

DO YOU BELIEVE?
A BOOK SERIES FROM RATIO CHRISTI

IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY?

BY GREG KOUKL

 RATIO
CHRISTI

FAITH & REASON are at odds in our culture. For many, faith has come to mean little more than wishful thinking and blind belief. Such a concept is completely foreign to the pages of Scripture and historical Christianity. As Edward Feser notes, “In short, reason tells us that there is a God and that he has revealed such-and-such a truth; faith is then a matter of believing what reason has shown God to have revealed. In that sense faith is not only not at odds with reason but is grounded in reason.”

WHAT IS RATIO CHRISTI?

Ratio Christi, Latin for the reason of Christ, wants to help reverse this trend of anti-intellectual Christianity. We organize apologetics clubs at colleges, universities, and even for high school groups in order to strengthen the faith of Christian students and faculty and challenge the rampant atheism and secularism on most campuses. Our mission is to fill the intellectual gap, to make Christianity something worth thinking about, both personally and in the public square.

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That Jesus is the only way of salvation has always been bedrock teaching for classical Christianity. This point of view is called exclusivism. It also seems to be the most offensive detail of our message—wildly politically incorrect and deeply distasteful in a pluralistic society—raising the most common complaint Christians face against their faith. It’s also the first detail to get tossed when some churches try to present a kinder and gentler Christianity. I have four main points I’d like to discuss in this booklet.

First, I mean to clarify some of the ways people are perplexed about the issue of Christian exclusivism. That is, I want to textually justify the Bible’s exclusive claims about Christ so that Christians—who are either confused or under pressure from the culture—do not back away from this central theological tenet of Christianity. Second, I’ll answer the question of *why* Jesus is the only way to salvation. Third, I want to demonstrate the incoherence of religious pluralism—the view that all religions are equally true and legitimate paths to God. Finally, I want to biblically refute a hybrid form of pluralism known as “inclusivism.”

IS JESUS THE *ONLY* WAY OF SALVATION?

Sometimes we make dealing with controversial features of Christianity more difficult than they actually need to be.

Some ideas flow so naturally and directly from clear, core elements of the Christian worldview that they are not “tough” issues in a scriptural sense. The relevant texts are clear. There is no ambiguity in the Bible’s teaching. They are not gray areas. They never have been.

The confusion comes almost completely from the outside, not the inside. Lots of folks—including Christians—simply don’t like what the Bible teaches, so they wrangle about words and twist the text trying to get the verses to say the opposite of what they clearly mean.

And this brings me to my present concern. I continue to be mystified by what I call the “confused confession” that many Christians make regarding Christ as savior. It goes something like this (note carefully the inflection): “*I* am a Christian. I believe that Jesus is *my* savior. He is the only way for *me*. But I can’t say He is the way for *others*.”

So, here’s my question: Does this claim strike you as unusual?

Now, there is a sense in which it’s not unusual at all. Comments like this are so common lately—not just with more secular Christians or with politicians who identify in some way with Christianity, but also with massive numbers of rank and file evangelicals—they hardly raise an eyebrow anymore. That, of course, is the appeal. It’s a clever way of both aligning with Christ (in one sense) and denying Him (in another). No one gets offended. Everyone is satisfied. It’s perfectly politically correct.

I want to know, though, if this statement strikes you as *theologically* unusual. Think of Christ’s response when He was asked a similar question at His trial: “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” He didn’t respond, “That’s true for *Me*, but it doesn’t necessarily apply to others.” He simply said, “I Am,” (Mark 14:61-62) and, in virtue of that confession, was led away to execution.

Just weeks later, when facing the same ruling body that crucified Christ, Peter’s own confession was unqualified: “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). When threatened, he was unmoved: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19–20).

There was no ambivalence or ambiguity in these ancient confessions, yet today ambivalence abounds. Indeed, it’s hard to know what such a confused confession even

means coming from a Christian. In what sense can Jesus be “my savior” but not the only savior for everyone else?

The confusion that prompts confessions like the one above is so corrosive, it puts the gospel itself in jeopardy. Those who hold this view are not likely to suffer any inconvenience or discomfort to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). Worse, this conviction is so theologically thin, it may not be an expression of legitimate saving faith at all.

Three possible explanations for this have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too Christianity come to mind: theological uncertainty, religious pluralism, and Christian inclusivism. (I left out “dishonesty” because I don’t want to sound completely jaundiced, though I do think that is what drives some people to make this statement, particularly politicians.) I don’t think any of these succeed, though, and I want to tell you why.

One Way for Some? – Theological Uncertainty

There are some Christians who genuinely believe and trust that Jesus is the source of their pardon before the Father yet aren’t completely sure they’re right. They *believe*, but do not *know*. Their explanation would go something like this: “I can’t say that *others* have to trust Jesus for salvation because I’m not even sure *I* have to. I *believe* I need Jesus, so I’m trusting Him as best I can, but I don’t *know* Jesus is the only way of rescue, so I can’t say with any deep confidence that others need to trust Him, too.”

I am completely sympathetic to this reason for religious relativism because I realize this is the best some Christians can do. They lack confidence because they lack *knowledge*—that is, they lack any evidence their beliefs are actually justified.

It’s one reason apologetics (like this entire Ratio Christi booklet series) is so important. The role of Christian defenses is to supply the evidence meant to help elevate mere belief to credible and justified conviction. Some believers have not been exposed to the kind of resources that could help them bridge this belief/knowledge gap, so their hesitation is understandable.

This approach, though, has a lethal liability for our “confused confession” (“true for me but not for you”). The biblical claim that Jesus is God’s Messiah for the world (John 3:16, et al.) is either true or false. If true, then those who trust in Him are pardoned and those who do not are still in their sin. If false, then Jesus fails to save anyone, unbeliever *or* believer. Those who reject Him face no consequence for doing so, and those who trust Him have trusted in vain.

It is not a reasonable option, however, to claim that Jesus is one’s own savior but not the world’s. The claims of Christ can be true for me and true for you *even though you don’t believe them*. Or they can be false for you and also false for me *even if I do believe them*. Under no circumstance, though, can they be half and half. Jesus either is the savior for all, or He is the savior of none.

Here is another way of putting it. The question can always be asked, “What essential, foundational, defining benefit would any Christian gain from Christ that without Christ would be lost?” The correct answer is “salvation.” That is why we call Jesus “Savior,” after all. If damnation would be our fate were we bereft of Christ, why would it be any different for anyone else?

This of course brings me to the question of why Jesus is the only savior for everyone. It is difficult for a believer to be confident *that* Jesus is the singular savior if she is not clear on *why* He is necessary in the first place, so let me make that clear.

As each of us lives life, we accumulate to our account a rap sheet of sorts, a personal list of our crimes before God. When we stand before Him at the final judgment, God is not going to ask what religious club we belonged to. He is going to judge us from the record in the books according to our deeds (Revelation. 20:11–15).

God is going to ask if we lived our lives the way we should have: honoring Him and loving Him before anything else, never lying or deceiving, never taking something not our own, never dishonoring our parents, never abusing other people in any way, never hungering after something that does not belong to us (including people we were not married to), always loving our neighbors as ourselves—those kinds of things.

Now, if we have never broken any of His laws—if we have never faltered in any of God’s requirements in any way—then we have nothing to worry about. However, if we have done wrong, we will be punished in proportion to our crimes.

This, of course, is not good news. It is bad news. The good news is that even though God would be completely just to punish us without any further consideration, still He has provided a rescue plan. He extends an offer of mercy through His Son.

Jesus has purchased a pardon. With it, we are rescued. Without it, we stand alone. Anyone trusting in his own goodness will be judged by his own goodness and found wanting. Anyone trusting in the goodness of Christ will be judged by the goodness of Christ and will find favor. As I have written elsewhere:

This is why Jesus of Nazareth is the only way to God, the only possible source of rescue. He is the only one who solved the problem. No other man did this. No other person could... Only Jesus of Nazareth could save the world. Without him, we are crushed under our overwhelming debt. Without him, every single one of us would have to pay for our own crimes.¹

There is no middle ground, no neutral place to stand for the Christian espousing the confused confession. Anyone thinking there is a third option has either severely misjudged the problem—sin—or he has severely misjudged the solution—Christ—or both.

¹ Gregory Koukl, *The Story of Reality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 132, emphasis original.

Many Ways for All – Religious Pluralism

It could be that the confused confession is motivated by a different false conviction: religious pluralism. There are actually two kinds of pluralism. The first is so unremarkable, it only needs to be mentioned in passing to prevent those who are not reading carefully from thinking I am denying something obvious.

The religious pluralism I am concerned with is not simply the observation that there are lots of religions to choose from (a plurality of views) coupled with the conviction that we ought to live in peace with people who disagree with our own convictions. That strikes me as self-evident.

The pluralism that concerns me is the view that, generally speaking, all religions are each *on their own terms* legitimate roads to God. According to this view, God has somehow ordained various paths for various people in diverse cultures with diverse beliefs. Therefore, no one is within his rights to say his religion is better than anyone else's. "God is too big to fit into one religion," the bumper sticker instructs us. The Almighty is much larger than our limited theological categories. Christ may be the path for Christians, but others have legitimate paths of their own.

This alternative, though, is another dead end. I'll use a popular religious pluralism parable to show you why.

In the children's book *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, Lillian Quigley retells the ancient fable of six blind men who visit the palace of a prince and encounter an elephant for the first time. As each touches the animal with his hands, he announces his discoveries.

The first blind man put out his hand and touched the side of the elephant. "How smooth! An elephant is like a wall." The second blind man put out his hand and touched the trunk of the elephant. "How round! An elephant is like a snake." The third blind man put out his hand and touched the tusk of the elephant. "How sharp! An elephant is like a spear." The fourth blind man put out his hand and touched the leg of the elephant. "How tall! An elephant is like a tree." The fifth blind man reached out his hand and touched the ear of the elephant. "How wide! An elephant is like a fan." The sixth blind man put out his hand and touched the tail of the elephant. "How thin! An elephant is like a rope."²

An argument ensues, each blind man thinking his own perceptions of the elephant are the correct ones. The prince, awakened by the commotion, calls out from the balcony of his palace. "The elephant is a big animal," he says. "Each man touched only one

² Lillian Quigley, *The Blind Men and the Elephant* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959). Possible original sources of the story are the Jataka tales, a collection of Buddhist birth stories, and the Pancatantra stories, Hindu religious instruction fables.

part. You must put all the parts together to find out what an elephant is like.”

Enlightened by the prince’s wisdom, the blind men reach an agreement. “Each one of us knows only a part. To find out the whole truth we must put all the parts together.”

This fable is often used to illustrate the nature of religious pluralism, instructing us that every faith represents just one part of a larger truth about God. Each religious tradition possesses a piece of the truth, eventually leading its adherents to God by its own unique route. Devotees of Eastern religions are fond of using the parable in this way.

The problem with the parable, though, is it presumes that Christians reject pluralism because they lack exposure to other beliefs, much as the blind men erred because each explored only a part of the elephant and not the whole animal. Had they searched more completely, they would have discovered their error. Christians, then, are simply uninformed about the bigger picture.

This is not the case, though. Christians reject pluralism, in part, because defining elements of different religions *contradict* each other. For example, Judaism teaches Jesus is *not* the Messiah; Christianity teaches He *is*. Jesus either is the Messiah or He is not. Both religions can’t be right. One or the other is mistaken on one of its core, defining doctrines. The notion that Christianity and Judaism are somehow equally true is contradictory, like square circles.

Other examples abound. What happens when we die? Some religions promote Heaven and Hell. Others teach reincarnation. For still others, there is no conscious afterlife at all, only self extinction. However, when we die, we *may* go to Heaven or Hell, or we *might* be reincarnated, or we *could* disappear altogether, but we can’t do them *all* at the same time. Someone is mistaken. Indeed, it’s possible all of these options are false, but they cannot all be true.

If the point is still unclear, consider this. What if the elephant in the parable were a miniature, so small one of the blind men could completely encompass it in his hand? If another then claimed, “The elephant is bigger than a house,” the first would be right to disagree. An elephant cannot be small enough to fit into one’s hand and also as big as a house at the same time.

No, the Christian’s concern is not based on ignorance. No possible future discovery is going to change the fact that many of the claims of competing religions simply cannot be harmonized. Rather, exploration complicates the issue. The more we discover about core beliefs of various faiths, the more complex the problem of harmonizing becomes.

Appealing to a common element like the “golden rule” is no help. It’s merely a moral action guide that says almost nothing about any religion’s fundamental understanding of the shape of the world. Profound contradictions between foundational beliefs are not removed by pointing to shared moral proverbs. It’s the *differences* that matter, not the *similarities*. Contradictory claims about fundamental beliefs cannot be simultaneously true. Consequently, religious pluralism self-destructs. Either Jesus *is* the Messiah or He *isn’t* (for example). He can’t be both.

I guess someone could respond that from God's perspective the details don't matter. He's satisfied with any sincere religious effort, regardless of the religion. But how do they know this? This claim is an article of faith, a leap of hope that turns out to be contrary to the specific teachings of just about every religion, especially Christianity.

Any informed Christian can immediately see the challenge religious pluralism presents for the Great Commission, the authority of Scripture, the uniqueness of Christ, the role of evangelism, etc. Clearly, those who follow Jesus and understand the New Testament teaching on the work of the cross—and also those who take the first of the Ten Commandments in its plain and obvious sense, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20.3)—cannot make peace with pluralism, no matter how politically incorrect it is to oppose it.

One Way *and* Many Ways – Christian Inclusivism

There is a final, more sophisticated way of explaining how Jesus can be the savior for Christians even though others need not believe in Him. It is a hybrid combination of one way and many ways called religious inclusivism.

Inclusivism is different from pluralism, but in its more extreme form (there are actually two versions of it), it has the same ultimate impact, and therein lies its danger.

First, inclusivism is only promoted by Christians who agree that, as the New Testament claims, Jesus is the only way of salvation—at least in one sense. However, *explicit faith* in Christ is not required on this view. In God's bookkeeping, so to speak, Christ is the only *grounds* of forgiveness—without the cross there could be no salvation for anyone. However, the *object of faith* for the salvation provided solely by Christ need not be Jesus.

Clearly, Old Testament saints had no knowledge of Jesus. He hadn't been revealed yet. Even so, God rescued the ancients who were faithful to the limited light they had been given. In the same way (the explanation goes), there are millions of people today outside the range of the gospel who have never had a chance to consider Christ yet still seek God the best way they know how. Would it be just for God to condemn them for not believing in a Jesus of whom they have never heard?

As I mentioned, this inclusivism takes two different forms, what I might call “modest inclusivism” and also a more radical variety. The modest version goes like this: For everyone who *hears* the gospel, the standard for *them* is faith in Christ. For those who *explicitly* reject the gospel, there is no hope. However, we must be either agnostic about those who have never had a chance to hear the gospel, or consider it possible that God judges them by a different standard. The bottom line is, a person does not have to *believe* in Jesus to *benefit* from Him.

Note, I do not think there is good scriptural justification for this hesitation.

However, I am somewhat sympathetic to those who hold this view given the uncertainty some have. It is far less dangerous than the second, more radical version of inclusivism. Here it is: even those who are exposed to Christianity and who have heard the gospel are not required to believe it. They can be forgiven through Christ even if they openly and decisively reject Him.

Maybe they have been so deeply influenced by circumstances and cultural biases that they do not have the psychological freedom to take the gospel seriously. Maybe they are convinced that the narrowness of Christianity isn't fair or just. Maybe Christ simply isn't compelling to them. Whatever the reason, they sincerely reject Christianity and diligently pursue other religious options instead. For this effort, God recognizes the *implicit* faith of these religious people—"anonymous Christians," of sorts—and answers by granting them the saving grace of Christ.

The first—modest inclusivism—is somewhat benign. The second—radical inclusivism—is insidious, in my view, even though at least one notable Christian thinker has considered it.

C.S. Lewis's Inclusivism

I do not consider myself a particularly brave person, and I think it especially foolish, on the main, to make a frontal assault on a clearly superior force. Further, it is always dangerous to cross theological swords with C.S. Lewis. He was, arguably, the most compelling voice for Christianity in the 20th century, and his impact continues unabated into the 21st.

Even so, as a young Christian I read something Lewis wrote that gave me pause the first time I saw it. Now, decades later, it troubles me more than ever. The problematic piece appears towards the end of *The Last Battle*, the final installment of Lewis's wonderful and theologically rich children's fantasy, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Emeth, a noble young Calormene soldier who all his life had innocently served Tash, the false god of his people, encounters Aslan face to face for the first time.

"Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash," he admits to the great lion.

"Child," Aslan answers, "all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me... If any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him."³

In narrative form, Lewis seems to be suggesting that those who sincerely pursue God the best way they know how, regardless of the particulars of their own religion, are accepted by Him. Could he be correct?

3 C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier, 1956), 164–5.

ANONYMOUS CHRISTIANS?

I don't for a moment think Lewis was a pluralist. In fact, when Emeth asks Aslan if he and Tash are one ("Tashlan," as some had put it), he "growled so that the earth shook." This was error; Tash and Aslan were opposites. Clearly, though, the religious sincerity and the noble life of this young Calormene were taken by Aslan as implicit loyalty to the lion himself.

Lewis intimates that, though all religions are not true in themselves (pluralism), there still exist people of other faiths who are what Catholic theologian Karl Rahner called "anonymous Christians"—those enjoying the grace that comes through Jesus alone, even though they never explicitly put their faith in Him.

Was Lewis right? Many Evangelicals in this country seem to think he was, giving rise to the trend I earlier called the "confused confession." As I argued there, some may be uncertain about the fate of those who never heard about Jesus. This, I think, is Lewis's concern. Perhaps God will judge them by the limited light they've been shown. Others, though, seem to take it quite a bit further.

Dinesh D'Souza, author of the vigorous defense of Christianity titled *What's So Great about Christianity*, faltered in a debate with atheist Christopher Hitchens and Jewish thinker Dennis Prager. When asked by Prager if Jews who do not accept Jesus as savior can still be saved, he said, "I believe the answer to that is yes." Clearly, Abraham made it to Heaven without believing in Jesus, D'Souza pointed out. There must be, then, another "mode of salvation...that doesn't include Jesus."⁴

In her book *A Simple Path*, Mother Teresa explained why she did not "preach religion" to those in her care. In a section titled "Equal Before God" she writes:

There is only one God and He is God to all; therefore it is important that everyone is seen as equal before God. I've always said we should help a Hindu become a better Hindu, a Muslim become a better Muslim, a Catholic become a better Catholic.⁵

Consequently, Mother Teresa never considered it a problem when people of different religions joined together in prayer at her center and read from their own scriptures, since her focus was to encourage them in their "relationship with God, however that may be."

4 Dinesh D'Souza, "The Christian God, the Jewish God, or No God: A Meaningful Dialogue," May 8, 2008.

Find a video clip of this portion of the debate at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoonNPAsiZc>.

5 Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 31.

Roman Catholic thinker Avery Cardinal Dulles makes this stunning claim in his essay “Who Can Be Saved?”:

Jews can be saved if they look forward in hope to the Messiah and try to ascertain whether God’s promise has been fulfilled. Adherents of other religions can be saved if, with the help of grace, they sincerely seek God and strive to do his will. Even atheists can be saved if they worship God under some other name and place their lives at the service of truth and justice.⁶

Remarks like these raise a host of questions. If Jews today don’t need to believe in Jesus, but can be saved as Abraham was, why did both Jesus and Paul say the gospel should go to the Jews *first*, before it went to the Gentiles (Matthew 10:5–6, Acts 1:8, Rom. 1:16)? Given that Hindus worship idols, wouldn’t helping them be “better” Hindus make them better at breaking God’s first commandments (Ex. 20:3–5)? If atheists are *seeking* truth, why does Paul say they are *suppressing* the truth (Rom. 1:18)? If people following false religions are recipients of God’s grace, why does Scripture say they have exchanged the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1:25) and are therefore without excuse (1:20)? Worse, what implications do such sentiments have for the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20)?

This is why I call such a confession “confused.” It may sound plausible at first, but it is hard to make sense of it in light of either Old or New Testament teaching.

Let me tell you one of the reasons this confusion gets a foothold. People draw the wrong conclusions from an obvious scriptural fact: Not everyone in history needed to believe in Jesus to be restored to relationship with God. Though it may be that Abraham understood something about Jesus (Jn. 8:56), that cannot be said of every patriarch, prophet, or Old Testament faithful. Despite their own sins, they still found favor with God apart from explicit faith in Christ. This is Lewis’s point.

Couldn’t the same be true today, some ask, not only of those who have never heard, but also for those who reject the message of Christ through no apparent fault of their own? How can we say what’s in a person’s heart? Who are we to judge?

This, I think, is D’Souza’s, Teresa’s, and Dulles’s point. Though Jesus’ death on the cross is the only *provision* for forgiveness, *belief* in Jesus is not the only way to receive the grace He alone provides. This view is called inclusivism since even those who do not believe in Christ can, in certain circumstances, be “included” in the grace that He alone secures.

It is true; you and I are in a poor position to judge the hearts of others. But God is not. Though our judgments may falter, His are true. Has He said anything to shed light on this question? He has. Lots.

⁶ Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., “Who Can Be Saved?,” *First Things*, February 2008.

A “Jealous” God

First, it might be helpful to remember that from the very beginning, the God of the Bible has been narrow in His demands.

Adam and Eve’s violation of God’s singular restriction in the garden brought swift justice. The serpent’s suggestion of an alternate route to wisdom, knowledge, and fulfillment resulted in death, not the promised enlightenment.

God’s very first commandment to His fledgling people explicitly condemned all other “roads to Rome.” In Exodus 20:2–5 He said, “I am the Lord your God.... You shall have no other gods before Me.... You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.” Transgressors of this command were to be executed, some destroyed directly by God Himself.

God showed His utter contempt for other religions by pummeling Egypt with plagues directed at different Egyptian deities (Ex. 12:12b: “...and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the Lord”). The capstone plague ended the life of every firstborn whose doorway lacked the blood covering that was to be applied according to God’s very precise and particular conditions.

During their wanderings in the desert, the Jews were offered only one antidote to the poison of the serpents God had unleashed in judgment upon them. Only those who gazed upon a bronze snake lifted up on a pole were spared (Numbers 21:9). Jesus Himself cites this event as a type—a foreshadowing—of His crucifixion, which alone purchases eternal life (Jn. 3:14–15).

In Acts, we learn that “Christian” was not the first name given to the followers of Jesus. Instead, the name they used for themselves embodied the heart of their message about the Savior. They were simply called “The Way”—not “a way,” or “one of the ways,” or “our way,” but *The Way* (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23).

This pervasive theme of exclusivity was captured with crystal clarity in Jesus’ words, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13–14). Jesus’ very next words warned of false prophets who would appear as sheep yet would ravage the flock like wild wolves.

From Wide to Narrow?

Even so, it does seem that New Testament standards are more “narrow” than Old Testament ones. Why is that? Here, some distinctions may be helpful.

First, throughout the biblical revelation, the *source* of salvation has always been the

unmerited mercy of God. Our Sovereign owes no rebel a pardon. That He extends clemency to any is a pure gift of grace (Ephesians 2:8, Titus 3:4–7).

Second, the *ground* of salvation has always been the redemption secured by Christ on the cross. Old Testament saints who, because of progressive revelation, had not yet learned about Jesus were still saved because of Him. God “passed over the sins previously committed” (Rom. 3:25), knowing the full, complete, and final payment would be made at the cross (Hebrews 9:15, 10:10–18).

Third, the *means* of salvation has also been constant. Every sinner ever justified gained access to God’s mercy through faith. Whether in Old Testament or New, active trust in God’s grace appropriated His mercy. In every age, the just have lived by faith (Genesis 15:6, Habakkuk 2:4, Rom. 4:5, 5:1).

Each of those has been constant. Only one thing changed as God progressively revealed His plan. The way one expressed their faith in God (the means), that appropriated the work of Christ (the ground), based on the grace of God (the source), has been different at different times.

Adam received the covering God provided for his nakedness and trusted God’s promise that a seed of woman would crush the serpent (Gen. 3:15, 21). Abraham simply believed God’s promise of descendants who would bring blessing to the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:3, 15:6). Jewish slaves in Egypt trusted God by believing the blood covering would protect them from the plague of death at the Passover (Ex. 12:13, 23). Old Testament saints trusted God through the atoning sacrifices He required to cover their sins (Leviticus).

There is only one question we need to answer at this point: What is the appropriate way of expressing faith *now*, in the New Covenant period, since the public appearance and proclamation of the world’s singular Messiah?

The answer from every New Testament writer is the same. Since Pentecost, the *focus* of faith and the *ground* of salvation are one and the same: Jesus. There is no other name that can save, and there is no other “name” we may put our trust in. Not the Levitical sacrifices or Passover blood (Heb. 10:8–10). Not zeal or sincerity (Rom. 10:1–2). Certainly not pagan gods, false prophets, or counterfeit religions (Matt. 24:23–25, Galatians 1:8–9, Jude 4).

That’s why Jesus said that our response to Him would be the acid test of our true loyalty to the Father. Anyone who loves God will honor the One sent by God. Conversely, those who reject Him, reject the Father also. This one point is so critical, it is repeated in various ways no less than 16 times in the New Testament (Jn. 5:23b, 5:37–38, 8:19, 8:42a, 12:48–50, 14:7, 15:20b–21, 15:23, 16:2–3; 1 Jn. 2:22, 2:23, 4:2–3, 4:15, 5:1, 5:9–12; 2 Jn. 1:7–9a).

These verses reveal something crystal clear to me. Had any Old Testament saints lived during the time of Jesus or after, their love for the Father demonstrated by their earlier expression of faith would have driven them to embrace His Son, Jesus. Each one

of those accepted by the Father under the Old Covenant would have loved the Son of the New (“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad,” Jn. 8:56).

In a sense, then, nothing has changed from Genesis to Revelation. God’s way has always been specific, limited, and precise. A narrow gate leads to life. A broad way leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13–14).

And there are many more verses that make this clear. For example:

- “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but *the wrath of God abides on him.*” (Jn. 3:36)
- “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for *unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.*” (Jn. 8:24)
- “And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God; but *he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.*” (Luke 12:8–9)
- “And after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They said, ‘*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.*’” (Acts 16:30–31)
- “I testify about [the Jews] that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For *Christ* is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” (Rom. 10:2–4)
- “And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. *He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.*” (1 Jn. 5:11–12)

THE GOD-FEARING GENTILE

The most compelling single passage against inclusivism comes from the book of Acts and the conversion of a Gentile named Cornelius. Scripture says Cornelius was “a devout man...who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually” (10:2). Indeed, his “prayers and alms [had] ascended as a memorial before God” (10:4). As “a righteous and God-fearing man,” he was “divinely directed by a holy angel” to send for Peter to come to his house and hear a message from him (10:22).

This is quite a spiritual pedigree, all without the gospel of Christ. In fact, Peter was so impressed at the clear working of God in Cornelius’ life, he said, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him” (10:34–35). This is the whole of inclusivist theology in a single sentence. Everything stated about Cornelius fulfills the inclusivists’ demand.

What does Peter do next? He does not assure this “anonymous Christian” that all is well and turn on his heel to leave. Instead, he preaches the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (10:36–41), then warns of final judgment by Jesus for all *except those who believe in Him for the forgiveness of their sins* (10:42–43).

Why go through all this trouble and labor over theological details about Jesus? Here’s why. For all his spiritual nobility, *Cornelius is still lost*. If the inclusivist gospel were true, Cornelius would not have needed a special visit from Peter. Yes, Cornelius had responded faithfully to all the revelation given to him up to that point. But it was not enough. It was just the first step. Even God-fearing Cornelius needed the rest of the story, the specifics about Christ and the cross, without which he could not be saved.

Simply put, if the inclusivist’s claim were true, then the same kind of faith Old Testament saints possessed would be adequate in New Testament times as well. Peter’s divinely directed message to Cornelius proves otherwise.

The teachings of Christ and also the writings of those disciples Jesus personally trained to proclaim His message after Him give little comfort to inclusivists. Remarkably, Dulles admits as much: “The New Testament and the theology of the first millennium give little hope for the salvation of those who, since the time of Christ, have had no chance of hearing the gospel.”⁷ If this is the clear testimony of the ancients, what good reason do we have to abandon that message in the modern era? I don’t see any.

And I will give you one final reason to be faithful to that message.⁸

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The question, “What about those who’ve never heard?” is part and parcel of the question regarding

PASCAL REDUX

I have a last thought for any who may still be tempted to sit on the fence on this issue. Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French scientist and Christian sage, once offered a famous wager to his detractors. Based merely on a kind of cost/benefit risk assessment, Pascal argued it is smart to “bet” on God. If the Christian is right, he gains eternal life. If wrong, he passes into non-existence, nothing lost. The atheist, on the other hand, gains nothing substantial if correct, and if incorrect suffers eternally for his error.

I think the wisdom of Pascal’s wager applies to inclusivism. If we preach the message of Jesus, the apostles, and the early church—that faith in Christ is necessary for salvation—and we are wrong, what is the downside? If we proclaim that those separated from the gospel are also separated from Christ and have no hope and are without God in the world (Eph. 2:12), yet we are mistaken, Heaven will be more crowded than we thought. If we erroneously preach exclusivism, the upshot is good news, not bad.

However, what if we take the side of inclusivism and err? What if we are wrong when we teach that the person who has heard the gospel of Christ does not have to answer its challenge by humbling himself before the cross? What if we say that sincere people will be accepted by God in the pursuit of their own religious convictions? What if we discourage other Christians from “forcing” their views on “good” Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc.? What if we do any of these things and it turns out their rejection of Christ—either active or passive—seals their fate: judgment and an eternity of suffering for their crimes against God? What is the downside then? Only that we have given false hope to the lost and have prevented them from seriously considering the only salvation available to them. If you are an inclusivist and you are wrong, that is very bad news.

It seems we have a simple choice. We can be broad-minded and advance the broad way, a path Jesus said leads to destruction. Or we can endure being called “narrow-minded” and preach the narrow way, the only path that Jesus said leads to life. I, for one, would not want to be on the inclusivist’s side of this issue.

inclusivism. While it is not addressed directly here, see the recommended reading list at the end of this booklet for thoughtful answers to this question. One thing to consider with this question is that in many Muslim countries where Christianity is illegal, Muslims have dreams about Christ and then actively seek Him. Interestingly, He is found most often through the preaching of the gospel, and through a Bible.

BROAD OR NARROW

On judgment day, how will God deal with people who have never heard of Christ or who have rejected Him? We've seen a number of reasons why believing Jesus is the only Savior is the right way of thinking for Christians. First, we know that it's irrational to believe that Jesus is Savior "for me" but not for everyone. Either Jesus is the only Savior or He isn't. It cannot be true that Jesus is the only Savior and Jesus is not the only Savior.

Second, we know from Scripture that all will stand before God on judgment day needing God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness offered through Christ. There is no other way for us to have our sins forgiven than through the blood of Jesus. Religious pluralism, though attractive, cannot be true because religions teach contrary things about God, sin, forgiveness, and the afterlife.

Third, inclusivism—the idea that while Jesus is the only Savior, people do not need to consciously hear or believe in the gospel to be saved—is biblically false. In Acts 26:15-18, Jesus tells Paul that Gentiles "who've never heard" have closed their eyes, are living in darkness under the power of Satan, and will receive forgiveness of sins only through believing in Christ. Hence the Apostle's eagerness to preach the gospel to all. This makes even mild or agnostic inclusivism untenable.

Fourth, what do you have to lose by being bold about the gospel with others? Persecution, perhaps, and that is a serious thing. But isn't Christ worth it? On the flip side, if you adopt an inclusivist position and are mistaken, then you have given false hope to others. "Wager" on the exclusivist side and be bold about who Jesus really is: the one, true Savior of all mankind who bids all to repent and believe in his name for the forgiveness of sins and the right to eternal life.

Finally, remember that God is good (1 Peter 2:3), that God is love (1 John 4:16), and that the Lord, the judge of all the earth, will do what is right (Gen. 18:25). Trust Him and trust in His love for you and for the world, knowing that "the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world," (1 John 4:4).

FUTHER READING

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg founded Stand to Reason in 1993 and currently serves as President of Stand to Reason. He has spoken on more than 70 college and university campuses both in the U.S. and abroad and has hosted his own call-in radio show for 27 years, advocating for “Christianity worth thinking about.” He has debated atheist Michael Shermer on national radio and Deepak Chopra on national television. An award-winning writer and best-selling author, Greg has written seven books, including *The Story of Reality—How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important that Happens in Between*; *Tactics—A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions*, and *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*. Greg has been featured on Focus on the Family radio and has been interviewed for CBN and the BBC. He’s been quoted in Christianity Today, the U.S. News & World Report, and the L.A. Times.

Greg received his Masters in Philosophy of Religion and Ethics at Talbot School of Theology, graduating with high honors, and his Masters in Christian Apologetics with honors from Simon Greenleaf University. He is an adjunct professor in Christian apologetics at Biola University.

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