

John Sanders, "Those Who Have Never Heard: A Survey of the Major Positions," in *Salvation in Christ: Comparative Christian Views*, ed. Roger R. Keller and Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), 299–325.

Those Who Have Never Heard: A Survey of the Major Positions

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Porphyry, a third-century philosopher and critic of Christianity, asked: "If Christ declares Himself to be the Way of salvation, the Grace and the Truth, and affirms that in Him alone, and only to souls believing in Him, is the way of return to God, what has become of men who lived in the many centuries before Christ came? . . . What, then, has become of such an innumerable multitude of souls, who were in no wise blameworthy, seeing that He in whom alone saving faith can be exercised had not yet favoured men with His advent?"^[1] The force of his question was brought home to me personally when Lexi, our daughter whom we adopted from India as an older child, asked me whether her birth mother could be saved.^[2]

The issue involves a large number of people since a huge part of the human race has died never hearing the good news of Jesus. It is estimated that in the year AD 100 there were 181 million people, of whom one million were Christians. It is also believed there were 60,000 unreached groups at that time. By AD 1000 there were 270 million people, 50 million of whom were Christians, with 50,000 unreached groups. In 1989 there were 5.2 billion people with 1.7 billion Christians and 12,000 unreached groups.^[3] In addition we could think of all those who lived prior to the incarnation who never heard of Israel and God's covenant with them.

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have provided an array of responses to this important issue. The task of this paper is to survey the major views that have been espoused. Before doing this, however, some clarifications are in order. First, we need to distinguish between religious pluralism and the destiny of the unevangelized. Religious pluralism addresses the issues surrounding the

relationship between Christianity and the other religions. Are other religions vehicles for salvation? Is evangelism appropriate? Can any one religion claim priority over the others? There are three general views on the topic. (1) Unitive pluralism, which declares all the major religions to be “salvific,” or appropriate responses to ultimate reality and no one religion can claim priority over the others. This is the view of John Hick and Paul Knitter.^[4] (2) Exclusivism, according to which “salvation” or a proper relation to ultimate reality is possible in only one religion. However, other religions may contain some truths. Hendrik Kraemer was the modern champion for Christian exclusivism and it has become the leading position among conservative evangelicals.^[5] (3) Inclusivism holds that adherents of other religions, who seek what is good and true, find the fulfillment of their quest in the religion to which the inclusivist belongs. Christian inclusivists maintain that other religions find the fulfillment of what they seek in Jesus. Some Christian inclusivists say that God normally uses the other religions to save people while others affirm that God works through aspects of the other religions but deny that the religions in themselves save. This is the position of Roman Catholicism, highlighted at Vatican II, and is the dominant view of mainline Protestantism and even has its evangelical proponents.^[6]

The fate of those who die never hearing about the gospel of Jesus is a subcategory of religious pluralism. This is the issue Porphyry and my daughter Lexi raised, and it is the focus of this paper.^[7] My general framework for dealing with this issue is to see it as part of the problem of evil—the soteriological problem of evil, if you will. The Bible declares that “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son” to save it (John 3:16) and that God is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). These texts are illustrative of the many passages proclaiming God’s incredible love for, and desire to save, sinners. However, the Bible also teaches that there is only one Savior, Jesus, and it is through Him and Him alone that salvation has been brought to humanity. “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The soteriological problem of evil then, is located in the tension between these two important beliefs that the church has long proclaimed: (1) God’s universal salvific will and (2) the particularity of salvation in Jesus. Jesus is the only savior, yet God desires all to be saved. What does the creator God, who redeemed humanity through the death and Resurrection of Jesus, do to accomplish this goal? *Does God make the salvation*

found only in Jesus available to all people? Is salvation universally accessible? If so, how might God work to accomplish this purpose?

The Spectrum of Views regarding the Destiny of the Unevangelized^[8]

The following chart provides a schematic overview of five of the six major positions I shall discuss.

Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized

Universalism	Inclusivism	Postmortem Evangelism	Universal Opportunity before Death	Restrictivism
<p>Definition:</p> <p>All people will in fact be saved by Jesus. No one is damned forever.</p>	<p>Definition:</p> <p>The unevangelized may be saved if they respond in faith to God based on the revelation they have.</p>	<p>Definition:</p> <p>The unevangelized receive an opportunity to believe in Jesus after death.</p>	<p>Definition:</p> <p>All people are given opportunity to be saved by God's sending the gospel (even by angels or dreams) or at the moment of death or by middle knowledge.</p>	<p>Definition:</p> <p>God does not provide salvation to those who fail to hear of Jesus and come to faith in him before they die.</p>
<p>Key Texts:</p> <p>Romans 5:18</p> <p>1 Corinthians 15:22–28</p>	<p>Key Texts:</p> <p>John 12:32</p> <p>Acts 10:34–35</p> <p>1 Timothy 4:10</p>	<p>Key Texts:</p> <p>John 3:18</p> <p>1 Peter 3:18–4:6</p>	<p>Key Texts:</p> <p>Daniel 2</p> <p>Acts 8</p>	<p>Key Texts:</p> <p>John 14:6</p> <p>Acts 4:12</p> <p>1 John 5:11–12</p>

1 John 2:2

Adherents:	Adherents:	Adherents:	Adherents:	Adherents:
Origen	Justin Martyr	Clement of Alexandria	James Arminius	Augustine
F. E. Schleiermacher	Thomas Aquinas	George MacDonald	John Henry Newman	John Calvin
G. C. Berkouwer	John Wesley	Donald Bloesch	J. Oliver Buswell Jr.	Jonathan Edwards
William Barclay	C. S. Lewis	George Lindbeck	Norman Geisler	Carl Henry
Jacques Ellul	Karl Rahner	Stephen Davis	Robert Lightner	R. C. Sproul
(Hopeful universalist: Karl Barth)	Clark Pinnock	Gabriel Fackre		Ronald Nash
	Wolfhart Pannenberg			

Note: The listed adherents of all these views agree that Jesus is the only Savior.

Agnosticism

“we do not know God’s will”). Some Christians maintain that we simply do not have enough information in scripture to know how God addresses the unevangelized. It is best to “leave it in God’s hands.” A favorite text for the adherents of this view is Genesis 18:25: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” We can trust God to do what is right with them.

Universalism

Proponents of universalism, also known as apokatastasis or retorationism, hold that all people are given the opportunity to receive Jesus and that all will, eventually, be saved. God never closes the gates of the new Jerusalem (see Revelation 21:25), so the door of salvation is always open and God will not rest until all of His children are safely inside. Says Nels Ferré, “There are no incorrigible sinners; God has no permanent problem children.”[\[9\]](#)

Several types of biblical texts are used to support universalism. To begin are those that affirm God’s desire to save all people (see 1 Timothy 2:4; 4:10; 2 Peter 3:9). Next are texts that proclaim the unlimited Atonement of Christ (see 1 John 2:2; Hebrews 2:9; Titus 2:11; 2 Corinthians 5:19). If God wants everyone to experience salvation and if Christ died for everyone, then everyone will, in fact, experience salvation. Jesus declared, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men

to Myself” (John 12:32; see also John 10:16). Paul wrote that just as all things were created in the Son of God, so all things are being reconciled through the Son’s “having made peace through the blood of His cross” (Colossians 1:20). One of the most important passages is Romans 5:12–19. Here Paul draws an analogy between the first and second Adams. The first Adam brought sin, condemnation, and death, but the second Adam—Jesus—brought righteousness, justification, and life. “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men; even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men” (5:18).

A favorite text of universalists is 1 Corinthians 15:22–28:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.

But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming,

Then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.

For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.

The last enemy that will be abolished is death.

For He has put all things in subjection under His feet. But when He says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him.

And when all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the one who subjected all things to Him, that God may be all in all.

Restorationists interpret this text as saying that all people will be given life in Christ; it may take longer for some than for others, but eventually all will come into the kingdom of Christ, and there will no longer be any enemies to the kingdom of God, only loyal subjects. When this occurs, then Christ will have achieved His goal, and God will be “all in all.”

There are, however, biblical texts on damnation that speak of two classes of people, the saved and the lost. The parable of the sheep and the goats concludes, “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:46). Mark 3:29 reads, “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” Paul says that those who do not obey the gospel “will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Universalists do not ignore such texts but interpret them in a way consistent with

what they see as the overriding theme of the New Testament that God will redeem everyone. The references to eternal damnation must be seen in their proper contexts, they say. Jesus and Paul utilized the strong language regarding eternal loss in order to bring individuals to a commitment to God. They were calling for a serious decision, and the nature of their existential preaching required graphic imagery to portray the importance of the choice.

Universalists hold that the “saved or lost” language in the New Testament is not ultimate: the consummation texts speak of one group of people, not two, in the eschaton. Restorationists grant that the God-as-judge metaphor does point to damnation and separation, but they argue that these punishments are only temporary. The concept of eternal damnation is hyperbolic, they say, a rhetorical device aimed at producing faith in the hearers. Restorationists do not object to the reality of hell. The sticking point for them is rather the concept of an *eterna* hell. If hell were eternal, they argue, then there would be an ultimate dualism in the universe—God and evil. Since God’s justice demands the eradication of evil, evil cannot be eternal. The existence of an eternal hell without the possibility for repentance would raise questions about God’s power, justice, and love.

Theologically, universalists argue that the sovereign love of God entails the salvation of all. Nels Ferré frames the issue as part of the problem of evil: “The logic of the situation is simple. Either God could not or would not save all. If He could not He is not sovereign; then not all things are possible with God (Matthew 19:26). If He would not, again the New Testament is wrong, for it openly claims that He would have all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). Nor would He be totally good.”^[10] But what of human freedom? Does God force salvation upon us whether we want it or not? While some proponents of universalism affirm libertarian freedom others affirm compatibilistic freedom. Yet both sides agree that ultimately all humans will voluntarily accept God’s grace. It is important to remember that God’s love cannot be limited by our earthly time. There will be countless eons in the afterlife in which He will finally achieve His plan of universal redemption. God is infinite, so His redemptive love cannot be limited by our temporal rejections.

Universalism has a long and distinguished list of proponents. In the early centuries the Eastern Church was more inclined towards universalism than the Western Church. In the third century Clement of Alexandria and Origen first proposed it. Though not as prominent in their writings it seems to have been favored by Gregory of Nyssa, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Diodore of Tarsus. Many in the

Orthodox tradition “hope” that all persons will be redeemed but will not put this forth as dogma. According to Ernst Benz, the “doctrine of eternal damnation has always met with intense resistance in the East. . . . The church officially disavowed this doctrine [universalism]; nevertheless a hankering for it persisted within Eastern Orthodox religious thought, and Eastern theologians have repeatedly revived it.”^[11] He suggests this is due, in part, because the Eastern Church tends to understand salvation in terms of God’s healing love whereas the Western Church sees it more in terms of God’s legal justice.

After the time of Augustine universalism fell out of favor in the West and was not seriously revived until after the Reformation when some Anabaptists affirmed it. Widespread support for universalism began in Protestant theology in the latter eighteenth century, sprouted with the Reformed theologian Schleiermacher in the nineteenth and fully bloomed in the twentieth when a wide array of Protestant and Catholic writers affirmed it. Today there are those who confidently put forth universalism as a dogma of the faith while others, including such luminaries as Barth and Von Balthasar, claim we may hope for the final salvation of all humanity but should not hold it as a dogma of the faith.

Restrictivism

Restrictivism asserts that there is no salvation unless one exercises saving faith in the gospel prior to death. Outside the proclamation of the gospel there can be no salvation. I coined the term *restrictivism* in order to distinguish the position from *exclusivism*, which refers to the idea that other religions have no salvific value. Certainly all restrictivists are exclusivists, but not all exclusivists are restrictivists, since not all exclusivists believe that God limits the accessibility of the salvation in Jesus to those who hear about and accept the gospel in this life. Those who affirm postmortem opportunities for evangelism as well as those who affirm universalism are exclusivists but not restrictivists. Some proponents of this view distinguish between “hard restrictivism”—one must hear the gospel from a human agent and accept it before death in order for there to be the possibility of salvation—and “soft restrictivism”—God may make salvation available to those who have not heard from a human agent, but we have no reason to think God will do this on a large scale.^[12] Soft restrictivism is similar to the nonjudgmental view mentioned above, except that it is more pessimistic. Since proponents of both the

soft and hard forms of restrictivism use the same arguments, I will cover them together.

Restrictivists emphasize biblical texts that affirm the particularity and exclusiveness of salvation in Jesus Christ. “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). “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6). “And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:11–12). Paul writes that the Gentiles were “strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). Those without Christ are “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart” (Ephesians 4:18). Paul writes, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9). A person finds out about Jesus from human preachers: “How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14). “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). Finally, Jesus said, “enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it” (Matthew 7:13–14). Restrictivists interpret such texts to mean that a person must have explicit knowledge of the person and work of Jesus in order to have an opportunity to be saved.

Philip Melancthon, Martin Luther’s colleague in the German reformation, held that “it is certainly true that outside the Church, where there is no gospel, no sacrament, and no true invocation of God, there is no forgiveness of sins, grace, or salvation, as among the Turks, Jews, and heathen.”^[13] Jonathan Edwards said that biblical revelation “is the only remedy which God has provided for the miserable, brutish blindness of mankind. . . . It is the only means that the true God has made successful in his providence, to give the nations of the world the knowledge of himself; and to bring them off from the worship of false gods.”^[14] Restrictivists tend to draw a sharp distinction between natural and special revelation. Charles Hodge says, “The revelation of the plan of salvation is not made by the works or by

the providence of God; nor by the moral constitution of our nature, nor by the intuitions or deductions of reason; nor by direct revelation to all men everywhere and at all times; but only in the written Word of God.”[\[15\]](#) Natural revelation only brings knowledge of sin and condemnation, it cannot provide enough light to provide divine salvation.

A criticism often raised against this teaching is, How can God justly condemn someone simply because they never heard of Christ? Conservative evangelical R. C. Sproul explains: “If a person in a remote area has never heard of Christ, he will not be punished for that. What he will be punished for is the rejection of the Father of whom he has heard and for the disobedience to the law that is written in his heart.”[\[16\]](#) Furthermore, restrictivists maintain that all the unevangelized continually turn away from the light of natural revelation and so are justly condemned.

Another necessary belief for restrictivism is that there is no opportunity for salvation after we die. “It is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). The idea is also present in 2 Esdras 9:10 and in early Christian writings such as 2 Clement 8:3: “For after we have gone out of the world, no further power of confessing or repenting will there belong to us.” In Roman Catholic theology and in much Protestant thought, it is assumed that death ends our period of probation and seals our destinies.[\[17\]](#)

Restrictivists often use such arguments as the motivation for evangelism. “In fact,” says Loraine Boettner, “the belief that the heathen without the Gospel are lost has been one of the strongest arguments in favor of foreign missions. If we believed that their own religions contain enough light and truth to save them, the importance of preaching the Gospel to them is greatly lessened.”[\[18\]](#) This argument, which came into use beginning in the eighteenth century, is emphasized by evangelical mission societies in order to raise the needed resources.

A final theological line of argumentation in favor of restrictivism comes from the Augustinian–Calvinist tradition. Though not all restrictivists affirm it, it is quite common among conservative evangelicals. Boettner, a five–point Calvinist, states the case well: “Those who are providentially placed in the pagan darkness of western China can no more accept Christ as Savior than they can accept the radio, the airplane, or the Copernican system of astronomy, things concerning which they are totally ignorant. When God places people in such conditions we may be sure

that He has no more intention that they shall be saved than He has that the soil of northern Siberia, which is frozen all the year round, shall produce crops of wheat. Had he intended otherwise He would have supplied the means leading to the designed end.”[\[19\]](#)

This doctrine, known as limited or definite atonement, holds that Christ only atoned for those who exercise faith in Christ. Consequently, those who espouse this deny that God desires all humans to be saved. Restrictivists tend to understand the gospel in legal terms connected to divine justice and so believe God is righteous in damning the unevangelized for their unbelief.

Though it cannot be called *the* classical view, restrictivism has been quite popular in Western Christianity. Augustine and those following close to his soteriology such as Blaise Pascal and John Calvin are the shapers of the restrictivist teaching. Those evangelicals who trace their heritage to the Old Princeton School and the Fundamentalist movement tend to affirm restrictivism.

In response to both universalism and restrictivism—viewed by many Christians as extremes—a wide number of views have been developed that situate themselves between these polar views. Some of them are closer to universalism and some to restrictivism. I categorize these views as members of “the wider hope.” To these I now turn.

Universal sending. A widely discussed view in the Middle Ages—though it was never fully developed—and one that finds some adherents in conservative Protestantism is the notion that if someone seriously seeks after God, then God will see to it that they receive the message of the gospel in some way. I call this universal sending, because it is an attempt to answer the soteriological problem of evil by affirming that salvation in Christ is universally accessible. If the unevangelized will only respond favorably to the revelation they have, then God will send the message either by human agent, angelic messenger, or dreams.

From scripture, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is cited as the paradigm case for this view. The Ethiopian was seeking after God, in this case reading the Old Testament, and God sent Philip to him in order that the seeker could hear the gospel of Jesus. In Acts 10 the Roman centurion Cornelius was searching for the true God, and God sent Peter to him to proclaim the gospel. At various times God used visions, dreams, and angels to communicate messages to people. Alexander of Hales (1180–1245) sums up the position of many medieval writers when,

regarding an unevangelized person, he says, "If he does what is within his power, the Lord will enlighten him with a secret inspiration, by means of an angel or a man."[\[20\]](#)

Several theological beliefs are central to this view. To begin, no one is damned without an opportunity to be saved. However, explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation and human destinies are sealed at death so the seekers must hear about and respond in faith to the gospel message prior to death. If anyone does seek God, God will ensure that the gospel will be given to the seeker.

Universal sending became popular in the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries and was affirmed by Peter Lombard, Albert the Great, St. Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, Gabriel Biel, and many others.[\[21\]](#) Dante's *Paradiso* (canto 19) raises the issue beautifully:

A man is born in sight
Of Indus' water, and there is none there
To speak of Christ, and none to read or write.
. . . He dies unbaptized and cannot receive
the saving faith. What justice is it damns him?
Is it his fault that he does not believe?
Dante's guide responds:

To this high empery
None ever rose but through belief in Christ,
Either before or after his agony.
Though this would seem to imply that very few are saved, Dante gives this caution:
Mortals, be slow to judge! Not even we
Who look on God in heaven know as yet,
How many he will choose for ecstasy.

Although explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation, Dante, in canto 20, writes of a number of pagans who received visions of Christ, even a thousand years prior to the incarnation, and of one pagan who was removed from hell and restored to his body long enough to hear of Christ and be converted. The view was affirmed by the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacob Arminius and has found a hearing among modern evangelicals, most notably Norman Geisler.[\[22\]](#)

Middle knowledge

The theory of divine omniscience known as middle knowledge, or Molinism, was developed by the Jesuit Molina in the sixteenth-century in an attempt to reconcile divine sovereignty and human freedom. The basic idea is that God knows not only all the things that possibly could happen and all the events that actually will happen, but He also knows what would have happened had something in the circumstances been different. For instance, God knows all the details of your life that would be different if you did not marry the person you did or if you had attended a different university. God knows precisely what you would have done in any given situation if the situation were different in any respect. If, for instance, you had an annual income of \$50,000 per year and needed to buy a car, God knows what you would buy. Moreover, God knows what car you would purchase if everything about your life were the same but your annual income was \$30,000 instead. It is like Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, in which Scrooge is shown what will happen unless he changes his ways.

When applied to the question of the unevangelized, one could argue that God knows who among the unevangelized would confess Christ were they to be evangelized. If so, then God could redeem such people based upon His middle knowledge. But Molinists disagree as to the extent this will occur, if it does at all. Evangelical theologian Donald Lake applies Molinism in a favorable way when he says, "God knows who would, under ideal circumstances, believe the gospel, and on the basis of his foreknowledge, applies that gospel even if the person never hears the gospel during his lifetime."[\[23\]](#) This same idea was used by Joseph Smith when he spoke about an 1836 vision of his dead brother Alvin. He wondered how Alvin could be in the celestial kingdom when he had not been baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Joseph was told that those who died without knowledge of such matters should be admitted if they would have accepted the knowledge had they known of it.[\[24\]](#) An even more optimistic view has been suggested to me (privately) by one prominent proponent of middle knowledge who believes that every human under "ideal circumstances" would believe the gospel, and so all will be saved because God knows this to be the case.

To date, I've not found anyone using this theory to develop a full explanation of how this would work when applied to the unevangelized. Nonetheless, I shall hazard some comments regarding those who believe that God will save at least some unevangelized on the basis of middle knowledge. Proponents of this view need to clarify a few points. First, it is not clear whether explicit knowledge of

Christ is necessary for salvation for the following reason. If God saves some of the unevangelized based upon God's knowledge that they would have confessed Christ had they heard the gospel, then those people never actually heard the gospel. Hence, it seems to imply that people can be saved without hearing the gospel. Second, it is commonly assumed that an act of faith on the part of an adult is necessary for salvation, but middle knowledge seems to suggest that the unevangelized may be saved without any actual faith of their own. Finally, if proponents of this view claim that knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation and that an act of faith is required, then how can this be possible in this life? It would seem that some sort of evangelization and confession would need to transpire after the death of the unevangelized.

A few evangelical proponents of middle knowledge have applied it to the issue of the unevangelized but arrive at a pessimistic conclusion. William Lane Craig and Douglas Geivett claim that not a single one of those dying unevangelized would have believed in Christ even under "ideal circumstances."[\[25\]](#) God knows that all individuals who die never hearing the gospel are individuals who would never believe no matter in what situation they were to hear the gospel. Such people suffer from "transworld depravity." That is, there is no feasible world God could have created in which people who possess transworld depravity would believe the gospel. Consequently, God decided to create a world in which He placed certain people in unevangelized areas, because He knew that they would never believe anyway. Hence, we can rest assured that if our missionary efforts never reach certain peoples, they never would have believed the gospel anyway.

Postmortem evangelization

Most of the foregoing positions regarding the necessity of explicit knowledge of Jesus and the necessity of an act of faith in the gospel are agreeable to the view but postmortem evangelization disagrees that knowledge of Jesus must occur before death. God's power and love cannot be limited by earthly time. John Lange writes, "The preaching of Christ begun in the realms of departed spirits is continued there . . . so that those who here on earth did not hear at all or not in the right way, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, shall hear it there."[\[26\]](#)

Postmortem evangelization sometimes called eschatological evangelization or divine perseverance, relies upon several biblical texts. Mark 16:16, "He who has

believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.” In Matthew 10:32–33 Jesus says that He will confess before the Father those who confess Jesus and will deny before the Father those who deny Jesus. The unpardonable sin (see Matthew 12:31–32) is understood to mean the denial of Jesus. From these texts the following argument is constructed: (1) the salvation in Jesus is universally accessible, (2) explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation, and (3) the only reason anyone is condemned to hell is for rejection of Jesus Christ. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that the unevangelized must receive some kind of opportunity after death to respond to Christ.

Proponents of postmortem evangelization find support for this conclusion in the biblical teachings surrounding Christ’s “descent into hell.” Jesus had foretold that He would be three days and nights in the heart of the earth (see Matthew 12:40), that the hour was coming when the dead would hear the voice of the Son of God, and that those who heard it would live (see John 5:25). Paul says that when Jesus ascended He led captive a host of captives after He had descended into the lower parts of the earth (see Ephesians 4: 8–10). The majority of Christians in the first three centuries affirmed the “harrowing of hell.” It was a common belief that Christ descended into hell and released some of the souls there. The only debate was precisely who was released. Some said that only the Old Testament Saints were freed. According to this interpretation, the old maxim “you haven’t got a preacher’s chance in hell” is literally true. Other Christians, however, said that the release also included any of the Gentiles who desired salvation, and some go so far as to say that people may be redeemed from hell (preachers do have a chance in hell after all!). Melito, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nazianzus held this latter view.[\[27\]](#)

The classic text used to support postmortem evangelization is 1 Peter 3:18–20, 4:6: “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in whom also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. . . . For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.”

That this text is a notoriously difficult passage is demonstrated by the wide array of interpretations in the history of the church. The different interpretations stem from the answers given to three key questions: (1) Who are the “spirits in prison”? (2) What did Jesus preach? and (3) When did Jesus preach? Four main positions have developed. Perhaps the earliest view was that Christ preached the gospel to the Old Testament believers in hell during His descent and then released them. Augustine put forward the view that the text is simply suggesting that Christ preached repentance through Noah while Noah was building the ark, and hence the text says nothing about a descent into hell. The view taken by most modern commentators is that after Jesus died, He descended and proclaimed triumph over the “fallen angels.” A fourth view, held by many in the early church and regaining popularity today, is that during His descent into hell Jesus preached the gospel to all present and then led all who accepted Him as Savior out of that prison. Each of the four views has the support of widely respected exegetes.

Proponents of eschatological salvation are not all of one mind, however, regarding certain points of this theory. Some proponents believe that every single person will be granted an opportunity to place their faith in Christ after death—including Christians. However, many proponents of postmortem salvation reject the notion that some people receive a “second chance” after death. The evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch says that this view “is not to be confounded with the doctrine of a second chance. What the descent doctrine affirms is the universality of a first chance, an opportunity for salvation for those who have never heard the gospel in its fullness.”^[28] At first blush this may seem to rule out all who are acquainted with some form of the gospel. That this is not the case is made clear by Bloesch’s qualifying remark: “those who have never heard the gospel in its *fullness*.” In other words, only those who have “fully and adequately” heard the gospel in this life will be excluded from an opportunity for salvation after death. Hence, perhaps it could be said of almost everyone that they have not “fully and adequately” heard the gospel in this life and so will receive a postmortem opportunity. Steven Davis explains: “Some who hear the gospel hear it in such a way that they are psychologically unable to respond positively. Perhaps they heard the gospel for the first and only time from a fool or a bigot or a scoundrel. Or perhaps they were caused to be prejudiced against Christianity by skeptical parents or teachers. Whatever the reason, I believe it would be unjust of God to condemn those who did indeed hear the good news but were unable to respond positively.”^[29]

Historically, Clement of Alexandria and Origen pioneered the theory of postmortem evangelization, but it fell out of favor in the West after the time of Augustine. It was revitalized in the nineteenth century and, in addition to those cited above, is now finding increasing favor particularly among Lutheran theologians such as George Lindbeck at Yale and even some noteworthy evangelicals such as Gabriel Fackre.

Before moving on to the next position, I want to briefly mention a couple of variations of this view. First, the Latter-day Saints believe that their dead preach the gospel to other departed spirits and that some of these evangelized spirits repent and accept the gospel.^[30] Moreover, those who accept the gospel in their postmortem state can experience “exaltation” if someone on earth is vicariously baptized for the dead spirit. Mormons believe that very few persons end up experiencing damnation, since just about everyone makes it into one of the three heavenly kingdoms. The other variation is a minority view in Roman Catholicism known as the “final option” theory.^[31] If it is non-negotiable that our destinies are sealed at death, then postmortem evangelization is simply not possible. However, if one believed that the only reason anyone is damned is for refusing the grace of Christ, then everyone must come to hear about that grace. Proponents of the final option theory claim that *a//* people will have an encounter with Jesus Christ at the moment of death and will have to give their “final answer” while dying. Even those who are already Christians will have to do this. In the process of dying, according to this view, at the moment the soul is separating from the body the person will, for the first time, be able to make a fully free act in full knowledge of the truth, unhindered by any constraints. Critics might suggest that it would then be better to put off making a decision now. However, this is to ignore the role habits and character will play in our final decision. We will not become totally different people than we are now. Yes, our awareness will be enlarged, but if we have habitually rejected the promptings of the Spirit in this life that will have an impact on our final decision.^[32]

Inclusivism

According to inclusivism (sometimes called “the faith principle”), Jesus is the particular savior of the world, but people can benefit from the redemptive work of Christ even though they die never hearing about Christ—if they respond in faith to God based on the revelation God has given them.

Inclusivists glean from various biblical texts an optimism of salvation, for they see God working outside the bounds of ethnic Israel as well as the church. God made a universal covenant through Noah, and God's choice to work through Abraham was for the purpose of blessing the nations (see Genesis 12:3). Scripture mentions several nations for whom God provided land by driving out the previous inhabitants (see Deuteronomy 2:5, 9, 19, 21–22; 2 Kings 5:1). The prophet Amos declared that God had performed events similar to the exodus of Israel for other nations (see Amos 9:7). Attention is drawn to the so-called “holy pagans” in scripture.^[33] God seems to have looked favorably upon non-Israelites such as Melchizedek, Jethro, Job, and the Queen of Sheba. On several occasions Jesus commented on the extraordinary faith He discerned among Gentiles such as the Canaanite woman (see Matthew 15:21–8) and the Roman centurion (see Matthew 8:10). Though God was doing a special work in Israel, God was working and was known outside her borders.

The Gentile that inclusivists highlight is Cornelius, a God-fearing uncircumcised Gentile who prayed continually. One day an angel informed him that his prayers and alms were a memorial offering of which God took note, and he was given instructions to send for Peter (see Acts 10:4). Peter arrives and informs the household about the redemption in Jesus, whereupon the household is baptized in the name of Jesus. In light of these events, Peter declares, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him” (see Acts 10:34–35). The welcome of God extends outside Israel and outside the church.

From the scriptural commentary on believing Gentiles, inclusivists suggest that these God-fearers were already acceptable to God, prior to any knowledge of Christ, due to their acts of faith. The redemption in Christ is applied to these people, even if they are unaware of it. Cornelius was already worshiping the God who saves through Christ. What he received from Peter's proclamation of the gospel was the fullness of salvation that comes from the knowledge of what God has done in Jesus and being incorporated into the body of Christ. He went from being a “believer” in God to being a Christian or, in John Wesley's words, from being a “servant” of God to a “son” of God. Karl Rahner designated such people “anonymous Christians.”

According to inclusivists, ignorance of Christ does not disqualify one from grace. What God requires is a right disposition towards God and a willingness to do God's

will. The Apostle Paul says that God will approve of those Gentiles who, though they do not have the law (the Old Testament revelation), do by nature the things required in the law (see Romans 2:6–16). Abraham did not know about a Messiah to come, yet he was accepted by God because of his faithful response to what he knew of God. Christians are those who place their faith in what God has done in Jesus. Christians certainly know more about what God has done for our redemption. Yet, for Paul, there is continuity between believers such as Abraham and Christians such as those at Rome, because both believe in and seek to follow the same God (see Romans 4:24). There is only one God (see Romans 3:29). The Creator who gave us life is the same God who raised Jesus from the dead. Though some only know God as Creator while others know Him as both Creator and Redeemer, it is the same God who relates to both groups. The difference between creational revelation and biblical revelation concerns the degree of specificity about what God is doing, not a difference of kind, since it is the same God doing the revealing.

Inclusivists maintain that anyone who is saved, including the Old Testament patriarchs, will be saved because of the atoning work of Christ, even if those people never knew of that work. In other words, the redemptive work of Jesus is *soteriologically necessary*, but it is *not epistemically necessary*. Those who die unevangelized are able to benefit from the Atonement of Christ, if they will respond appropriately to the knowledge of God given them. This may be called the “faith principle.” According to Hebrews 11:1, God is pleased with those who acknowledge Him and believe that He rewards those who seek Him. God accepts those who have the disposition of faith, even if they remain ignorant of what was accomplished through Christ Jesus. Proponents of the other views discussed above, especially restrictivism and postmortem evangelization, strongly object to the inclusivist contention that the work of Christ is not epistemically necessary for salvation. However, inclusivists reply that proponents of these views commonly break their own rule regarding the necessity of knowing of Christ’s work in order to be saved when it comes to infants that die. In 1676 the Quaker Robert Barclay pointed this out: “If there were such an absolute necessity for this outward knowledge, that it were even of the essentials of salvation, then none could be saved without it; whereas our adversaries deny not, but readily confess, that many infants and deaf persons are saved without it: so that here they break that general rule, and make salvation possible without it.”^[34]

But how can humans, in bondage to sin, receive revelation and exercise faith in God? Inclusivists respond to this question by appealing to the universal work of the Son and Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity, though particularly active in Israel and the church and uniquely in Christ, has also been active in other venues. According to Justin Martyr, the seed (*sperma*) of the universal logos is present in all races, even though the fullness of the logos is present in Jesus. From this idea many have utilized a logos Christology that sees the cosmic work of the Son apart from the incarnation. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is active among the nations as well. The human heart is hard because of sin, and we are unable to respond in faith to divine revelation and grace apart from the enabling power of the Spirit. Inclusivists reject any notion that people are saved “on their own” apart from divine grace. Gavin D’Costa explains: “If a person’s ability to respond to revelation is not by means of reason or through any faculty possessed by that person, but by this initiative of God . . . is not this basic orientation towards God a gift of grace?”[\[35\]](#)

Perhaps the most celebrated summary statement of inclusivism comes from the Second Vatican Council: “Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His church, yet, sincerely seek God, and moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor, does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace.”[\[36\]](#)

Inclusivists disagree over whether God works through the other religions, outside of them, or both through and in spite of. Clearly, the scriptures contain denunciations of certain other religions. Religions can enslave as well as liberate. Some religions offer God less to work with than others, and history has witnessed the burial of many religions in the graveyard of the gods. Inclusivists of evangelical persuasion are typically quite willing to admit that there are truths in the other religions of which God may make use.[\[37\]](#) Clark Pinnock, for instance, seeks to steer a middle course between Barth, for whom other religions must be unbelief, and Rahner, for whom other religions are valid ways of salvation. “On the one hand, it is possible to appreciate positive elements in other faiths, recognizing that God has been at work among them. On the other hand, it is not necessary to be blind to oppression and bondage in religion, Christ being our norm and criterion for measuring.”[\[38\]](#) Vatican II takes a cautious approach, holding that other religions

contain truths derived from conscience and providence, yet affirming that other religions are human constructions produced out of the “restless searchings of the human heart.”[\[39\]](#)

Why do inclusivists go in this direction? Because they feel that the other wider hope views simply do not take seriously the way God works in the world. In scripture we see God working through human cultures and religions, sorting out what He can accept, what He can adapt, and what must be rejected. The ideas that God will simply use His omniscience to determine who would have come to Christ had they heard, or that people receive an evangelistic experience at death, just do not ring true to the way God has chosen to encounter us in the rough and tumble of human history and culture.

The inclusivist position has a long and distinguished history in the church. Such widely divergent thinkers as Justin, Thomas Aquinas, John Wesley, C. S. Lewis, and Pope John Paul II have affirmed it.[\[40\]](#) Today, it is the dominant view of the Roman Catholic Church and of mainline Protestants. Though the Eastern Orthodox Church has no officially sanctioned position, the inclusivistic views of Justin and other Greek fathers are widely cited with approval and many of the arguments for inclusivism are employed.[\[41\]](#) Inclusivism represents the closest thing to a consensus among Christians today.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of the main positions in the history of the church regarding the possibility for salvation of the unevangelized. None of the views is new on the theological scene. Each is a response to the soteriological problem of evil: how can God be said to desire the redemption of all people and yet Jesus be the unique and particular savior of humanity? Positions range from universalism to restrictivism with each view drawing upon scripture and theological argumentation. Clearly, Christians have never been of one mind on the matter, and I doubt we will be anytime soon.

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All biblical citations are from the New American Standard Version.

- [1] Porphyry, quoted by Augustine in a letter to Deogratias, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:416.
- [2] The term *saved* is being used here in a truncated sense: a life after death or getting to "heaven." Though salvation is much more than this, the narrow sense of the word is how it has been used in the history of this issue and so I shall use it that way in this essay.
- [3] The figures are from the *World Christian Encyclopedia* as cited in *World Evangelization* 16 (1989): 40.
- [4] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).
- [5] Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938). For evangelical views see the essays in William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, eds., *Through No Fault of Their Own: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991).
- [6] See chapters six and seven in Knitter's *No Other Name?* for the mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic views, and for Evangelical views see Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness*

in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).

- [7] Since the fate of the unevangelized involves the issue of communion with God in the afterlife, it is not a topic of interest for many Christians today.
- [8] For much more detailed explanations and historical bibliographies for each of the positions see John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).
- [9] Nels Ferré, *The Christian Understanding of God* (New York: Harper, 1951), 229.
- [10] Nels Fredrick Solomon Ferré, *Evil and the Christian Faith* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 118.
- [11] Ernst Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church, Its Thought and Life*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1963), 47, 52. See also Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), 266–67.
- [12] See Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips eds., introduction to *More than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 19–20.
- [13] Philip Melanchthon, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. Clyde Manschreck (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 212.
- [14] Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1984), 2:253.
- [15] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1940), 2:648.
- [16] R. C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 56.
- [17] See Alan Fairhurst, “Death and Destiny,” *Churchman* 95 (1981): 313–14. Aquinas agreed in his *Summa Theologica*, part 3, question 52, answer 7; as did Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:515–25. This point is also raised in several Reformed confessions: Scottish Confession of Faith (1560), chapter 17; Second Helvetic Confession (1566), chapter 26; Westminster Confession (1646), 32.1; Westminster Larger Catechism (1647), question 86.
- [18] Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), 119.
- [19] Boettner, *Reformed, Doctrine*, 120.

- [20] See Ricardo Lombardi, *The Salvation of the Unbeliever*, trans. Dorothy White (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1956), 232.
- [21] See T. P. Dunning, "Langland and the Salvation of the Heathen," *Medium Aevum* 12 (1943): 45–54 and Ralph Turner, "Descendit ad Inferos: Medieval Views on Christ's Descent into Hell and the Salvation of the Ancient Just" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 173–94.
- [22] See my *No Other Name*, 152–63, for these and others.
- [23] Donald Lake, "He Died for All: The Universal Dimensions of the Atonement," in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975), 43.
- [24] See Douglas Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000): 87. As will be noted below, however, this was not to be the preferred view among Mormons.
- [25] William Lane Craig, "No Other Name: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (April 1989): 172–88; Douglas Geivett, "A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach," in *Four Views on Salvation*, 261, 270.
- [26] John Lange, *The First Epistle General of Peter* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1868), 67.
- [27] For documentation on these and the following discussion see my *No Other Name*, 184–88.
- [28] Donald Bloesch, "Descent into Hell," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 314.
- [29] Steven Davis, "Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant," *Modern Theology* 6 (January 1990): 183–84.
- [30] See Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 97–98.
- [31] John Cardinal Henry Newman endorsed this view. See my *No Other Name*, 164 note 26.
- [32] I would add another reason: God is not merely interested in the next life. God wants to redeem this world and so we need to be making it possible for others now to experience redemption and the new life in Christ.

[33] See Jean Danielou, *Holy Pagans in the Old Testament* (London: Longmans, Green, 1957).

[34] Barclay, *An Apology for True Christian Divinity* (Philadelphia: Friends Bookstore, 1908), 181. He goes on to say, “neither can they allege, that it is because such are free from sin; seeing they also affirm, that all infants, because of Adam’s sin, deserve eternal damnation.”

[35] Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 69.

[36] “The Constitution of the Church,” article 16 in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: American Press, 1966), 35.

[37] See my *No Other Name*, 241–49; and Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 92–106.

[38] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 109.

[39] “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” in *Documents of Vatican II*, 662. This stance was recently reaffirmed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in “*Dominus Iesus*” in 2000 (though it used a more noticeably negative tone). On Wesley and Lewis, see my *No Other Name*, 249–57. On John Paul II see his *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 81.

[40] In my *No Other Name* I concluded that Aquinas was a proponent of universal sending. Though there is some evidence for this in Thomas’s writings, the insightful study by Thomas O’Meara convincingly shows that Aquinas was an inclusivist. O’Meara, “The Presence of Grace Outside Evangelization, Baptism and Church in Thomas Aquinas’ Theology,” in *That Others May Know: Essays in Honor of Zachary Hayes*, ed. Casuto and Caughlin (New York: Franciscan, 1997), 91–131.

[41] See, for example, Metropolitan Anastasios Yannoulatos, “Facing People of Other Faiths from an Orthodox Point of View,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 38 nos. 1–4 (1993): 131–52.