about Christianity, salvation or the gospel. The difference between this view and universalism is simply the matter of Christianity's place and role. In pluralism, Christianity has no privileged place by which to offer salvation. Their answer to the question is "Yes, those who have never heard may experience 'salvation' *as they understand it* because each embraces their version of the

²⁰ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Karl and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1969), 6:395.

²¹ Christopher W. Morgan, "Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms", in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, p.34.

²² John Peter Lange, *First Peter* (New York: Scribner, 1868), p. 75, quoted in Morgan and Peterson, eds., *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 35 (Emphasis mine).

²³ Christopher W. Morgan, "Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms", in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, p.35.

²⁴ Madeleine L'Engle, *The Irrational Season* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1977), p. 97.

real...:"²⁵ Probably the most notable proponent of this view is John Hick. He explains pluralism this way:

The great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions or, and correspondingly different responses to the Real [the religious ultimate] from within the major variant ways of being human...These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative Soteriological "spaces" within which, or "ways" along which, men and women find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment.²⁶

There is no simple answer to the question posed if you were to survey various Christian responses. The amazing thing to keep in mind is that within the framework of the story of the gospel, it is not so much as shocking that God sends people to hell who haven't heard, but that he would allow any sinners to escape it.

²⁵ Christopher W. Morgan, "Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms", in *Faith Comes by Hearing*, p. 36.

²⁶ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 240.