

The *SBJT* Forum: Responses to Inclusivism

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the Forum's format. Timothy George, Carl F. H. Henry, D. A. Carson, Scott Hafemann, and C. Ben Mitchell have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the Forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: Historically, why have Christian missionaries believed salvation does not come through other religions?

Timothy George: In 1792 William Carey, an English shoemaker turned Baptist pastor, published a little treatise entitled *An Inquiry Into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. Using the best statistics available to him at the time, Carey surveyed the religious state of the world and concluded that "a very considerable part of mankind is still involved in all the darkness of heathenism." Against certain hyper-Calvinistic Christians, he argued that the Great Commission was still in effect and that the missionary mandate of Jesus required believers "to use every lawful method to spread the knowledge of His Name" to all peoples everywhere. For forty-one years Carey himself labored in India proclaiming to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and all others a "free salvation for poor and perishing sinners."

Carey is still honored as "The Father of Modern Missions," but his understanding of the exclusive claims of Christ has been denigrated by many modern theologians. Today we wince at words such as *heathen* and *sinners* when applied to those who do not consciously profess faith

in Jesus Christ. Is there really a culture-permeable gospel without the knowledge of which men and women are irretrievably lost? What about those who have never heard the name of Jesus? Is Jesus indeed "the only way" or merely one of several possible pathways to God? Both religious pluralism and Christian inclusivism seek to answer these questions in ways that soften the offense of the message Carey and generations of missionaries who followed in his wake believed they had been commissioned to proclaim: Personal faith in Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation for all peoples everywhere, and those who die without this saving knowledge face eternal separation from God.

Religious pluralism holds that the divine transcendent reality has many different "faces" revealed in the various religious traditions among humankind. Thus what is called "salvation" in Christianity is more or less equivalent to *nirvana* in Buddhism, submission to Allah in Islam, or following the way of Torah in Judaism. In this view, the aim of missions and evangelism should not be conversion, but rather (as the famous Hocking Report of 1932 put it) "the emergence of the various religions out of their isolation into a

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world fellowship in which each will find its appropriate place.” However, far from engendering greater respect for the various world religions, the pluralist perspective is marked by profound disrespect because it relativizes and disregards the distinctive claims made by the adherents of these religious traditions. For example, Islam regards the Qu’ran not merely as one religious writing among many, but as the definitive revelation of Allah. Likewise, Buddhism does not desire eternal bliss in the Kingdom of God, but rather the annihilation of the self and the transcendence of existence altogether. Had the early Christians been guided by the pluralist paradigm, they could certainly have escaped persecution at the hands of the Romans who were happy for “followers of the Way” to worship Jesus alongside the imperial deity, as one Lord among many. This the Christians could not do. Their faith was rooted in the Old Testament declaration, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One,” and the New Testament confession, “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Christian inclusivists, whether of the Roman Catholic or revisionist evangelical variety, agree with biblical particularists that Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and humanity. However, out of concern for the “fairness” of God, and the “wider hope” of universal salvation, they teach that many of the unevangelized may be saved through God’s general revelation. According to some (though not all) proponents of this view, the major world religions contain sufficient truth to bring their adherents to a saving knowledge of God, apart from the special revelation of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures.

From the standpoint of biblical theology, however, this theory trivializes the tragic consequences of the Fall and thus

exalts too highly the possibilities of common grace. The specific message of Jesus Christ, his cross and resurrection, is not an extra “add on” to what is already present to the human psyche through creation and culture. No, it is an absolutely decisive factor in bringing lost sinners into right relationship with God. See not only John 14:6 and Acts 4:12, but also John 3:18 and 1 John 5:12.

This does not mean, of course, that there is no value or truth in non-Christian religions, but that such systems are unable to lead anyone to salvation—because of their own falsity as well as human fallenness. Thus, Carey said to those who asked him about the Hindu *Shastras* and other holy books of India, “I told them that their books were like a loaf of bread, in which was a considerable quantity of good flour, but also a little very malignant poison, which made the whole so poisonous that whoever should eat of it would die.” According to Paul in Romans 1-3, general revelation does serve a crucial purpose: it renders us inexcusable before God and thus accountable for the light we have received both through creation and in our conscience.

Should we then dogmatically declare that no one could be saved apart from the preaching of the Gospel through human missionaries and evangelists? Biblical particularists who believe in the sovereignty of God will be cautious in making such a blanket claim. God is God and can work by extraordinary as well as ordinary means to accomplish his purpose. Thus the Second London Confession of 1689 speaks of the salvation of babies who die in infancy, as well as that of “other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.” The risen Christ himself appeared

to Saul of Tarsus and the apostle raises the possibility of angelic proclamation. But he also says that Satan himself can sometimes appear as an angel of light, and warns that the message proclaimed by angels may be “another gospel” (2 Co 11:14, Gal 1:8). If such special communications of the gospel are extended in the gracious providence of God, and there is nothing in Scripture to indicate that this is so, then we can be sure that their content will be identical with that of the apostolic witness, that is, salvation by grace alone, received by faith alone, on the basis of Christ’s finished work on the cross alone. In the meantime, what John Calvin said about predestination should also guide us in our discussion of *salus extra muros ecclesiae*: “We should not investigate what the Lord has left hidden in secret, nor neglect what he has brought out into the open, so that we may not be convicted of excessive curiosity on the one hand, or of excessive ingratitude on the other” (*Institutes* 3.21.4).

SBJT: Many Inclusivists argue that Christ’s death mediates salvation even through other religions. Is this viewpoint biblically and theologically valid?

Carl F. H. Henry: Notions of universal salvation have been promoted by critics of the doctrine of eternal punishment of the wicked. Many deplore the doctrine of hell as unchristian, and especially as incompatible with God’s love. Yet Jesus is quoted by the Gospels as saying more about hell than about heaven.

For more than a century champions of salvific inclusivism have shared in this repudiation on one ground or another. In 1878 the English churchman Frederic W. Farrar published five sermons titled *Eternal Hope*, which affirmed that while some

unbelievers who resist Christ even in the life to come may fall under endless divine judgment, full salvation awaits the great majority.

Modernists and mediating evangelicals have championed the doctrine of universal salvation. So severe is the judgment that Jesus passes on the unrepentant wicked that one can understand Farrar’s enduring hope for the salvation of all. But scriptural passages that speak of universal reconciliation include in their biblical context an exhortation for repentance and regeneration.

It is all too easy, as some profess to do, to find traces of the divine in all world history and to postulate everywhere a latent or unconscious Christianity. A generation ago the Hindu theologian Raymond Pannikar wrote of *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (1965) and contended that in all religions devout believers confess what is implicitly a christological faith. The religion of the Bible is then considered a foundation shared by all religions.

Somewhat the same misunderstanding underlies the view expressed by the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who regards the ethico-religious consciousness of all humans as a basis on which the gospel rests. Yet nowhere does the apostle Paul commend such a view. As *Today’s English Version* puts it, “Salvation is to be found through (Jesus) alone; for there is no one else in all the world, whose name God has given to men, by whom we can be saved” (Ac 4:12). An exclusivity is here affirmed: Christ is *the* truth, not simply one among many. Precluded is the notion that God reveals himself in all religions, among which Christianity is chronologically somewhat a tardy phenomenon.

This need not imply that the Christian missionary outreach is obliged to con-

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demn the non-biblical religions as a preliminary phase of its public task and to displace and replace them. Such a program would only undermine the existing social structures, worldviews, and cultural customs through which the existing religions seek to fend off chaos without providing an alternative. This is not to welcome the various alternatives to revealed religion as acceptable equivalents. It is rather to remind us that the evangelical task is to exalt Christ and to proclaim the good news of biblical revelation and redemption, and not simply to discredit existing options.

The Christian revelation is not to be assimilated or subordinated to religion-in-general or to the rival non-biblical faiths. The Great Commission provides no call to legitimate the non-biblical options as if the so-called great religions of the world offer equivalent values. Christ's incarnation is not to be found in the non-biblical religions, either by way of promise or fulfillment. The competing and conflicting world cultures do not offer access to Christ. Properly understood, they are in fact challenged and confronted by revelation, rather than providing a preliminary disclosure of grace that supposedly permeates all human life, outside as well as inside the church.

SBJT: Does the Johannine corpus leave room for salvation through means other than specific faith in Christ?

D. A. Carson: In some ways, this question is remarkably perverse.

I understand why it must be asked, of course: not for a moment am I suggesting that there is perversity in the editor, who put the question to me. It has to be asked because today there are increasingly strident voices that argue that although all

salvation comes through Jesus Christ, it does not follow that there must be personal, self-conscious faith for salvation to take place. God in his grace, it is argued, may save some people by the merits of his Son, without their ever having heard of his Son. So is it not legitimate to ask whether the books of the Johannine corpus leave room for salvation "through means other than specific faith in Christ?"

So yes, the question may be asked. Indeed, in today's climate, it *must* be asked. Still, in some ways it is perverse. It is a little like the questions teenagers sometimes ask: "Is there anything in the Bible to stop me from doing X?" "What's wrong with Y?" Once again, the questions must be asked, and answered. But at best, such questions are remarkably immature. They try to get the Bible to answer things which, strictly speaking, are not quite on the Bible's agenda. Worse, they focus on something just slightly skewed. As compared with the teen's question, surely the Bible's focus is on how to please God, what are our most important priorities, and the like—not what we can get away with. Similarly, there can be little doubt that the Bible's focus is on the plan of salvation God has provided. Men and women can be reconciled to their Maker through the death of the Son he sent into the world. Men and women must repent and put their faith in him. The gospel must be preached everywhere, and will draw people together from every tribe and language and people and nation. Strictly speaking, it does not focus an enormous amount of attention on the question as to whether some might be saved even if they do not consciously trust Christ, or if so, how many such a group might comprise. So I am being asked if the Bible, in one of its corpora, allows space for such a view.

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It is a bit like trying to disprove a negative proposition. Moreover, this particular vision of the “anonymous Christian” (the expression is Karl Rahner’s) is on the face of it remarkably insulting to devout believers of other faiths. Most devout Hindus or Muslims that I know would not like to be informed that they are really “anonymous Christians,” anymore than devout Christians want to be told that they are “anonymous Buddhists.”

Certainly the Johannine corpus includes many passages that insist on some kind of exclusion. One thinks, for instance, of Thomas’ question and Jesus’ answer. Thomas protests, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answers, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:5, 6). But the critic might well respond that this sort of text does not really address the crucial question. For both sides of this particular debate agree that people gain salvation solely through Jesus Christ: no one comes to the Father except through him. But does this passage, they ask, necessarily exclude those who may be saved by him who have nevertheless not self-consciously reposed their faith in him, because they have never had the privilege of hearing about him?

At one level, of course, the critics are right: *formally*, John 14:6 does not address that question. Nevertheless the Gospel of John so repeatedly insists that *faith in Jesus* is the condition of salvation that the drift of this book is all in one direction. God gave his Son so that “whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). Again: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from

death to life” (5:24). And this is the fruit of God loving the world and sending his Son into the world (3:16,17): in other words, the mission of the Son into the world is to result in people believing in him and experiencing eternal life. The Son’s mission is never cast as providing eternal life for certain people whether they have believed in him or not. If the Gospel of John does not *formally* exclude such a possibility, it is only because it does not set out to address that particular question. Its direction does not encourage speculation along that front.

First John is more focused yet. As in the Fourth Gospel, there is an emphasis on the cross as the place where sin was dealt with, and therefore as the ground on which people approach God (2:2, 4:10). Potentially, that ground is sufficient for the whole world (2:2). At the same time, 1 John is patently clear that the whole world is not saved. When this epistle describes who is “in” and who is “out,” it deploys a number of criteria, what Robert Law famously called “the tests of life.” Law’s category has its problems, but these need not concern us. Law detected three “tests”: Genuine Christians (a) love other Christians, (b) do what Christ says, and (c) believe the truth, in particular the truth about who Jesus is.

It is this latter category that is most applicable to the topic at hand, precisely because it is worded in several ways. In 1 John 2:23, we are told, “No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” The critic may respond, “Yes, but this text does not specifically deal with the person who does not *deny* the Son, yet who has not specifically *acknowledged* the Son, either. That person may not even have heard of the Son.” Formally, of course, that is

correct—though on the face of it, it flies in the face of the tenor of the book. Moreover, 1 John 4:2-3 is even stronger: “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does *not acknowledge* Jesus is not from God.” Formally, this excludes those who *do not acknowledge* who Jesus is. Doubtless someone may argue that this is merely a rhetorical way of saying that such people *deny* who Jesus is. But if the critic is allowed to appeal to the larger rhetoric of the document, so may I—and I insist that the rhetoric of the document aligns who is “in” with certain faith-content and certain performance-in-life—even while insisting that the *ground* of acceptance before God is the atonement. The only reason one wants to appeal to the most pedantic reading is because that is the kind of pedantry the critics deploy to avoid what the text says in, say, John 14:6. If we respond with the same level of pedantry, citing 1 John 4:2-3, the text is against them.

The same sort of polarization between who is “in” and who is “out” is found in the Apocalypse, though there, of course, the imagery is very different. In the massive vision of Revelation 4-5, no one is found who is worthy to approach the throne of God and open the seals of the scroll in his right hand (5:3). In the symbolism of the vision, this means that no one was found worthy to bring to pass all God’s purposes for blessing and judgment. John weeps at the news, until an interpreting elder reassures him: the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is also the Lamb, who emerges from the center of the throne of God, has prevailed, and he alone brings to pass God’s purposes. As the book progresses, a massive dualism controls the dramatic apocalyptic symbolism. Either

one bears the mark of the beast and is thereby spared the beast’s wrath, but faces the wrath of the Lamb, or one bears the mark of the Lamb and is thereby spared the Lamb’s wrath, but faces the wrath of the beast (Rev 13-14). Implicitly, the question becomes, whose wrath do you want to face? Everyone bears one mark or the other. Attempts by some writers to define “the eternal gospel” in Revelation 14:6 as a generic appeal to the God of creation or the like, without reference to the Lamb and his death which are so central to the unfolding drama of this book, are desperate expedients deployed to support a lost cause. Specifically, this appeal argues that the content of “the eternal gospel” in 14:6 is simply to “Fear God and give him glory” (14:7). But by this stage in the church’s history, “gospel” is a word so bound up with the good news of Jesus this is an extraordinarily ahistorical reading—the more so in a book in which the Lamb, both slaughtered and reigning—is the One who alone has brought about God’s purposes for redemption and judgment. It is better by far to understand 14:7 and its exhortation to fear God to be the warning added to (but not identified with) “the eternal gospel” (14:6) that has already been explained.

So does the Johannine corpus “leave room for salvation through means other than specific faith in Christ”? Certainly not on its most obvious reading.

SBJT: What are the main challenges being raised against the exclusivity of the gospel as presented by Paul?

Scott Hafemann: Due to our extreme isolation and homogeneity in the past, most Christians in the West have only recently been confronted with the problem of pluralism. These days, encountering sincere

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adherents of other faiths has caused many to rethink whether the exclusive claims of the gospel can be maintained. But this uncertainty is more a reflection of the sudden shock caused by our own cross-cultural myopia and provincialism than it is a discovery that the Bible actually teaches universalism. Indeed, the pluralism of the modern world is no more dramatic than that faced by Israel or Paul. In Paul's day every Roman was born into a nexus of personal religious affiliations and family household cults. Add to this milieu the Roman imperial cult, the Greco-Roman pantheon of deities descending down from Jupiter, and the mystery religions venerating gods from Greece, Anatolia, Egypt, Persia, and Syria, and our situation looks tame in comparison. In Corinth, for example, remains have been found of official temples and shrines to the emperor, the Greek deities Apollo, Athena, Aphrodite, Asclepius, Tyche, Dionysus, Zeus, Neptune, Demeter and Kore, Palaimon, and Sisyphus, as well as to the Egyptian gods Isis and Sarapis. To assert the One God of Israel and Jesus as his Messiah, *the* Son of God, was just as startling and exclusive then as it is now (cf. 1 Co 8:5-6; Php 2:9-11).

Yet Paul plainly teaches the reality of eternal judgment for those who do not embrace Christ (cf. 2 Th 1:8-9, 2:8-12; Gal 6:7-8; Php 3:18-19; 1 Co 6:9-10, 16:22; Ro 1:18-2:12, etc.). He holds no hope for those who remain in idolatry and its lifestyles, for he attributes the practice to demons (cf. Ro 1:25, 28-32; 1 Co 6:9-10, 12-20, 8:4, 10:14-22, 12:2; Gal 4:8; 1 Th 1:9, 4:5; Eph 2:12; Col 2:8, 15, etc.). Of course, many today simply reject these declarations as patently false or reinterpret them in view of some abstracted theological principle (such as a universal "election" in *the* elect one, Christ).

These challenges are clear-cut, for they are related to questions of the authority of Scripture and theological method.

More challenging are the arguments of those who argue for a universalism within Paul's own thought. Those who take this tact usually point to the parallels in Romans 5:15-18 (cf. 2 Co 5:19; 1 Ti 4:10; Tit 2:11) between the consequences of Adam's sin and Christ's act of righteousness (see esp. 5:18). They argue that while some people are justified by faith already in this life, Paul believes that the rest of humanity will be justified at the final judgment, when Christ's final, cosmic act of deliverance will bring eternal life to all creation (cf. Ro 8:21-25).

But it is clear from many passages that the terms "all" (Greek: *pas*) and "world" (*kosmos*) do not always mean "every single human being." The former is often limited by context (cf. Ro 8:32, 12:17-18, 14:2, 16:19). The latter often refers to the realm of rebellion under this evil age (1 Co 6:2, 7:31, 33; 2 Co 4:4; Ro 12:2; Gal 1:4, 6:14; Eph 2:2, 6:12; Col 2:8; 2 Ti 4:10), the inhabited earth generally or part of it (Ro 1:8, 10:18; Col 1:6; 1 Co 4:9; 1 Ti 1:15, 6:7), or the diversity of those within the world as made up of Jews and gentiles (Ro 11:12, 15). Context is king; we must determine the specific meaning of these terms in their own respective contexts. Thus, in his recent, excellent commentary, Douglas Moo rightly observes that in Romans 5:15

'The many' refers simply to a great number; how inclusive that number might be can be determined only by context. In the protasis of this verse, 'the many' clearly includes all people; for Paul has already said that 'all died' with reference to the sin of Adam (v.12). But in the apodosis ('how much more...') 'the many' must be qualified by Paul's insistence in v. 17 that only those who 'receive'

the gift benefit from Christ's act. Here it refers to 'a great number' of people (but not all of them) or to 'all who respond to the gift of grace.'¹

Romans 5:17

reminds us—lest we have forgotten Romans 1-4!—that righteousness and life are for those who *respond* to God's grace in Christ and that they are *only* for those who respond. What appears at first sight to be a universalism on both sides of the Adam/Christ parallel is here, then, importantly qualified....²

Hence, Paul's point in 5:18 is not so much that the groups affected by Christ and Adam, respectively, are coextensive, but that Christ affects those who are his just as certainly as Adam does those who are his. When we ask who belongs to, or is "in" Adam and Christ, respectively, Paul makes his answer clear: every person, without exception, is "in Adam" (cf. vv. 12d-14); but only those who "receive the gift" (v.17; "those who believe," according to Rom. 1:16-5:11) are "in Christ."³

Those who try to argue exegetically that Paul taught an ultimate universalism will have difficulty convincing anyone who is not predisposed to that view.

The importance of one's predisposition can be seen most poignantly in the corollary question of the status of the Jews within salvation history. We may concede that Paul believed that gentile pagans need Jesus. But do the Jews need to know Jesus as the Christ in order to belong to God's eschatological people? In the shadow of modern Zionism, the holocaust, the re-establishment of the state of Israel, and the influence of dispensational theology, this question is filled with the intense emotion of an apparent anti-Semitism.

For almost forty years Krister Stendahl,

long-time professor of New Testament at Harvard Divinity School and former Bishop of Stockholm, has argued that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone served the very narrow purpose of defending the rights of gentile converts to full participation in God's promises to Israel, i.e. to be "honorary Jews," without having to keep the Law.⁴ Conversely, Stendahl argues that Paul's purpose in Romans 9-11 is to counter gentile pride in the face of Jewish rejection of Jesus and to affirm "a God-willed coexistence between Judaism and Christianity in which the missionary urge to convert Israel is held in check."⁵ God has a mysterious plan of salvation for Israel outside of Christ, just as he has deemed gentiles to be saved in Christ. In short, there are two covenants: Sinai for the Jews and Jesus for the gentiles. Stendahl's view has been immensely influential, and has since been widened out to embrace other religions as valid for gentiles as well.⁶

The answer to Stendahl's thesis resides in a detailed exegesis of Romans 11:25-36 itself, which forms the heart of his argument, against the backdrop of a reevaluation of Stendahl's understanding of Paul's "conversion" and the role of justification in Paul's thought. In the space permitted here, let me call attention to two glaring facts and the fundamental issue that grounds them.

First, Paul feels great anguish over his fellow Jews' rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, since they above all are the ones to whom the covenant blessings and promises have been given. He would even give himself over to God's eternal curse if this could save them (Ro 9:2-3)! Second, Paul's concern that Israel's rejection of Jesus seems to call into question the character and faithfulness of God *herself* (Ro 9:4-6)

only makes sense if Paul regarded those among his “kinsmen by race” who are rejecting Jesus to be outside of God’s covenant people. It is this feeling of personal anguish and fundamental theological question that drive Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11.

The central issue underlying both issues is whether God’s faithfulness to himself and to his promised redemptive, saving activity can be maintained in spite of Israel’s rejection of Jesus. This would be no problem at all if Paul thought that there was salvation for the Jews (or for anyone else for that matter) outside of Christ. Nor would Paul be concerned with Israel’s future as an ethnic people in 11:1 if her present rejection of Christ did not have salvific implications! Furthermore, faith (in Jesus Christ) is explicitly referred to as the way to salvation for both Jews and gentiles in 11:20 and 23. Paul’s God-centered doxology in 11:33-36 is not an attempt to downplay the centrality of Jesus (*contra* Stendahl), but is intended to show that all, both Jews and gentiles, will one day be worshipping the same Father for the same reason, namely, his sovereign, electing mercy in Christ (cf. 11:35 with 9:16). The parallel between Romans 9:30-33 and 11:5-7 indicates that Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone through grace is to be applied equally to both gentiles and Jews.

Of course, gentiles and Jews alike stand before God only by faith in response to God’s mercy and sovereign grace (Ro 11:17-24). Those who preach to others should do so with humility and fear (Ro 11:20). Paul’s missionary activity is not the expression of a colonial imperialism designed to conquer and exploit others for one’s own aggrandizement. It is the heartfelt cry of one convinced that the gospel

was God’s one and final word of reconciliation for all, both Jews and gentiles (Ro 1:16-17; 2 Co 5:14-21).

ENDNOTES

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 336-337.

² *Ibid.*, 340.

³ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁴ See his *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), esp. 2-9, 130.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ See Stendahl, “Christ’s Lordship and Religious Pluralism,” in *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 233-244.

SBJT: How sound is the Inclusivist claim that God’s love necessitates their view?

C. Ben Mitchell: The Johannine assertion that “God is love” is one of the greatest affirmations in the Bible. That the divine nature is suffused with love as an attribute is at once both a comfort and a promise. At the same time, Universalism of a Christian variety is prone to “agapetitus” of a peculiarly maudlin, American style. Philosophically, the argument looks something like this: (1) If God’s nature is truly love and his relation to his creatures fundamentally one of love, then he desires the eternal salvation of all his creatures; (2) If God is truly sovereign, then he is capable of bringing about his most earnest desire, the salvation of all persons; (3) Temporally-speaking, not all persons have responded to Christ in faith; (4) Therefore, either (a) God is not sovereign, (b) God is not love, or (c) in due course and by means currently beyond our grasp, God will in-

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deed bring all persons to salvation.

Of course, Inclusivists alter premise (3) to remove its Christocentrism. Faith in Christ was never a necessary condition of salvation, an Inclusivist might say. Sincerity, belief in a divine being, or some other less particularistic condition is usually added. The point is, Inclusivism is nothing new. It has been around for centuries. What is new is that it is being proposed by evangelicals who at the same time espouse the inerrancy of the Bible.

Regardless of its type, Inclusivism suffers from one or more philosophical problems (not to mention a dubious hermeneutic). First, the kind of love which animates the Inclusivist god is more akin to sentimentalism than God's holy affection. If love means God abandons all of his other attributes, then love itself is deified. The love of God does not dictate that he abandon his justice or holiness. In fact, the glory of the gospel is that God is both just and the justifier of the ungodly. God does not allow unregenerate sinners to do as they will, worship what they wish, live as they please, and still go free. In the divine scheme of things, sin demands punishment. The rebellion of self-worship requires wrath. Yet, the God of wrath is no less God than the God of mercy. He is the same God. Were God never to have offered salvation to any sinner, his love would still survive unblemished. The reality and richness of God's love is not measured in the number of persons saved, but in the magnificence of the attribute itself. Inclusivists insist that love makes demands on God. He *must* respond to the human predicament *because* of love. Nevertheless, God would not be diminished one bit in his justice or glory were he to consign every person who ever lived to eternal torment. If, however, one begins with the premise that

God must love in such a way that no one is condemned, love is defined by the creature rather than the Creator.

Similarly, contrary to some contemporary theodocists, what God does is what we must define as "the good." That is to say, the fact that God has decided to create a place of damnation and chooses to reserve it for those who reject him does not violate his love—unless we have already defined "love" in such a way as to preclude the existence, not to mention the use, of such a place. Our definition of love must fit the facts. And the facts, as Jesus knew them, are that there is a place where the worm does not die and where those who do not trust Christ savingly will be consigned. By definition, such a reality is consistent with the love of God. To argue otherwise is to load the word "love" with baggage it will not hold.

Finally, this all means that the love of God must be understood not as an isolated term to be defined philosophically. Rather, it is a word that must be understood in light of revelation. We do not, therefore, presume a definition of love and then bring scripture into line with that definition. We define the idea according to revelation. And those who, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, penned the scriptures, were well aware of its sometimes-counterintuitive turn. For instance, the apostle Paul sets up the following debate:

Just as it is written, 'Jacob I loved, Esau I hated.' What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pha-

raoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.' So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. (Ro 9:13-24)

Paul's very line of argument presupposes a view of divine love similar to that of Inclusivism. He nevertheless affirms God's love in its particularity. So God can show mercy to whom he wills, and not be accused of any injustice or any diminished affection.

The reality of God's distinguishing love, his absolute justice, the exclusivity of Christ, and the doctrine of eternal punishment are all hard pills to swallow. Inclusivists hope to rescue God from accusations of injustice by positing a postmodern deity with a kind of love that borders on romanticism. Instead, let us proclaim, without compromise, the God who loves sinners so much that he sent his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have everlasting life.