## The Salvation of the Unreached

What will happen to those who have never heard about Jesus? Can a person be saved without knowing about Him or expressing personal faith in Him? Several theories exist which attempt to solve this dilemma: universalism, universal opportunity, pluralism, inclusivism, implicit faith, and exclusivism. We will attempt to determine the most probable of these theories.

Sanders underscores the relevance of this topic: “It is safe to conclude that the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived have never heard the good news of grace regarding the God of Israel and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Geisler adds that at the conclusion of the twentieth century, only one-half of the world’s population had heard the good news about Jesus, and many others have heard very little about Him.[[2]](#footnote-2) Therefore, this is an important topic for our consideration.

### А. Universalism

Universalism is the teaching that all people in the end will be saved regardless of their faith or lack thereof in this life. A famous proponent of this teaching in the Early Church was Origen, who believed that even Satan would eventually be saved. In Origen’s opinion, God’s design is to restore all things. By means of discipline, the Lord will bring all to repentance, even after death. Origen writes,

…all things shall be re-established in a state of unity, and when God shall be all in all. And this result must be understood as being brought about, not suddenly, but slowly and gradually, seeing that the process of amendment and correction will take place imperceptibly in the individual instances during the lapse of countless and unmeasured ages, some outstripping others, and tending by a swifter course towards perfection, while others again follow close at hand, and some again a long way behind; and thus, through the numerous and uncounted orders of progressive beings who are being reconciled to God from a state of enmity, the last enemy is finally reached, who is called death (Origin, *De Principiis*, 3.6.3. Also see 1.6.1-3).

Several passages of Scripture may seem to support this understanding:[[3]](#footnote-3)

- For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers (1 Tim 4:10).

- For it was the {Father's} good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, {I say,} whether things on earth or things in heaven (Col 1:19-20).

- …with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, {that is,} the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth (Eph 1:10).

- And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, {be} blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever” (Rev 5:13).

- And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself (Jn 12:32).

- …and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until {the} period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time (Acts 3:20-21).

- …so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10-11).

We can also cite 1 Corinthians 15:22-25, where Paul states,

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will 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 hands over 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.

It is thought that one of the enemies that Christ will subdue is unbelief.[[4]](#footnote-4) The result will be a universal turning to Him.

Adherents of universalism diverge as to the mechanism of how God will accomplish universal salvation.[[5]](#footnote-5) Some, like Schleiermacher, believe that God will overpower the will of unbelievers and compel them to believe. Others feel that all people will eventually believe voluntarily. Still others assert that unbelievers will undergo a period of punishment until they accept salvation in God’s Kingdom.

Universalism operates on the assumption that if persons are subject to eternal punishment, then God’s salvation plan is unsuccessful. Dodd argues that if judgement is God’s final word, then love was ineffective.[[6]](#footnote-6) Boring claims that if we accept exclusivism, yet do not take seriously the passages that seem to indicate universal salvation, we get a picture of a “frustrated God who brought all creation into being but despite his best efforts could only salvage some of it.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

In Chauncy’s opinion, it is “ridiculous to accuse an omniscient God of creating people he knew would be finally impenitent.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Chauncy himself states,

As the First Cause of all things is infinitely benevolent, it is not easy to conceive that he should bring mankind into existence unless he intended to make them finally happy. And if this was his intention, it cannot well be supposed, as he is infinitely intelligent and wise, that he should be unable to propose, or carry into execution, a scheme that would be effectual to secure, sooner or later, the certain accomplishment of it.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Other arguments are advanced to support the teaching of universal salvation.[[10]](#footnote-10) John Hick claims that since God created people for Himself and people find their ultimate satisfaction only in Him, all will eventually come to Him. Psalm 139:7-8 is interpreted to say that God will pursue people even to hell until they turn to Him. It is thought that “no persons have ever existed who can eternally spurn God’s love.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Furthermore, if certain persons are to remain in sin eternally, then the dualism between good and evil will exist eternally as well. Yet, Jesus came to “destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn 3:8).

Moreover, the saints will not be able to enjoy eternal bliss knowing that others are in torment. In addition, the Bible claims that “God will be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28), i.e., everything and everybody will be in God. Furthermore, is seems to some unfair to punish finite transgression for an infinite duration. Adherents of universalism also cite Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep, which the shepherd sought until he found it. It is also suggested that nothing can prevent an omnipotent God from accomplishing His plan to save all.

Defenders of this view also appeal to Paul’s letter to the Romans. In chapter 5, he compares the scope of the Fall with that of salvation – both phenomena encompass all of humanity: “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” (Rom 5:18). Moreover, just as the Lord will eventually save all Israel (Rom 11:26), He is able to save all humanity. In that same chapter, Paul concludes, “For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all” (Rom 11:32).

In answer to the question, “Why, then, evangelize?” universalists respond that conversion in this life will spare individuals from many ills and afford them many blessings. In addition, the New Testament commands us to evangelize. Furthermore, Calvinists evangelize, even though they believe that all the elect will somehow eventually come to faith.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Without a doubt, however, the Bible often makes mention of those who perish. For example, on Judgement Day, “if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:15). We can also appeal to 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; Philippians 3:19; and Matthew 7:21-23; 25:46.[[13]](#footnote-13) Defenders of universalism, however, assume that God’s goal in these passages is to motivate people to obedience in this life. If punishment will be dealt out at all, it will be temporary and corrective. When the Scriptures speak of eternal punishment, they are employing hyperbole.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Some proponents of universalism attempt to explain the biblical teaching on eternal punishment by means of the concept “progressive revelation,” which is when God progressively reveals His truths throughout the course of biblical history. They feel that Paul’s most advanced teachings are in his later writings, and these writings contain verses that are thought to support universal salvation (Rom 11:32, Col 1:19-20, Eph 1:10).

We respond to universalism in the following way. The Bible does teach that God has reconciled all things to Himself in His Son. Yet, that does not imply that salvation comes automatically. One must personally receive the gift of eternal life through repentance and faith. Paul charged his readers, “Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).

We concur that in Romans 5, Paul applies the consequences of the Fall to all humanity. Yet, the benefits of union with Christ come through faith: “For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who *receive* the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:17). Only those who receive the abundance of grace experience salvation.

Sanders offers the following critique of universalism.[[15]](#footnote-15) First, in verses that seem to support this view, one must distinguish the availability of salvation from accepting salvation, as we did in Romans 5:17. Second, we must also make a distinction between reconciliation with God and submission to Him. The fact that someday everyone will submit to the Lord (as in Philippians 2:10 and Ephesians 1:10) does not mean that they are also reconciled to Him. Third, in Matthew 12:32 we learn that the unpardonable sin in not forgiven “either in this age or in the {age} to come.” In addition, the Bible abounds with examples where humanity is divided into two groups: the unrighteous and righteous, unbelievers and believers, etc. Finally, if people are genuinely free, then God cannot force them to accept salvation.

Erickson adds the following thoughts.[[16]](#footnote-16) In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus speaks of two paths: one to life, and the other to perdition. Most people travel the latter path (cf. Matt 22:14). Commenting on Philippians 2:9-11, Erickson notes that even demons acknowledge the lordship of Jesus (Mk 3:11). So then, acknowledging Jesus as Lord in Philippians 2:9-11 does not necessarily result in salvation. In Erickson’s opinion, 1 Corinthians 15:22 refers not to a universal spiritual rebirth, but of the physical resurrection of all people. Finally, in Romans 11:32 Paul is not speaking of the salvation of each individual, but of the opportunity for salvation to all people groups, in particular, to Jews and Gentiles.

The following facts contradict the claim that “eternal” punishment is only temporary. First, a number of passages indicate that people suffer eternally (Isa 66:24; Matt 25:46; Mk 9:44, 46, 48; Rev 14:11). The use of the term αἰώνιος(*aionios*) in Matthew 25:46 is highly significant. It refers both to the eternal bliss of the saints and the eternal punishment of the lost. If believers enjoy eternal blessing, then unbelievers experience torment without end.

In answer to the claim that in the traditional understanding of eternal punishment, good does not conquer evil, we respond that good can overcome evil not only through redemption, but also through judgment.[[17]](#footnote-17) Finally, in Acts 3:21 the phrase “{the} period of restoration” refers not to the restoration of sinners, but the millennial kingdom, about which the prophets often spoke.[[18]](#footnote-18)

### B. Universal Opportunity

“Universal opportunity” means that all people will have the opportunity to hear the gospel, either before or after death. Some adherents of this position posit that this applies only to those who had no opportunity to hear in this life, while others are willing to extend this privilege even to those who rejected Christ during their time on earth. This latter theory resembles universalism, except that there is no guarantee that these individuals will in fact turn to the Lord.

Still another variant of this theory suggests that at the time of death, Jesus personally visits those who have never heard to give them a chance to believe. The decision made at that moment, however, is irreversible.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Several figures from church history held this view.[[20]](#footnote-20) From the second century, the conviction existed that Jesus liberated souls from “prison” (see 1 Pet 3:18-20). Some Fathers taught that when Jesus rose from the dead, He liberated only Old Testament saints.[[21]](#footnote-21) Others proposed that at that time He liberated all who were willing.[[22]](#footnote-22) The liturgy of the Early Church contained a prayer for the deceased.

Some contemporary thinkers also support this view.[[23]](#footnote-23) C. S. Lewis and Clark Pinnock taught that opportunity to hear the gospel after death is granted only to those who positively responded to general revelation in this life. In the opinion of David Bloesch, only those who eternally persist in rejecting God’s grace will be lost.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Defenders of “universal opportunity” appeal to 1 Peter 4:6, where we read, “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.” Opponents of this teaching respond that Peter is speaking of spiritual dead people still alive in the world*.*

Another passage used in support is 1 Peter 3:18-20, where Peter records that Jesus was “put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation (κηρύσσω) 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.” It appears that these individuals had opportunity to receive salvation after death (cf. Eph 4:8-9).

Several alternative explanations are proposed for this difficult passage.[[25]](#footnote-25) First, some suggest that the word “spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit, who preached through Noah to the people of his day. However, the text identifies Christ as the preacher, not Noah. Second, Jesus preached only to those individuals who repented in Noah’s day. On the other hand, the Genesis narrative does not record any conversions at that time. Third, Jesus preached salvation just to those who perished in Noah’s day. Yet, we ask, “Why only these spirits and not all?”

A more plausible option is that Jesus did not preach salvation to these spirits, but rather declared His victory to lost souls (or possibly evil spirits) in hell*.* Nonetheless, we must take into consideration that the verb κηρύσσω (*kerusso*) in the New Testament nearly always denotes preaching with the intent of conversion.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Proponents of universal opportunity refer us to passages of Scripture where the damned are those who actively reject the gospel of Christ (Mk 16:15; Matt 10:32-33; 2 Thes 1:8; Jn 3:18; 3:36; 16:8-9; 15:22). Since a person’s eternal destiny hinges on their response to the gospel, at some point they must hear the gospel, before or after death, in order to accept or reject it. On the other hand, other passages indicate that people are condemned for sin in general, without reference to their response to the gospel (see Rev 20:12-13; Jn 5:29; Rom 2:6-10).[[27]](#footnote-27)

Others defend this theory by claiming that since Jesus has the keys of hell and death, He can free people from the nether world (Rev 1:18; Heb 2:14). Also of note is that those “under the earth” will confess Jesus as Lord (Phil 2:10-11; Rev 5:13). In addition, the gates of the New Jerusalem “will never be closed” (Rev 21:25; cf. Isa 60:11).[[28]](#footnote-28) Does this indicate that people can still repent after death? However, Hebrews 9:27declares, “It is appointed for men to die once and after this {comes} judgment.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Other passages support the claim that there is no hope for redemption after death(Ps 48; Rev 20:11-15).[[30]](#footnote-30)

Other arguments favoring universal opportunity are also advanced.[[31]](#footnote-31) In Matthew 12:32, Jesus declares that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not forgiven “either in this age or in the {age} to come.” Could this indicate that other sins can be forgiven in the age to come? In addition, in John 5:25 we read, “An hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” Yet, in subsequent verses it becomes clear that Jesus is speaking about the physical resurrection of both the saved and the lost*.*

Jesus’ saying in Luke 16:27-29 provides a strong refutation of the theory of universal opportunity. Jesus relates the story of a man in hell appealing to Abraham, “I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” Abraham responds, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” Clearly, neither the man in hell, nor Abraham expected that these brothers would have opportunity to repent after death.

Also in refutation of this teaching, its opponents ask the question, “Why did Peter, writing with the goal of encouraging persecuted believers to hold fast to their faith, allow an opportunity to find salvation after death? Would this not have undermined his readers’ steadfastness in persecution?[[32]](#footnote-32) Another objection is the negative effect this teaching might have on motivating for evangelization and missions.[[33]](#footnote-33) Finally, the Bible repeatedly calls people to come to God in this life(Prov 29:1; Jn 8:24; Heb 3:7-13; 2 Pet 3:9)*.*

### C. Pluralism

The term “pluralism” can have different meanings in different contexts. One can speak of cultural pluralism, philosophical pluralism, or religious pluralism. In this section, we will devote our attention to religious pluralism. According to normative religious pluralism, one God stands behind all religions, and each of them contributes one piece of the total picture of Him and His truth. Therefore, all religions lead to God, and there is no one special messenger from Him. All great religious figures taught some aspect of His truth. In addition, this theory holds that God is so great and unfathomable, that no one religion can comprehend or describe Him adequately.

In answer to the question why religions differ, pluralists appeal to the influence of culture. In different cultures, people perceive God differently, which leads to differing faith systems. Since a single religion can only partially apprehend God’s nature and plan, we must unite all religions to better know and understand Him. Therefore, all world religions must, first of all, acknowledge that they all speak of the same Divine Being and, secondly, find common ground between themselves, eliminating all contradictory doctrines.

Some of the more notable proponents of pluralism include John Hick, Paul Knitter, and William Cantwell Smith. We will devote special attention to how these three approach pluralism. Like all pluralists, Hick believes that one Supreme Being stands behind all world religions. God is so unfathomable that humans cannot know His essence or describe Him in human language. Hick theorizes that people understand God differently because in various cultures He is perceived from different cultural perspectives.[[34]](#footnote-34) This supposedly explains why people usually adopt the religion of their culture. Conversion to a religion foreign to one’s culture is an infrequent phenomenon.[[35]](#footnote-35)

To describe God, Hick uses his unique formulation “the Real.” He writes, “We do not worship the Real in itself but always one or other of its manifestations to humanity.”[[36]](#footnote-36) According to Hick, the task of all religions should be to eliminate all contradictions between themselves in recognition of the fact that they all speak of the same God.

Hick calls for a radical change in religious thinking, like what occurred during the Copernican revolution, when the general worldview changed form an earth-centered to a sun-centered model. Similarly, Hick recommends giving center stage not to Christianity, but to God: “We have to realize that the universe of faiths centers upon *God*, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Hick feels that Christianity does not surpass other world religions and occupies no pride of place among them. He claims to know many fine, morally upright people from non-Christian faiths. He sees no great difference in moral character among followers of different religions. Hick also accuses Christianity of failing to transform the world. He writes:

But if we define salvation as an actual human change, a gradual transformation from natural self-centeredness (with all the human evils that flow from this) to a radically new orientation centered on God and manifested in the “fruit of the Spirit,” then it seems clear that salvation is taking place within all of the world’s religions – and taking place, so far as we can tell, to more or less the same extent.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Hick also observes that even within Christianity, different movements exist. Christianity itself is not a unified faith.[[39]](#footnote-39) Moreover, Hick feels that if Christianity is the only true religion, then it should have found universal acceptance. He thinks that misunderstanding is the reason that Christians distinguish themselves from non-Christians.[[40]](#footnote-40)

When critics of pluralism claim that progress in European countries resulted from the positive presence and influence of Christianity, Hick responds that the keys to Europe’s development, rather, were factors like the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Christianity, in fact, opposed these movements. Hick also cites examples in world history of harm caused by Christians, such as the Crusades, persecution of Jews, etc. Furthermore, Hick cannot tolerate the idea that a loving God would condemn those who never heard the gospel. He believes that in the end all people will be saved.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Hick rejects the Christian teaching of salvation through the death of Jesus Christ. This idea, he feels, derives from ancient pagan culture. It would be unjust for the innocent to die for the guilty. In addition, if God required a sacrifice for sin, then the pardon He offers in not true forgiveness, since He received retribution for sin – the death of Christ.[[42]](#footnote-42) Hick rejects the Deity of Christ as well. The Early Church, under the influence of Greek philosophy, ascribed to Him this exalted status.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Paul Knitter also believes that behind all religions stands one Supreme Being, who He is so unfathomable that humans cannot comprehend Him, and that no one religion can fully describe Him. Knitter names this Being “Mystery.” He has revealed Himself to different religious groups in different ways. Each religion expresses only a partial understanding of this “Mystery.” Therefore, we must treat all religions with respect and seek unity between them.

Knitter defends the position that the most important tasks for religions to accomplish are eliminating poverty and oppression in the world and protecting the environment. He evaluates the quality of world religions by their success in accomplishing these goals. Regarding Christianity, the death of Christ is interpreted as His identification with all who suffer in the world. The resurrection of Christ points to and guarantees ultimate victory for those who suffer now.

Knitter feels that pursuing the above-mentioned goals will secure religious unity as well. In order to effectively deal with poverty, oppression, and pollution of the planet, followers of all religions must cooperate and participate. As they begin to work together on these issues, Knitter assumes, they will discover how much they have in common, and walls between them will start to come down. The end result will be the unification of all religions.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The final figure we will highlight is William Cantwell Smith. The unique feature of his brand of pluralism is his defense of the practice of idolatry. He claims we wrongfully charge idol worshipers with the worship of objects. They actually worship the gods represented by the idols.[[45]](#footnote-45) Since God is unfathomable and exceeds all human understanding, idols are useful, Smith believes, in that they provide the worshiper with a visible image to worship the invisible God. In his opinion, all religions, including Christianity, utilize symbols (i.e. “idols”) in worship. Idol worship is detrimental only when one insists that his or her idol is the only genuine reflection of the true God.[[46]](#footnote-46)

We will begin our evaluation and refutation of pluralism by focusing first on its inconsistencies. Pluralists claim that no one religion can proclaim the whole truth about God. Yet, if all religions are limited in their perception of God and His truth, then how can proponents of pluralism claim that their understanding of God is true and comprehensive? Are they not limited in their perspective as well? If their perception is limited, then why should we accept their system as the true approach to religion and consider other views incomplete?[[47]](#footnote-47)

Pluralism also underestimates God’s ability to reveal Himself. The knowledge of God depends more on His ability to reveal Himself than on people’s ability to perceive His revelation. If we properly assess God’s ability to reveal Himself, then it behooves us not to unite all religions, but seek that religion in which God has truly made Himself known. Another factor weighing against pluralism is the fact that the basic doctrines of various religions sharply differ from one another. How can one conclude that they all testify of the same Supreme Being?[[48]](#footnote-48)

Furthermore, because of the substantial differences between religions, any attempt to unite them will unavoidably lead to compromise. As a result, each religion will lose its uniqueness and essentially cease to exist, at least in its traditional form. So then, the religion that results from the merging of all existing religions is, in fact, a new religion, which fundamentally differs from the faiths that preceded it and replaces them. Pluralism does not unite religions, but replaces them with a new religion – pluralism.

We can also appeal to Scripture to refute pluralism. First, the biblical attitude toward other religions, in both Old and New Testaments, is consistently negative.[[49]](#footnote-49) The apostle Paul, in fact, engaged in turning adherents of other religions “from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). Jesus called leaders of other faiths not “coworkers” or “brothers,” but “thieves and robbers” (Jn 10:8). He claimed to be the exclusive path to God (Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Another key passage concerns Cornelius (Acts 10:1-2), a God-fearing man, but still in need of the gospel of Christ to be saved. Peter did say that “the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him” (Acts 10:34-35), but earlier the angel announced to Cornelius that Peter would speak “words to you by which you will be saved” (Acts 11:14). This means that the phrase “is welcome to Him” refers not to salvation without Christ, but to God’s willingness to receive all who accept the gospel, whether Jew or Gentile.

Finally, Church history rejects pluralism. Early Christianity was birthed in a pluralistic milieu, but the Early Church recognized no other religion as valid. Pluralism thus runs contrary to the historical position of the Church in regards to other faith traditions.

For a more comprehensive analysis of pluralism, see chapter 10 in volume 1 of this series.

### D. Inclusivism

The teaching of “inclusivism” is similar to pluralism in that sincere devotees of any religion can be saved in the context of their religious convictions. The difference with pluralism is that in pluralism, God recognizes all religions as equal. There are many paths to God. According to inclusivism, Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. Yet, those who have not had opportunity to hear about Jesus, but were nonetheless devoted to their own religion, will be acceptable to God, who will apply the benefits of redemption in Christ to such individuals. Thus, they are saved by the blood of Jesus.[[50]](#footnote-50) It is mandatory, though, that such people have never rejected the gospel, but are merely ignorant of it.

Acts 17:23 is cited in support of inclusivism, where in his preaching in Athens, Paul finds a point of contact with his pagan Greek audience: “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown God.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.” On the other hand, before Paul came upon this altar, he had already passed by many statues and altars devoted to Greek gods. Yet, he refrained from mentioning any of them since he could find little commonality between them and the true God. Also significant is that when Paul preached the gospel to them, few responded in faith. It seems that their pagan faith was inadequate to prepare them to recognize and receive the Christian God*.*

There are two types of inclusivism: objective and subjective. Objective inclusivism is the conviction that God accepts faith in another religion as faith in Himself. Consequently, sincere worshipers in other faith traditions are actually worshiping the true God. Subjective inclusivism asserts that the “object” of faith is not important. What is vital is faith itself. It does not matter what or whom a person believes in, but rather the presence of sincere faith.

Let us discuss objective inclusivism in more detail. Its leading proponent is Jacques Dupius. In his view, God revealed Himself not only to Jews, but also to all peoples. For example, every individual can know about God through conscience and observation of nature. In addition, people in antiquity could learn about God through Noah’s encounters with Him. John 1:9 is also interpreted to say that God gives special revelation to everyone who comes into the world. It is also thought that ancient religions have preserved revelation received from the Lord. Paul’s appeal to Greek poets (Acts 17:22-28) may serve to confirm this claim, as does the account of Melchizedek, who worshiped and served the true God among the Gentiles.

At the same time, Dupius fails to appreciate the marked differences between Christian and non-Christian religion. This makes the claim that ancient religions have preserved revelation from God suspect. Furthermore, the Bible does not endorse other religions. Ultimate truth is found only in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Additionally, there is no evidence that Melchizedek was a *pagan* priest. He did indeed serve and worship the true God, but we have no information about his relation to pagan religion.Finally, John 1:9 relates how Jesus the Messiah brings people the knowledge of God through His earthly teaching ministry.

A teacher of subjective inclusivism, Christoph Schwöbel, works off the Reformation principle of salvation by “grace alone” through “faith alone.” Therefore, he considers it inconsequential what or whom a person believes in. All that matters it that a person has faith. If we require people to hold to certain doctrines, then we violate the principle of salvation by grace alone, since acceptance of doctrine is considered a “work” that results in salvation by works.

However, this approach encounters serious logical and theological inconsistencies. “Faith” without an object of faith is meaningless. One must believe in something or someone. The Bible declares, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

Lesllie Newbigin, another proponent of subjective inclusivism, is troubled that many Christians confess Christian doctrine without the presence of active faith, which is necessary for salvation. Christians often resemble Pharisees, whom Jesus rebuked for hypocrisy. Additionally, in Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus warns those who lack living faith:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven {will enter.} Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt 7:21-23).

We differ from Newbigin, though, because the acceptance of doctrine and living faith are not mutually exclusive entities. In fact, they compliment one another. Like Newbigin, the apostles John and James speak against an empty confession of Christian doctrine (1 Jn 2:4; Jam 2:14). At the same time, they do not reject the need for correct doctrine in Christian faith.

The last teacher in this camp that we will investigate is Clark Pinnock. He argues that genuine believers in Jesus have imperfect faith, yet they are nonetheless saved. It follows, then, that the imperfect faith of non-Christians can save them as well. Both Christians and non-Christians know God only in part and believe in Him according to what they know of Him. Pinnock also points out that Jesus was not the object of faith of the Old Testament saints (Heb 11).[[51]](#footnote-51) Romans 4 teaches likewise – the object of Abraham’s faith was not Christ, but Yahweh.[[52]](#footnote-52)

We respond to Pinnock by noting that the important factors are not only the “quality” of our faith, but its “object” as well. It is true that our faith is imperfect, yet our faith is in Jesus Christ. Non-Christians do not direct their faith to the same object. Additionally, the faith of Abraham and the Old Testaments saints was not aimless, but based on God’s revelation and promises.[[53]](#footnote-53)

We also take into consideration the New Testament’s negative assessment of non-Christian religions.[[54]](#footnote-54) Jesus spoke of the religious leaders who preceded Him as thieves and robbers (Jn 10:8). God called Paul to turn adherents of other faiths “from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). The Scriptures repeatedly insist that there is only one way to the Father – through the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Jn 5:12).

From a historical perspective, we observe the existence of various religious faiths in the early Christian centuries. Yet, the Church did not recognize any of them. In other words, the Early Church was very exclusive. If sincere believers in other religions could be saved in the context of their own faith, then what fueled the aggressive missionary movement of the apostolic age?

Finally, we must consider some of the defects of pagan religions.[[55]](#footnote-55) Non-Christian faiths distort the true knowledge of God that is available through general revelation. Instead of acknowledging the true God, they create gods of their own liking. The sacrifices they offer are not propitiatory to receive forgiveness of sin, but an attempt to manipulate the gods to be favorable to them.

### E. Implicit Faith (or Moderate Exclusivism)

**1. Basic Position**

This theory suggests that there exists in the world people who would believe in Jesus if they had the opportunity. This view differs from inclusivism in that such persons do not embrace their native religion, but seek God outside of it. Such individuals respond to God’s “general revelation,” that is, what one can know about God from observation of nature, conscience, and life experience. On this basis, they can surmise that God exists, that He is holy, and that they are sinful and in need of forgiveness. They simply are not cognizant that Jesus died for their sins. Yet, that does not prevent God from applying to them the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus. The response such people make to general revelation qualifies them to receive salvation.

**2. History**

Several well-known and influential figures embraced this theory, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, the Roman Catholic Church, Ulrich Zwingli, John Wesley, and C. S. Lewis. The following excerpts testify of this teaching in the Early Church:

We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham, and Ananias, and Azarias, and Misael, and Elias, and many others (Justin Martyr, *1 Apology*, *46*).

For it was not merely for those who believed on Him in the time of Tiberius Cæsar that Christ came, nor did the Father exercise His providence for the men only who are now alive, but for all men altogether, who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation have both feared and loved God, and practiced justice and piety towards their neighbors, and have earnestly desired to see Christ, and to hear His voice. Wherefore He shall, at His second coming, first rouse from their sleep all persons of this description, and shall raise them up, as well as the rest who shall be judged, and give them a place in His kingdom (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,* 4.22.2).

The Catholic view is most remarkable.[[56]](#footnote-56) For the longest time, Catholics taught that outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation. Participation in the sacraments was obligatory. In the twelfth century, both Pope Innocent III and the Fourth Lateran Council confirmed it, as well as the Council of Florence (15th c.) and the Council of Trent (16th c.).[[57]](#footnote-57)

However, this definition generally applied to Jews and heretics, and not to those who had never heard the gospel. In addition, some prominent Catholic thinkers, such as Hugo of Saint Victory and Bernard of Clairvaux (13th c.), taught that all God required from the unreached was faith in “God’s existence and providence” and “an implicit faith in a mediator.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

In the nineteenth century, Pope Pius IХ (and after him, Pius XII) determined that people who could not have known of Christ could be saved. Such persons, although they can not be part of the “body” of Christ, could nonetheless be part of the “soul” of the Church. Pius IХ wrote:

*We and you know* that those who lie under invincible ignorance as regards our most Holy Religion, and who, diligently observing the natural law and its precepts, which are engraven by God on the hearts of all, and prepared to obey God, lead a good and upright life, are able, by the operation of the power of divine light and grace, to obtain eternal life.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Moreover, the Roman Catholic Encyclopedia of 1913 requires of the unreached love and repentance. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we read,

Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity.[[60]](#footnote-60)

The Catholic Church not only endorses implicit faith, but also teaches that such individuals can embrace not only God’s general revelation, but also positive elements of one’s non-Christian religion. The document *Dialogue and Proclamation* states, “In the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their saviour” (№ 29). Additionally, “They may in many cases have already responded implicitly to God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ, a sign of this being the sincere practice of their own religious traditions, insofar as these contain authentic religious values” (№ 68).[[61]](#footnote-61) Here we see shades of inclusivism as well.

We also note the contribution of the respected contemporary Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, author of the work *Anonymous Christians*. He claims that there are true Christians in other religions, yet they simply do not know that God considers them such. He also teaches that since God became incarnate in Christ, humanity itself became an expression of God. Consequently, those who strive to be genuinely human (in an honorable sense of the word) are genuinely open to God’s grace.[[62]](#footnote-62)

The Catholic Church now divides all humanity into four groups: Catholics, Protestants, the Unreached, and those who reject the gospel. Only the final group has no hope for salvation as long as they continue in unbelief. Regarding the first three, “Each of these groups participate in the grace of God, but to various degrees and with varying experience and enjoyment of that grace.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

Catholics justify their new approach by creating a distinction between the Church and the Body of Christ. Previously, they shared the conviction with the Orthodox that participation in the Eucharist, that is the “body of Christ,” made one a participant in the “Body of Christ,” i.e., the Church.[[64]](#footnote-64) The new view is that, although the Body of Christ has its basis in the Church, it transcends its boundaries to include members of other Christian denominations and religious groups.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Zwingli is an example of a Protestant who embraced implicit faith. He believed “in the salvation of those heathen who loved truth and righteousness in this life, and were, so to say, unconscious Christians, or pre-Christian Christians,” and that “no good and holy man, no faithful soul, from the beginning to the end of the world, that shall not see God in his glory.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

Even Luther, who at times openly insisted that people have personal faith in the gospel, wrote in his commentary on Romans in 1515,

Original sin God could forgive them (i.e., those who have not heard) (even though they may have not recognized it and confessed it) on account of some act of humility toward God as the highest being they know. Neither were they bound to the Gospel and to Christ as specifically recognized, as the Jews were not either. Or one can say that all people of this type have been given so much light and grace by an act of prevenient mercy of God as is sufficient for their salvation in their situation, as in the case of Job, Naaman, Jethro, and others.[[67]](#footnote-67)

In his day, Wesley penned the following:

Such a divine conviction of God, and the things of God, as, even in its infant state, enables every one that possesses it to fear God and work righteousness. And whosoever, in every nation, believes thus far, the Apostle declares is acceptable (From the Sermon “On Faith”).[[68]](#footnote-68)

We have great reason to hope, although they lived among the heathen, yet (many of them) were quite of another spirit, being taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion.[[69]](#footnote-69)

C. S. Lewis adds that such individuals may embrace positive elements of their non-Christian faith:

There are people in other religions who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it.[[70]](#footnote-70)

**3. Support and Counterarguments**

**a. The Sufficiency of General Revelation**

In defense of this theory, its adherents point out that God has granted to all humanity knowledge of Himself through general revelation. They suggest that such knowledge is adequate to save those who respond appropriately to it. Psalm 19:1-2 declares, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.”

Romans 1:19-29 also asserts that God revealed Himself through creation to the people of the world, demonstrating His “eternal power and divine nature.” The word “divine nature” here is θειότης (*theiotes*). Millard Erickson comments that it can apply to any aspect of God’s nature. In this text, Paul also claims, “That which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.” So then, one allegedly can gain a substantial knowledge of the Most High by means of general revelation.[[71]](#footnote-71) Also significant is the phrase “without excuse” in verse 20. If God can condemn Gentiles on the basis of general revelation, then it must provide sufficient knowledge to lead to salvation as well.

Opponents to this teaching object that in Romans 1, Paul never mentions people finding salvation through general revelation, only condemnation. General revelation only shows a person their need for salvation. Оnly special revelation can lead a person to Christ.[[72]](#footnote-72) In addition, Gentiles reject the knowledge afforded them through general revelation (Rom 1:21).[[73]](#footnote-73) Geisler adds that Paul cites Psalm 19 in a context where he insists on the need for gospel preaching (Rom 10:14, 18).[[74]](#footnote-74) Warfield observes in Psalm 19, which comments on both of general (vv. 1-6) and special revelation (vv. 7-11), that only the latter context speaks of redemption (vv. 12-14).[[75]](#footnote-75)

In response to these objections, we note that Romans 1-3 deals not only with the condemnation of the Gentiles who received general revelation, but also the condemnation of the Jews who received special revelation (i.e., the Scriptures). Yet, we know from the Old Testament that, although most of the Israelites rejected God’s revelation, there were genuine believers among them as well (see Heb 11). Can we not assume that among Gentiles who received general revelation there were genuine believers as well? Dale Moody assumes so, who “questions what kind of a God would make enough known about Himself to make persons guilty, but not to save them.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

In addition, God gives to “those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life” (Rom 2:7). Is Paul describing here Gentiles that attempt to respond properly to general revelation?[[77]](#footnote-77)

Those defending implicit faith appeal to Paul’s words in Acts 14:16-17, where he reminds his hearers of the testimony God left in the natural world.

In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:16-17).

Moreover, when preaching to the people of Athens, Paul explains that in the light of general revelation, persons should seek God.

He made from one {man} every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined {their} appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:26-27).

Acts 17:30, though, depicts the weakness of general revelation as a means to know God. It is called the “times of ignorance.” Through special revelation, the Lord calls all to repentance. Others voice the objection that the word “seek” in 17:27 stands in the Greek verb mood “optative.” This tense can express a possible, but very doubtful action. Therefore, even though the nations were given opportunity to seek the Lord, it is very doubtful that they actually did so. On the other hand, the optative can be used for possible or likely actions as well.[[78]](#footnote-78) It is also objected that the phrase, “though He is not far from each one of us,” implies that people poorly respond to general revelation. God is near to all of us, but Gentiles do not recognize Him or acknowledge Him.

**b. Salvation in the Old Testament**

The theory of implicit faith provides a very plausible explanation of how Old Testament saints were saved. They were saved without knowing about Jesus the Messiah, but on the basis of their faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel. According to Romans 4, Abraham received justification in this way. He never heard the gospel, but merely trusted in God’s promise to give him offspring. This faith was reckoned as righteousness. Hebrews 11 gives us a list of individuals whom God counted righteous through faith, though they never specifically believed in Jesus of Nazareth.

Anderson adds the thought that, although the Old Testament faithful did know about a coming Messiah, they did not likely believe that He would be a sacrifice for their sins. Their faith was more primitive than that of New Testament believers. Nevertheless, their faith was sufficient for salvation. Anderson writes, “Believing Jews under the Old Testament dispensation enjoyed forgiveness and salvation through the saving work of God in Christ…. Their knowledge was deficient, their assurance often fitful, but their forgiven status identical with ours.”[[79]](#footnote-79)

The Old Testament sacrificial system is also significant for our discussion. According to Mosaic Law, God forgave sins through the various sin-offerings. The blood of animals served as a prophetic type of the blood of Jesus. Can we not conclude, then, that since forgiveness was available to those who brought animal sacrifices without the knowledge of the coming Redeemer, the unreached who depend on God’s mercy can also benefit from God’s forgiveness without knowing the name of Jesus?

Objections are raised to these proofs as well.[[80]](#footnote-80) Old Testament saints differ from the unreached in that they were responding to special revelation (the Law and Prophets), not to general revelation. In addition, Hebrews 11 reveals that the heroes of Old Testament faith had special insight into God’s plan. They anticipated the coming of Messiah and God’s kingdom (Heb 11:13). According to Hebrews 11:26, Moses endured the sufferings of Christ. Moreover, Jesus declared that Abraham somehow “saw His day” and rejoiced in it (Jn 8:56). Furthermore, the prophets knew of Messiah’s suffering (1 Pet 1:10-12).[[81]](#footnote-81)

However, even with the aid of special revelation, it is doubtful that Old Testament saints fully comprehended God’s plan of salvation. For the longest time, even Jesus’ disciples did not grasp it. It is true that some Old Testament heroes of faith had special insight into God’s plan (Heb 11:13, 26; Jn 8:56; 1 Pet 1:10-12), but it is highly unlikely that all Israel was blessed with such insights. So then, if through the writings of Moses and the Prophets most Israelites were not aware of the coming sacrifice of Messiah for their sins, then it seems that their faith was “implicit.” We concur with Ryrie that in the course of time, the *content* of faith can change, that is, what a person must believe in order to be saved, but the *object* of faith, that is the Lord, does not change.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Norman Geisler raises an interesting question about Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, recorded in Acts 19:1-6. There, he found “disciples” who only knew about the baptism of John the Baptist. They received salvation only after Paul preached the gospel to them. Geisler posits that there was a “transitional time” during which salvation could be obtained through John’s baptism. Since that transitional time was expiring, it was necessary for these disciples of John to accept Jesus.[[83]](#footnote-83) Is it not possible, though, to posit that that God allows not only a transitional “time,” but also a transitional “space.” Those who are geographically distant from the gospel may be shown extra mercy, just as those temporally prior to the gospel were.[[84]](#footnote-84)

**c. History of Gentile Salvation**

Defenders of implicit faith appeal to this system to explain how certain Gentiles, who knew not of Messiah or the Mosaic Law, nonetheless believed in the true God and served Him. We can mention Abel, Enoch, Noah, Lot, Jethro, Melchizedek, the magi, and Job. If these came to a true knowledge of God apart from the gospel, could not others do so as well? Even if some of these received some special revelation from the Lord,[[85]](#footnote-85) that does not mean that they understood God’s salvation plan as presented in the New Testament.[[86]](#footnote-86) Those who claim that these “Gentile believers” were trusting in God’s promise to Eve of a future Deliverer cannot demonstrate that such a tradition was ever passed down to them.

We can focus more on Job’s case. It seems that both he and Elihu responded appropriately to God’s general revelation and possessed a correct knowledge of the Lord, to the degree that it was possible.[[87]](#footnote-87) Job’s other “friends” distorted God’s general revelation and had “not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has” (Job 42:7). We can conclude, then, that an appropriate response to God depends more on the spiritual condition of the responder than on the quality of the revelation.

The story of Cornelius is key for our discussion as well. He is described as “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the {Jewish} people and prayed to God continually” (Acts 10:2). Peter comments, “God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him” (Acts 10:34-35). At the same time, in Acts 11:14 Cornelius was told, “He (Peter) will speak words to you by which you will be saved.” It appears the Cornelius was not saved until he heard and believed the gospel. In Geisler’s opinion, the “transitional time” to be saved under the old system was now passed. Time to believe the gospel![[88]](#footnote-88)

**d. Concluding arguments**

Sanders offers more proofs for implicit faith.[[89]](#footnote-89) God’s grace for salvation is appointed for all people (Tit 2:11). We see God’s care for the Gentiles in action when He sent Jonah to preach to Nineveh. The Bible often testifies that those who seek God will find Him.[[90]](#footnote-90)

Boyd relates more arguments.[[91]](#footnote-91) Jesus taught that persons are condemned on the basis of what they know (Lk 12:47-48). He also mentions God’s love and desire to save all (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9). Some, therefore, conclude, “If God wagers a person’s eternal destiny… on the contingent vicissitudes of where and when that person happens to be born, it is difficult to confess with integrity that God is all-loving and all-good.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

Finally, if God is ready to save departed infants who have no chance to trust in Jesus, it follows that He will judge adults who have no access to the gospel on the basis of their response to general revelation. One can also draw a parallel between the unreached and those mentioned in Matthew 25:37-40, who served Christ, but were unaware of it.[[93]](#footnote-93)

### F. Exclusivism

**1. Basic Position**

Exclusivists claims that only those who hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and believe in Him will be saved. Those who do not believe, or who have never heard, will be condemned. Unlike inclusivism, salvation come not only exclusively through Christ, but is also received exclusively through personal faith in Him. In other words, Christ is needed for salvation not only ontologically, but also epistemologically. Exclusivism is the narrow path to salvation. All followers of other religions and the totally unreached will eternally perish.

**2. History**

Church history records several well known exponents of exclusivism, including Tertullian and Ambrose.[[94]](#footnote-94) The Athanasius Creed leaves that impression as well. We read in the introduction, “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.”[[95]](#footnote-95)

Augustine also advanced this theory.[[96]](#footnote-96) He felt that general revelation was inadequate to communicate the way of salvation, taking into consideration the darkened state of the human mind. We need a more concrete expression of the gospel. Even if persons had no access to the message of salvation, they are still guilty of sin, and God is just in condemning them. Augustine suggested that possibility God did not send the gospel to the Gentiles earlier because He knew that they would reject it. Contrary to Augustine, Thomas Aquinas allowed that if someone was open to God, the Lord would make sure that the gospel would somehow reach that individual. Jacob Arminius shared that conviction.[[97]](#footnote-97)

John Calvin taught that general revelation could only condemn, but not save a person. The natural world merely reveals “God the Creator.” The gospel unveils “God the Redeemer.”[[98]](#footnote-98) Therefore, people must hear the gospel message in order to be saved. In Calvin’s words,

The more shameful therefore is the presumption of those who throw heaven open to the unbelieving and profane, in the absence of that grace which Scripture uniformly describes as the only door by which we enter into life…. Now, it were most incongruous to give the place and rank of sons to any who have not been engrafted into the body of the only begotten Son. And John distinctly testifies that those become the sons of God who believe in his name (*Institutes of the Christian Religion,* 2.6.1).

Since in Calvin’s teaching, all elect individual will unquestionably be saved, God will ensure that they will hear the gospel of grace.[[99]](#footnote-99)

**3. Support and Counterarguments**

Several key Bible verses support the theory of exclusivism, indicating that God requires faith in Jesus Christ for salvation: “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me’” (Jn 14:6); “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); “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 Jn 5:12); “There is one God, {and} one mediator also between God and men, {the} man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). According to John 3:18, those who do not believe in the Son are condemned.[[100]](#footnote-100)

Exponents of exclusivism stress the importance of evangelization and missions. The urgency to fulfill the Great Commission underscores the nations’ need to hear the gospel. Paul affirms, “How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14). In the same context, Paul reveals, “Faith {comes} from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).[[101]](#footnote-101)

We also recall the case of Cornelius noted above. Even such a God-fearing man as he could not be saved without hearing the gospel (Acts 11:14). The theory of exclusivism also aligns with the saying of Jesus, “The gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt 7:14). It appears that Peter also expects that few will be saved, comparing salvation with the outcome of Noah’s flood (1 Pet 3:20-21; 2 Pet 3:6-7).[[102]](#footnote-102)

Erickson also supports this view. He observes the comparison in Matthew 7 of the many who are lost with the few who are saved. We see this phenomenon worked out in history – a minority of people actually turn to Christ. Also notable is that at the end of time, when the world population will be at a maximum, there will be a great turning away from God (Matt 24:9-14). Erickson writes,

Nonetheless, (believers) will be, when compared to the great number of unbelievers, a minority. It is not with any satisfaction that we arrive at this conclusion. On the contrary, it is with a great sense of sorrow that we conclude this. We could wish that it were otherwise. Yet, in the final analysis, it is not our wishes or desires that determine what is true. There is a sufficient number of reasonably clear biblical texts teaching this that we have no choice but to reach this conclusion.[[103]](#footnote-103)

In support of exclusivism, Phillips and Geivett add the following thoughts.[[104]](#footnote-104) People come to faith through the preaching of the Word (Jn 17:20). The New Testament relates that even devoted Jews need to come to Messiah Jesus for salvation (Acts 2:5, 38). They also note that verses referring to God’s desire to save all people (2 Pet 3:9; 1 Tim 2:4; Acts 10:35) occur in contexts speaking of special revelation and the mediatorial work of the Son.

Adherents of exclusivism respond to the objection that God is unfair for condemning the unreached in the following manner. God is just in so doing, because the unreached, in spite of the witness of creation and conscience, nonetheless sin and therefore deserve condemnation.[[105]](#footnote-105) They reject the light they do have and therefore deserve no more light.[[106]](#footnote-106) Calvinists defend exclusivism by claiming that since all the elect will certainly be saved, then the unreached must be among the non-elect.

Some exclusivists work off the concept of God’s so-called “middle knowledge.” This refers to God’s ability to know all that could have been had conditions been different. Therefore, since God knows who would accept the gospel if they had opportunity, He will ensure that such people have a chance to hear it.[[107]](#footnote-107) God will certainly be found by those who sincerely seek Him (Matt 7:7-8; Heb 11:6) and will do everything possible to bring souls to Himself (Isa 5:4; Rom 10:21; Matt 23:37-39).[[108]](#footnote-108) At times, He gave dreams to Gentiles (Gen 20; Dan 2) or sent them angels (Acts 10). Some exclusivists indict the Church for its lack of zeal in reaching the unreached, blaming God’s people for their lost condition.

In refutation of exclusivism, Sanders interprets verses cited in support of this teaching as simply pointing to Jesus as the only mediator between God and people. Jesus is needed for salvation ontologically, but not epistemologically. In other words, salvation comes only through Jesus, but it is not absolutely necessary to know about Him. He also feels that those verses that speak of condemnation of unbelievers refer to those who reject the gospel, not to those who have never heard it.[[109]](#footnote-109)

Moreover, although Erickson defends the exclusivist position, he nevertheless recognizes other verses that speak of a large number of converts, such as Genesis 13:16 and Revelation 7:9. He also considers the huge dimensions of the New Jerusalem and of the Old Testament prediction of nations coming to God in the end times (Ps 47; Isa 4:1-4; 11:9).[[110]](#footnote-110)

Exclusivism encounters several difficulties as well. First, how can exclusivists reconcile this view with the love of God and His stated desire to save all (Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8)? Second, it seems inconsistent with God’s justice for Him to eternally condemn the unreached because of the failure of the Church to reach them.McGrath concurs, that God does not condition the salvation of the unreached on the success of the Church’s missionary enterprise: “We must never, by our inadequate theological formulations, imply that God’s work of salvation is somehow dependent on us.”[[111]](#footnote-111)

Third, the Calvinists’ suggestion that the unreached are among the non-elect is clearly far-fetched. The condition of the unreached is not due to God’s election or lack thereof, but on the historical consequence that the gospel simply has not fully penetrated certain geographical locals*.* It is also problematic to suppose that God will reach the elect among the unreached by dreams or angels. In Scripture, God sends the gospel message exclusively through human messengers(see Acts 10:5-6).[[112]](#footnote-112)

### G. Conclusions

Our topic is both vital and complex. The Bible does not provide us with a straightforward answer as to the fate of the unreached. Therefore, we must piece together a response from indirect implications in the text and general biblical principles. We can well understand why various views have arisen in the course of church history. Some commentators resort to the agnostic approach, claiming that all we can say in the end is, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Gen 18:25).

Assessing the theories proposed above, it is problematic to affirm universalism, since the Bible gives clear indication that some will perish eternally. On the other hand, although exclusivism boasts solid biblical support, it violates the biblical principle of God’s mercy and desire to save all. Pluralism and inclusivism give an overly optimistic assessment of the value of non-Christian religions. Both biblical and ecclesiastical writers look negatively on other religions.

It appears that implicit faith and universal opportunity hold the most promise for solving our dilemma. Between them, we would give preference to the former. Although the theory of implicit faith has its weak points as well, it introduces less difficulties into the overall Christian worldview in comparison with the other options. At the same time, we must admit that our two preferred theories can indeed dampen enthusiasm for evangelization. Therefore, adherents to these theories should give proper attention to this avenue of Christian service.

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3. Noted in Erickson M. J. How Shall They Be Saved? – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996. – P. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Noted in в Sanders, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 81-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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9. Chauncy, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Noted in Sanders, p. 92-103, and Erickson, p. 67-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. From Dalton, *Salvation and Damnation*, p. 82; noted in Sanders, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Erickson, p. 259; Sanders, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Erickson, p. 200-201. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Noted in Sanders, p. 88-89 and Erickson, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sanders, p. 107-111. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Erickson, p. 67, 198-201. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 634, 637. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Thiessen H. C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 504. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sanders, p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 177-184. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hippolytus, Athanasius, Jerome?, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Gregory Nazianzen. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Erickson, p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., p. 168-169. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Оther Early Christian Literature. – Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 543-544. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Sanders, p. 179-182, 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., p. 179-182, 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Noted in Boyd G. A., Eddy P. R. Across the Spectrum. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002. – P. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Erickson, p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Boyd, p. 186-188. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Sanders, p. 186-188, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. However, Erickson notes that Hick himself abandoned the faith in which he was raised, that is, the Anglican faith. Therefore, people’s faith is not always determined by their upbringing in a certain culture (Erickson, p. 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid, p. 105-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Hick J. A pluralistic view // Gundry S.N., Okholm D. L., Phillips T. R. Four views on salvation in a pluralistic world. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. – P. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Hick J. God has many names. – London: MacMillian Press, 1980. – P. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Hick, A pluralistic view, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Hick, God has many names, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Noted in Erickson, p. 89-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Hick, A pluralistic view, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Hick, The non-absoluteness of Christianity, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Hick J. Is Christianity the only true religion, or one among other? // Stewart R. B. Can only one religion be true? – Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013. – P. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Stewart R. B. Can only one religion be true? Considering this question // Stewart R. B. Can only one religion be true? – Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013. – P. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Erickson, How shall they be saved, p. 95-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Hick responds to this objection by saying that pluralists do not claim to have a “privileged position” in knowing the truth, but simply attempt to make sense of religious life as such (Hick, A Pluralistic View, p. 182-183). Still, can Hick guarantee that the pluralist’s solution to the religious question is superior to others? [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Nash R. H. Is Jesus the only savior? – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See 2 Chr 13:9; Isa 20:3-6; 37:18- 19; 40; Jer 2:11; 5:7; 16:20; Acts 19:26; 26:17-18: 1 Cor 1:21; 8:6; 10:19-20; Gal 4:8; Col 1:13; 1 Thes 1:9; 2:16; 2 Thes 1:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. In comparing inclusivism and exclusivism, Boyd makes an interesting observation. According to inclusivism, Jesus fills the role of Savior ontologically, but not epistemologically. According to exclusivism, Jesus fills the role of Savior both ontologically and epistemologically. In pluralism, He fills neither role (Boyd, с. 179). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Erickson, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Sanders, p. 227 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Erickson, p. 187-188. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. See 2 Chr 13:9; Isa 20:3-6; 37:18- 19; chp. 40; Jer 2:11; 5:7; 16:20; Acts 19:26; 26:17-18; 1 Cor 1:21; 8:6; 10:19-20; Gal 4:8; Col 1:13; 1 Thes 1:9; 2:16; 2 Thes 1:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Taken from Hendrick Kraemer [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Erickson, p. 33-46, 87-119; Dulles A. The Systematic Theology of Faith: A Catholic Perspective // Lee J. M. Handbook of Faith. – Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1990. – P. 159-160; Hill B. R. Exploring Catholic Theology. – Mystic, CN: Twenty Third Publishers, 1995. – P. 224, 259; Warfield B. B. Two studies in the history of doctrine : Augustine and the Pelagian controversy : the development of the doctrine of infant salvation. – New York: Christian Literature Company, 1897. – P. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. The Catholic view so radically changed that in 1953, Father Leonid Finney was excommunicated from the church for teaching that outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation (Erickson, p. 103-104). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Sanders, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Warfield, Infant Salvation, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Catechism of the Catholic Church. № 1260. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. https://www.vatican.va/roman\_curia/pontifical\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\_pc\_interelg\_doc\_19051991\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\_en.html [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Erickson, p. 110-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Pannenberg W. Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1991-1998. – V. 3. – P. 467-468. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Smedes L. B. Union with Christ. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983. – P. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Schaff P., Schaff D. S. History of the Christian Church. – New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910. – V. 8. – P. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Luther’s works // Ed. H. C. Oswald. – Philadelphia, PA: Concordia, 1972. – V. 25. – P. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. McGrath A. Christian Theology. – 4th ed. – Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Pinnock С. An Inclusivist View // Gundry S.N. Okholm D. L. Phillips T. R. Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. – P. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. From *Mere Christianity,* noted in McGrath, Christian Theology, p. 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Erickson, p. 147-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Noted in Sanders, p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Phillips W. G., Geivett R. D. A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach // Gundry S.N. Okholm D. L. Phillips T. R. Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. – С. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Geisler, p. 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Warfield B. B. The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume 1: Revelation and Inspiration. – Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008. – P. 5-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Erickson, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid., p. 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. See 2 Pet 1:2; 1 Thes 3:11; 5:23; 2 Tim 1:16; 4:16; Mk 11:14; Lk 1:38; 2 Thes 2:17; 3:5; Jude 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
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80. Grudem W. Systematic Theology. – Leicester, England: Intervarsity; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 116ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Noted in Sanders, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Sanders, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Geisler, p. 301, 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Erickson, p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. For example, Enoch (Gen 5:22); Job (Job chps. 39-42); Noah (Gen 6:13); Jethro (Ex 18:11); the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5); the Queen of Sheba (2 Chr 9:8). It is never stated that Melchizedek received special revelation (Erickson, p. 149). [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Erickson, p. 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. It is significant that Job received no “special revelation” until chapter 38. Yet, even before that he was regarded by God as “a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil” (Job 1:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Geisler, p. 303. Sanders looks at this from a different point of view. He feels that Cornelius was already saved just like other Old Testament saints. Gospel preaching merely brought him into a fuller experience of salvation (Sanders, p. 66). [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Sanders, р. 132, 137, 236-246; 284-285. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. See Deut 4:29; 2 Chr 15:2; Prov 8:17; Isa 55:6; Jer 29:13; Lam 3:25; Amos 5;6; Lk 11:9-10; Acts 17:27; Heb 11:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Boyd, р. 209-212. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Ibid., р. 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Erickson, р. 106-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Erickson, p. 34; Sanders, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/109017/Athanasian-Creed.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Sanders, p. 36, 51-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Ibid., p. 152, 155. Some regard Martin Luther as an exclusivist (Geisler, p. 302; Erickson, p. 49). However, his statements quoted in our section on “implicit faith” seem to indicate otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. McGrath, Christian Theology, p. 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Sanders, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Boyd, p. 181; Phillips, p. 218-242. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Noted in Sanders, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Phillips, p. 218-242. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Erickson, p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
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106. Geisler, p. 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Noted in Sanders, p. 168-174. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Boyd, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
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110. Ibid., p. 208-209. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
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112. Sanders, p. 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)