

Biblical Theology and the Inclusivist Challenge

Editorial: Paul R. House

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Not all challenges to orthodox belief come from outside evangelical circles. Sometimes individuals who hold a high view of scripture support unbiblical theological ideas. The recent advocacy of Inclusivism by some evangelicals is a significant example of this problem. To be sure, it is no secret that non-evangelicals have argued for many years that there may be a second chance after death for those who have never heard the gospel, that salvation may be mediated through non-Christian religions, and that God's loving nature precludes the possibility that a majority of the human race is headed for an eternal hell. What is relatively new, and troubling, is that a few key thinkers from traditionally evangelical circles, such as Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, and John Sanders, have joined them. Though no one of good will can accurately question the motives of these individuals, their arguments for Inclusivism are faulty on methodological, theological, and practical grounds. It is clear that these thinkers believe that their views will lead to more compassionate evangelism, but, sadly, this goal in reality is undermined by their own theological position.

Methodology

Inclusivists employ a questionable eclectic methodology. Though no essay of this length can do justice to their ideas, it is fair to say that Inclusivists use biblical terminology to begin their arguments, then define those terms in non-biblical ways. For

example, they routinely start discussions by asserting the biblical principle that God is love. Next, rather than defining this concept through contextual exegesis, they shift to a philosophical assertion: a loving God will not give some persons opportunities to hear the gospel that others will not have. Then, they proceed to claim that this conclusion necessitates a further one, which is that salvation may reside in other faiths, or even that saving faith may be exercised for the first time after death. Another example of this type of argumentation is the tendency to affirm that salvation comes only through Christ, which is certainly a biblical truth. Having stated the scriptural proposition, however, they argue that Jesus' death mediates salvation through other religions, a notion foreign to biblical theology. As Winfried Corduan argues in this issue of *SBJT*, Inclusivists often gloss over the real differences between Christianity and other world faiths. Through this sort of blended methodology the Inclusivist sounds biblical without having to apply the whole of the Bible to his or her conclusions.

Further, at times Inclusivist methodology includes emotional arguments that have no evidential basis. For example, in this issue Clark Pinnock asks why Doug Geivett cannot be more open to lots of persons being saved. Of course, this question is not an argument. It is a less-than-subtle attempt to make those who disagree with Inclusivism appear small-minded. Such questions are as inappro-

priate in organized discourse as a person committed to the exclusive nature of salvation in Christ asking Inclusivists why they are so blind and liberal. The issue is not who loves lost people more; the issue is whose interpretation of scripture is most accurate.

Biblical Theology

Inclusivists also fail to take the whole of biblical theology into account. They are especially deficient in their analysis of Old Testament theology's contribution to the debate, which in turn leads to an inadequate reading of relevant New Testament passages. Three issues deserve mention in this regard.

First, it is true that salvation comes to Jew and gentile alike in the Old Testament, and it is true that not everyone who knows the living God in the Old Testament comes to this knowledge through direct commitment to the Sinai covenant. Abimelech, Melchizedek, Rahab, Job, and others come to know God without the benefit of specific help from the chosen people. Still, it must be emphasized that these biblical figures, however they gain a relationship with God, know the Lord in the same way that the scriptures state that the chosen people know God. In other words, God does not reveal himself to them through Baalism or some other ancient polytheistic religion. Thus, while it is true that the Lord makes himself known through visions or other means, it is not true that he is revealed as one who may be defined differently than the one true God described in the rest of scripture. Rather, these individuals receive knowledge of the one, creating, revealing, saving God known by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Second, as their New Testament succes-

sors do in the book of Acts and elsewhere, Old Testament figures urge non-Jewish audiences to serve the living God. This tendency is not as prevalent as it is in the New Testament, but it exists nonetheless. After all, Jonah preaches to the Assyrians, Daniel bears testimony to the Babylonians, and several of the prophets both denounce the nations' current worship practices and promise a bright future for them as they come to serve the Lord. There is no indication that the Lord mediates salvation through any of the ancient religions known to the Old Testament writers. In fact, these religions are routinely denounced.

Third, the Old Testament does not indicate that the world is filled with persons who would trust in the Lord if they only had a chance to do so. In fact, quite the opposite is the case, for even the chosen people neglect the revelation given them. Converts are won to the Lord, to be sure, yet most that hear the truth reject it. It is also true that the Old Testament offers no hope for a second chance for salvation after death. Rather, the day of the Lord is portrayed as providing a final destruction of the wicked.

The New Testament does not disagree with the Old Testament in any of these matters. If anything, Jesus' preaching mission to his fellow Jews, the early church's missionary efforts among Jews and gentiles alike, and the picture of final judgment offered in Revelation and other books necessitate the doctrine of salvation through specific faith in Christ alone while in this life. Whether ministering to polytheists or monotheists, the early church claimed that specific, cognizant, scriptural faith in Christ is the only way to eternal life. As for other religions, the New Testament uniformly considers continuing adherence to these faiths after hearing the

gospel a serious barrier to a saving commitment to Christ.

Evangelism and Missions

Because of its methodological and theological weaknesses, Inclusivism is also faulty on practical grounds. Again, the issue is not who loves lost people and who does not. I have not the slightest doubt that evangelical proponents of Inclusivism desire that millions of non-Christians will someday find eternal life. I also have not the slightest doubt that traditional evangelicals have the same desire. After all, evangelical missionaries have risked everything dear to them to take the gospel to those who have never heard of Christ. They have used every legitimate means (and even some illegitimate means) to make Christ known in remote places. At times they have found individuals that long to hear of Christ because of a vision or the influence of another religion. It seems, though, that in every instance of this interest in the gospel the seeker wishes a way out of a religion that does not honor Christ as the unique Son of God, and the visionary knows of Christ as the scriptures reveal him, not as another religion portrays him. Missionaries also have found that many millions who hear about Christ do not respond to the gospel with saving faith. Despite this fact, every effort must be made to encourage further attempts at preaching the gospel to the lost wherever they live.

The missionary record of traditional evangelicals is not perfect, but it is clearly on the side of doing everything possible to propagate the gospel. What is the record of those committed to Inclusivism, or the record of Inclusivism's radical relative Universalism? Perhaps it is too soon

to tell, but Inclusivists will probably find it hard to preach their views zealously. Urgency will not likely mark their missionary efforts, nor will their reading of scripture likely prove compelling to Christians or non-Christians. I believe that these results will stem from a faulty theology, not just from a lack of zeal or a lack of an effective way to market the gospel. Inclusivism may not prove as deadly to church growth and evangelism as Universalism, but I see no reason to think that it will not.

Conclusion

Inclusivism as defined by Clark Pinnock in this issue (and by others in various publications) bears neither the mark of full-orbed biblical theology or of effective theological methodology. To my mind, at best, Inclusivism represents the thinking of caring, scholarly Christians who rely on extremely debatable philosophical reasoning for their position. At worst Inclusivism compromises the teachings of scripture in a way that will undermine the propagation of the gospel. Allowing the lost to take refuge in untruths is not compassion; it is kind hopes gone awry. Thus, Inclusivism is an unwilling, yet culpable, partner in the lost not taking responsibility for their adherence to idolatry and not confessing faith in Jesus Christ, the only name "under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (Ac 4:12).