

INCLUSIVISM: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

A Paper

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Inclusivism: Internal Strengths

Whereas the universalistic approach to Christian soteriology appears to ignore the testimony of Scripture that there will be a judgment and that not all people will be saved, the inclusivist position does not ignore that there will be some who are lost. The inclusivist position acknowledges that sometimes subconscious urge within most of humanity for wrongs to be made right and for good to triumph over evil is legitimate. This allows for a more positive understanding of human existence in the here-and-now. If there is no judgment then this life appears somewhat meaningless if in the end God will make all things as if there was never a human history to evaluate (which is the flaw of universalism to some extent).

Equally, the inclusivist position proposes that there will be *less* people lost than the more restrictive exclusivist position allows. It is maintained that inclusivism takes the grandeur, universalistic picture of salvation seriously while maintaining that human free-will is acknowledged and that some are judged. This apologetically is satisfying since it presents the goodness of God in such a way that one can maintain a Christocentric understanding of soteriology without seeing God as somewhat unfair in creating so many humans that He foreknew would be lost.

For instance, those who propose the inclusivist position argue that two pictures of redemption and judgment can be taken seriously from the Book of Revelation in a sense that both exclusivist and universalist are unable to claim with as much ease. First, the image of “a great multitude which no one could count” in Revelation 7:9-10 or Revelation 19:6 where there is a multitude whose noise sounds “like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder” (NIV) is said to be contrary to the exclusivist proposal that only those who have heard the gospel and consciously placed their faith in Jesus will be saved. It is argued that if this is so most of the

human race throughout history as well as the present are destined for hell. If this is so then than John the Revelator was mistaken. It seems a bit odd to depict many as being saved if indeed only a few throughout history will be saved. No, God will save a majority of the human race and this picture of salvation will be fulfilled.

Second, the picture of judgment found in Revelation 21:8, where there are some who will have “their part in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” can be affirmed as well. The Universalist position has to ignore such passages or do exegetical gymnastics by suggesting, for example, that there is eventually be a “post-mortem exodus” from hell as one-by-one people finally submit to the love of God. The strength of an exclusivist position, namely the ability to acknowledge the judgment of God, is acceptable in the inclusivist position as well.

The inclusivist position can account for much of the biblical data. It can also be presented as thoroughly Trinitarian. For some this means that we begin with the Father as do the pluralist, (theocentrism) and we acknowledge that the Son and the Spirit do the work of the Father in distinct ways but with the same end goal of human salvation. Yet unlike the pluralist this does not mean there are many ways to the Father, only that the way to the Father—through Jesus by the Spirit—does not have to be *known* (i.e. salvation *is not* epistemological).

It is also possible to begin with the Son (Christocentrism) as do most exclusivists and some universalist. As Jacques Dupuis argued we must remember that the *Word/Logos* that became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth is still eternal and therefore is not limited to the incarnation. This means that it is theoretically possible for the Son to save beyond knowledge of himself in Jesus Christ, although this is *very difficult* to establish.

Further, it is possible to begin with the Spirit (Pneumacentrism) as do scholars such as Clark Pinnock and Amos Yong. This perspective acknowledges that the Holy Spirit is the one who convicts, empowers, sanctifies, and glorifies those who are saved. The Spirit is the one who applies the atoning work of Christ to humans. This being said it is possible that the Holy Spirit could work outside of the church, and especially the Christian religion, to do a work of salvation ontologically equal to that of those who are in the church yet epistemologically distinct since those whom the Spirit are saving may not be aware of the Christ who provided that salvation.

Inclusivism refuses to abandon the world for the church. In other words, it is suggested that God is working in the hearts of people both through Christian proclamation and sometimes in spite of it! It is not trapped in a black-and-white understanding of who is in and who is out in areas where there may not be a definitive answer. God may be lovingly saving people who never come to be part of the church because God is bigger than the church. Equally, it means that where we find truth in the world outside of the Christian religion we can affirm it because God is at work everywhere.

Inclusivism is epistemologically satisfying. There are those like Millard J. Erickson (who is more of an exclusivist than an inclusivist) who do not find much hope in the biblical narrative for those who do not come to faith in Christ, but who do not feel comfortable making a definitive declaration that there is no hope for salvation for those who have never heard the gospel. Others may be more confident that there will be some who are saved. Both sides of the spectrum do not have to feel obligated as regards defining and explaining how this is possible. Rather, it can be suggested that God is the only one who knows and God is the one who saves, so God can be trusted to do the right thing. If this is so we do not have to condemn all who do not hear the gospel to hell since God may act in a way with which we are unfamiliar.

Inclusivism: Internal Weaknesses

It is exegetically difficult to hold to the inclusivist position in the face of several passages. John 14:6 quotes Jesus as saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.” Inclusivists agree that Jesus is the *means* to the Father, but it is not necessary that we know who Jesus is or what he has done. The only problem is that v. 7 states, “If you would have known me, you would have known my Father also” implying that there is a necessary relational dynamic. This almost forces inclusivist to separate salvation from reconciliation with God in a relational sense. In other words, salvation is almost exclusively, as a foundational precept, a judicial topic. It is about heaven and hell, and not so much about knowing or not knowing God.

Most exegetes familiar with Pauline theology realize that Romans 1-3 presents little or no hope for those who have not heard the gospel. In fact, the Apostle appears to suggest that although so-called “general revelation” was not designed to condemn this is in fact all it does since humans reject what God has given them. No one seeks God; no one wants God. It is difficult to propose that there are those out there who really do seek and want God, yet who have not heard the gospel, in face of such claims. One would have to say that the Apostle Paul was using some form of hyperbole to prove a point to which there are in fact exceptions although the biblical language of 3:10-18 does not suggest any exceptions!

The biblical characters used as examples by inclusivist are usually not good examples. Several of those characters noted from the Old Testament are chronologically before God called Abraham to become a great nation. This being said, it is not possible to use Abel, Enoch, or Job as those such as John Sanders attempt to do.¹ If anything it merely suggests that there was a residual knowledge of God that had remained since the fall of humanity as has been argued by

Todd Miles. Also, it puts the call of Abraham in a different light since it appears this knowledge was all but vanquished when God called Abraham. Abraham's call was timely because the knowledge of God was almost non-existent.

Melchizedek is shown to be a contemporary with Abraham who knows the true God. He may even be superior to Abraham in some sense since Abraham offered him a tithe (Hebrews 7:4-7). But it is dangerous to suggest that he is a "pagan saint". First, he was a contemporary of Abraham which may show, as previously stated, that there was *some* residual knowledge of the true God but that it was quickly vanishing and therefore it was time for God to intervene by calling Abraham. Second, Melchizedek is not seen as an example of a "pagan saint" in Jewish literature. Rather, according to the author of Hebrews he is a model for Christ's priesthood (chapter 7). According to the Qumran community he may have been a proto-Messiah or some sort of divine figure (see 11Q13, The Coming of Melchizedek) but he was not a "pagan saint".

Jethro, Rahab, Naaman, and others do not come to a full relationship with God until interacting with God's covenant people. Jethro is the best example, but even he is not a very stable example since before he met Moses he is called Reuel and afterwards he changes his name to Jethro and only then is he called "the priest of Midian" (Exodus 2:15-3:1). This may suggest that he did not come to a full and legitimate relationship with God until he met Moses or whatever relationship he had with God prior to meeting Moses can only be fully understood retrospectively *because he met Moses and therefore the God of Moses*. Whatever the case may be it is important to note that he does not find his way into the biblical narrative for being a good "pagan saint" but rather because he joined Moses.

As we turn to the New Testament it becomes even more difficult. Some use the centurion in Matthew 8:1-10 who believed that Jesus could heal his servant as an example since this man

was not of Israel. Jesus said he had not found a faith like this man's in all of Israel. The application is made that there may be greater faith by those outside the covenant community than inside. This application fails since it ignores that the point of the narrative is to show that people outside of Israel at times *had faith in Messiah when Israel did not*. The point is faith in Jesus, not that some people outside of the covenant may be more religiously inclined than those inside.

Equally, there is an attempt to make Cornelius a model.² Sadly, this appears to be one of the worse examples since according to Acts 10:2 depicts him as a God-fearer (a Gentile who worships Israel's God) and who did good to Israel. In addition, even then an angel is sent to Peter to make sure that the gospel is proclaimed to him and his household (10:15-23)! It was not until the Holy Spirit made it self-evident that Peter knew God had saved these Gentiles (10:34-44; 15:7-9). This implies that Peter did not even see Cornelius' God-fearing approach to God as legitimate in and of itself.

Inclusivism: External Strengths

Inclusivism does not fall into the trap of universal salvation. Inclusivist and exclusivist can agree against universalist and pluralist who appear to deny judgment or limit judgment to only those like Cain, Judas Iscariot, Adolf Hitler, and Jeffery Dahmer. There is an agreement that there is a basis for salvation that is not relative.

Equally, it rightly points toward the work of Christ as the means and source of the salvation of all humans. Unlike pluralist who credit each religion, or many religions, as legitimate pathways in and of themselves, inclusivism only suggest that those of other religious persuasions who are saved are not saved because of those religions but because of Christ. It can be affirmed by inclusivist and exclusivist (and some universalist) that this is so.

² Ibid. 222-223.

A Trinitarian approach to salvation is biblically appropriate. While it is true that salvation comes to humanity because of the death, burial, and resurrection of the incarnate Second Person this does not exclude the equally important work of the Father in electing people to salvation and sending the Son, nor the Holy Spirit who applies the work of Christ to sinners and comes from the Father and the Son (John 14:26).

Finally, those who hold to a position other than inclusivism can respect that there is a willingness to leave the destiny of those who do not hear the gospel in the hands of a good God without having to feel obligated to explain their fate. Even exclusivists are willing to do this for aborted children, infants, and the mentally impaired. Inclusivists expand this circle to include those who *may have responded had they heard the gospel, yet who never heard*.

Inclusivism: External Weaknesses

It appears that inclusivism is exegetically weak. As it was shown above it is difficult to find biblical support for the inclusivist position. An honest inclusivist will affirm that the Scriptures do not appear to present any hope for the unevangelized and that hope then must depend on the nature of the God described in Scripture, although this could be an inaccurate deduction (i.e. God can still be loving, good, all-powerful, all-knowing, while allowing people to go to hell who have never heard the gospel). In other words, an inclusivist is usually left with an argument from silence. Since the Scriptures do not *word-for-word* state that anyone who does not hear the gospel is lost inclusivists must then argue that this leaves the door open, even if only slightly cracked.

On the other hand, there are plenty of passages of Scripture that indicate that there is little hope for the unevangelized, if any at all. In Acts 4:12 it is written, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given amongst men by which we

must be saved". This implies that there is only one person whom salvation comes through and his identity is intrinsic to salvation!

The Apostle Paul indicates that anyone who calls on this name of the Lord will be saved. Equally, he emphasizes that this is an act of faith that comes from what is preached. What is preached is, at bare minimum, that "Jesus is Lord" and "God raised him from the dead". He asks, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how will they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" For Paul, the feet of those who proclaim the gospel are beautiful because without this proclamation how can *anyone* be saved (Romans 10:8-14)? This passage does not lend much support to the inclusivist perspective.

Furthermore, as regards those who have never "heard the gospel" it is apparent to Paul that these people are still responsible for what they have known, namely God's eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:18-21). Since that is rejected, ad hoc, there is universal guilt. This leaves little hope for the hypothetical "man on an island" who "loves God" but does not know of the message of Jesus. Apparently, for Paul, no such person exist (see Romans 3:10-18)!

Whereas Christian soteriology is Trinitarian it is *equally Christocentric*. The Trinitarian God works to bring humanity back in fellowship with Himself through the means of the incarnation. Athanasius wrote, "God became man so that man might become god" (*De Incarnatione* 54:3). Whereas there is some fear of the implication of this statement in the Western church we should not fear what the Apostle Peter spoke of when he encouraged Christians to be "partakers in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). It is by Christ that his own promise can be understood: "In that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you in Me, and I in you" (John 14:20). The work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one and the same.

Inclusivist who move toward Pneumacentrism greatly risk Tritheism. Whereas orthodox Christianity recognizes the economic distinction between the members of the Trinity it does not recognize a hypostatic distinction. In other words, the Father does nothing that the Son and Spirit do not, at least, indirectly participate in. The same can be said of the Son and Spirit. Yet there is a danger in seeing the Son and the Spirit as doing the work of the Father in such a way that the Son and the Spirit no longer work toward the same end. In fact, it is basically contradictory to suggest that the Spirit is working for the salvation of the world without bringing them to the Son.

As regards the “greatness” of salvation a couple of things can be said. When John the Revelator depicts a “great multitude” in Revelation 7:9-10 and 19:6 he *no where indicates that this is in juxtaposition to the amount of people who are lost*. Rather, he appears to rejoice from the perspective of God who focuses upon those who are saved!

Equally, it ignores what we may call an eschatological salvation. Whether or not one sees a great “revival” toward the end of this age or not there is one thing for sure. With the global population exploding to be three times the size that it was only a half century or so ago, and with a third of those people claiming to be Christian, even if only half of those who professed faith in Christ were *true believers* that would leave about one billion on earth at this point in history alone! If we add all the other believers in history the vision of the Revelator is easily understood—this is a number that no one can count! In other words, inclusivist deduct something from this biblical imagery that the author does not say, namely that this number will be more than those lost.

In addition, if the world’s population continues to expand, and if there is some sort of eschatological revival, it could very well be that there would be a closer to even number of

humans saved and lost throughout human history. This is mere speculation, but it is the same speculation that inclusivists engage in when they suggest that numbers of saved and lost somehow lean toward the inclusivist position.