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18 – Why I Am an Inclusivist

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Introduction

The discussion of the fate of nonbelievers, those who have rejected the gospel, is a terrible discussion. Descriptions of hell and torment are well-known in Christian history. What is unknown, however, are descriptions of what happens to those who have never encountered the gospel. What happens to those who have not received the gospel? What is their “security,” if any? The following discussion will explore some issues that I believe scholars have not addressed, as well as clarifying issues that have been misunderstood. I turn first to the latter: much must be “deconstructed” before something is “constructed.”

A. Clarification of Misconceptions

First, to clarify some common misconceptions in this discussion, the following must be said:

¹ This paper was given to a PhD seminar concerning Soteriology at Baylor University, Waco, TX, during the summer of 2004. For further information, please contact David_Pendergrass@baylor.edu.

(1) A person does not have to *hear* the gospel to respond to it. I know that “hearing” is often used in the New Testament (e.g., “who has ears to hear, let him hear”; Matt. 11:15; Mk. 4:9, 23; Lk. 8:8; 14:35), but this is hyperbole.² It could be rephrased thusly: “whoever can grasp this in the least bit better perk up and pay attention.” The actual act of *hearing* is inconsequential. There are many in the deaf community who deny Christianity because of our unrelenting use of this verb.³

(2) Knowledge does not save anyone: God saves a person. Revelation does not save anyone: God saves a person (Eph. 2:8). The amount of knowledge and the amount of revelation is important for correct *action* in life. What we *believe* is directly related to how we *behave*. Moreover, our mental competence cannot be related to God’s acceptance/rejection, or those who are less intelligent have a proportionately worse chance of “getting in.” Where is this in the Bible? Where do we find that God needs our mental capacity to be commensurate with our faith? If Einstein were Christian, does that mean he was a “better” Christian (or had more faith) than a child? I thought Jesus said to be like children. Rather, God’s judgment will be according to what we do with our “raw material” (see C. S. Lewis, “Morality and Psychoanalysis” in *Mere Christianity*).

(3) The nature of salvation is such that “getting in” is not the whole story. The nature of salvation is such that a person is a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15) and is “made alive” (Eph. 2:1, Col. 2:13) in *this* life. The eschatological component of Jesus’ teaching of the Kingdom radically affects the way a person lives in the here-and-now. The creatures we *will* be has already begun in this life. Therefore, the benefit for this discussion is not one-sided: the issue is not simply concerning “who gets in,” but “who is acting like s/he is already in” (even if s/he lacks the theological vocabulary to explain this).

This point is crucial for properly understanding this discussion, so I will spend some time clarifying this further. Firstly, the discussion of what or how God will judge those who have not had an

² All Scripture citations from the New Revised Standard Version.

³ My mother has the Bachelor of Arts in American Sign Language and the Master of Social Work, specializing in the Deaf Community. She is currently a therapist at a prestigious Deaf Academy, where she encounters this problem often in conversations.

opportunity to respond to the gospel is *not* a discussion of whether or not these people are technically “Christian.” Exploring whether or not these people are “anonymous Christians” and/or if they share the same status of Christians in this life or the next is a fruitless task to me. This discussion is centered (or should be centered) on what or how God will *judge* those who have not encountered the gospel, not concerning what label is applied to them.

For the Evangelical, a Christian is one who has encountered the gospel of the risen Jesus and deliberately decided to reorient his or her life and volition toward the cause of the Kingdom of God. Or, according to Ephesians 1: 9-10, 3:4-6, 9, and Colossians 1:27 and 2:2-3, a Christian is he or she to whom has been revealed the “full mystery” of God. If a person has not responded thusly, or has not been “revealed the fullness” of God in Jesus, then that person is not a Christian. A pagan is still a pagan, even if God allows him/her into Heaven in the end. A pagan may respond well to what s/he knows (more on that below), but that person is still a pagan. So what do we call him/her? If we can not get beyond this question: a “fellow child of God” will suffice.

Furthermore, Christians have this unbiblical notion that only *Christians* will be in Heaven. Moses, David, Abraham, and a host of others, never encountered the message of the risen Christ in their lifetimes. But the implicit Biblical understanding is quite clear: they definitely “made it to Heaven.” If we think that Heaven is full of only Christians (and for many also, babies), then we will be quite shocked indeed.

Second, the following question is crucial: Are Scripture references authoritative more than any other source? If so, are references to be understood as *descriptive* or *prescriptive*? For this discussion, I am keenly interested in what the Bible has to say, particularly the New Testament. This second question is just as important, because it can obviate much of the discussion made so far by those who debate this issue. For a case-in-point: If Romans 10:9 (“because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”) is *prescriptive*, then that means that *everyone* who wishes to be saved must *do* what this verse says. If this verse is *descriptive*, then it merely describes what a person does who becomes a Christian. To

give an analogy: “If you drive up I 35W north, you will get to Dallas, TX.” Does this mean that this is the *only* way to get to Dallas?—*prescriptive*. Or does this mean that if you do go this way, you will get to Dallas?—*descriptive*. If Romans 10:9 (and verses like it) are *descriptive*, then it does not tell us about those who do not do what it says, it merely tells us what happens to those who do. From the analogy given above, it is clear to those who live in Texas, USA, that these verses are *descriptive* and not *prescriptive*. There is more than one way to Dallas, TX, even if we do not know those ways ourselves. What it *does confirm* is that those who *do* believe and those who *do* confess will definitely be saved. It does not say that those who do not confess will not be saved.

So what do we do with verses such as John 14:6 (“Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”), John 3:16, and Ephesians 1:5 (“He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will”)? They are all true. Jesus is the only way to the Father: it is only because of the atoning life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that anyone comes to the Father (Eph. 2:13, 17-18). This is no prescription: it is a fact, a *description* of the essential nature of salvation for any human.

B. Construction of Gospel and Pauline References

If the verses that speak of Jesus’ salvation in this life and the next for believers are only for those who *do* come in contact with the gospel, then what do we find in the New Testament that is helpful at all for those who do not come in contact with the gospel? The way to find helpful verses is to search for those verses that speak of “everyone” or “all” or even “Gentiles.” I have come across a few that will be divided into Gospel and Pauline references. Full exegetical treatment is beyond the scope of this work, but it will be helpful to introduce them.

1. Gospel

Matthew 7:21 – “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only *the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*”

Even those who know the proper vocabulary “will [not necessarily] enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus says here that

obedience to the divine will is more important than *what you call Jesus*. Someone may ask, “If someone does not know the gospel, how does one discover the divine will?” This surfaces a crucial point that will be discussed in full when we get to Romans. For now, I will only emphasize that *obedience to a divine will* is the point of judgment, not vocabulary.

Matthew 16:27 – “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay *everyone* for what has been done.”

Here is another reference to “everyone” and God’s judgment. Is this a reference to what everyone has done in explicit response to the gospel, or to everyone in general? I believe the latter, because it fits the overall message of God’s judgment to regular Gentiles in the New Testament better. This will be demonstrated later, but now it surfaces: what we *do* in this life is the major basis of judgment, not what set of theological vocabulary or information we possess. What we *do* in response to the gospel is paramount, for sure, but what we do with that which we know is also paramount for those who have never come in contact with the gospel.

Matthew 22:9 – “Go therefore into the main streets, and invite *everyone* you find to the wedding banquet.”

A parable by Jesus concerning those who have declined his invitation (assuming they have come in contact with the invitation) shows us that God is *not limited to only those who have received the initial* invitation. In the end, God will invite anyone he chooses. We must remember: those who are invited after the first guests can also turn down the request: universalism assumes that no one has a choice. God’s invitation can always be denied.

Mark 9:49 – “For *everyone* will be salted with fire.”

Jesus is discussing what will happen if a disciple causes someone to stumble and what will happen if a disciple chooses to continue to sin. They must “cut off” whatever limb is the stymie. If not, then they will be in “Gehenna,” where the worm eats and the fire never stops. Then, Jesus says that *everyone* will be “salted with fire” – a statement of God’s judgment. This judgment by God is not to be missed by anyone, including disciples of Jesus. This point is important for the next verse too.

Luke 12:47-8 – “That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one *who did not know* and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”

Just as before, *everyone* is judged. This parable makes clear that *not everyone is judged the same*. This section makes clear that we will all be accountable to that which we have responded. That is, how we respond to what we know is the basis of the severity of the judgment. What about those who did *not* deserve a beating? What does this look like in heaven? It does not say. Surely God does not chase us down some street with a rod in His hand ready to beat us down. Mark 9:49 (above) is probably helpful here: God’s “fire” will cleanse us before the ever-after. The degree to which we are “cleansed” is based upon how we live now. We should not rejoice at the “light beating” the unevangelized receive; we should be humbled in fear at the “beating” that may come to us who have received the gospel.

John 1:9 – The true light, which enlightens *everyone*, was coming into the world.”

John 3:21 – “But *those who do what is true* come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

The “true light” does “enlighten” everyone, but not everyone responds to the “enlightening” the same way. Being enlightened does not mean being a Christian or that everyone will be in Heaven. It does mean that everyone has something inside of him/her that resembles the fingerprint of the one who created him/her. Those actions performed on Earth that resemble God show that a person is walking to some degree “in the light.”

2. Pauline

I will discuss a few references in Ephesians and Colossians, before moving to the oft-cited Romans passage concerning “general” revelation. It is generally agreed among New Testament scholars that hymnic formulas are among the most ancient beliefs among Christians. Kerygmatic formulas (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:3-8) and hymns give us a glimpse into primitive Christians’ view of salvation. When these

hymns are perused, a fascinating discovery is made. Here are the closings of three different hymns:

Ephesians 1:10 – “as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up *all things* in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

Colossians 1:19-20 – “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace *through the blood of his cross*.”

Philippians 2: 10-11 – “so that at the name of Jesus *every* knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and *every* tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

If “believing with our hearts and confessing with our mouths” is *prescriptive* (as exclusivists argue), then according to these hymns, particularly Phil. 2:11, then *everyone* will be Christian in the end, since “every tongue should confess.” Therefore, Paul would be a universalist. Since Romans 10:9 or others like it are descriptive, not prescriptive, these references are not relevant.

What do we do about these claims that “all things” will be “reconciled” or that “every tongue should confess” or “all things” will be “gathered up in him”? Since it has not happened yet, ultimately we have no idea to what these images point. It could mean that an early belief was that “through the blood of his cross,” everyone, indeed, will eventually be reconciled to God in Jesus. The atoning work of Jesus affected everyone for salvation. Or, to be “reconciled” could refer to the notion that in the end, all people will come face-to-face with their Creator: no more estrangement. Then, once “gathered up,” judgment will occur.

I am convinced that what can be taken from these verses is the early Christian belief, to which I espouse, that God *wants* everyone to come to Him and, in the end, everyone will. When everyone comes in the presence of God, judgment based on what has been done according to what was known will then occur. Every knee *will* bow in submission to the authority of God. That same authority will then judge what we have done on Earth. These hymns have all but been neglected by those in this discussion, and more needs to be done with them.

The final reference noted will be Paul's discussion of the knowledge of the Gentiles. This will lead us into a discussion of "general revelation" and its usefulness.

Romans 1:19-23 – "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles."

This famous passage is usually cited to claim one thing: general revelation leads one only to condemnation. People only, and always, become "futile in their thinking" when left to their own devices. I have a few comments: (1) Paul never calls this "general revelation." If it is, then more must be discussed about it below. (2) In this passage, this "divine nature" that has been "understood" by the world did *not* condemn – what did condemn these people was that they "exchanged the glory" of God for "images resembling mortal" humans and animals. They "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (1:25). This condemnation upon themselves is evidenced in "every kind of wickedness." For Paul, the result of not knowing God the ways the believing Jews did only led to chaos. What condemned them was bad choices, not their "divine nature" shown in creation. I am not proposing that they could have worked their way to Heaven or that Paul is suggesting such. I am suggesting that this passage says nothing about "general revelation" as only leading one to hell. (3) The environment in which Paul wrote, and particularly the audience to which he was writing in Rome, fully understood religions that made physical images. Here, he is making direct appeal to the Roman civil religion that took the "lie" of those Roman religions and called them the "true" religion. What do we do today since we are not familiar with Roman civil religions, or, at least, "Gentiles" who make physical images? (4) What about those who do *not* set themselves up as idols? Eph. 4:17-19 makes the same claim as this passage and both presuppose Gentiles who *end up* performing "evil" acts. Can a person

behave in life without living in these “evil” acts? If so, could that person be judged with mercy? I think so. I think Paul thinks so too; see the following.

Romans 2:6-8 – “For he will repay according to each one’s deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.”

Here, Paul believes that God will judge people according to what is *done*. Paul believes that “everyone has fallen short,” certainly, but this means that we need atonement: something Jesus has offered. People are not judged by what cognitive abilities they possess, or what vocabulary we have. How we respond to what we know is judged. If they know the gospel, then they should respond appropriately. If they do not know the gospel, then should respond to the “divine nature” put inside them well. Paul continues in Romans 2:14-16:

“When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.”

Therefore, the hidden (remember the verses in Eph. and Col. that mention the gospel being what is “revealed”?) “law” on the hearts of those who have not heard is the guide to follow.

As I alluded to earlier, there is a certain amount of knowledge and revelation that is necessary: there is an intrinsic law of right and wrong, or morality, that theologians and philosophers have noticed for millennia. It is to this which Paul appeals. The “will of the Father” (e.g. Matt. 7:21) is latent in everyone in creation. This is why it is so natural for “all of creation” to be “united” in Christ as expressed in the hymns. Their own conscience will “bear witness” to *what they have done with what they have had*, and it will either “accuse or perhaps excuse” them on the day of judgment. God does not judge them according to what they have encountered or have not encountered.

Paul even goes so far to say that those who have never received the circumcision (the sign that a person has received the “special revelation” of the Torah) can *outdo* the righteousness of those who have, if they act appropriately to what they do know (Rom. 2:25-9)! Is not the God of the Jews the same as the God of the Gentiles (since one has been given special revelation and the other has not)?

Romans 3:29-30 – “Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.”

This makes the salvation of those who have not heard based on what they do, rather than by grace. This is partly true, just as it is with Christians. How we Christians respond to the gospel and what we do in life is very important for our judgment, but our salvation is still a gift (e.g. Rom. 2:22-26). If a nonbeliever who has not received the gospel is accepted into heaven *at all*, it is only because Jesus has accepted him based upon Jesus’ atonement and grace.

C. Clarification of Paul

Is Paul describing “general revelation”? Yes. As some have noted, for most exclusivists, there seems to be two gods: one of general revelation and one of special revelation. The god of general revelation condemns everyone, the other loves and accepts certain persons through Jesus. As I have often heard it, general revelation is *not* “his eternal power and divine [and invisible] nature,” it is a ploy used by God like a toy for dogs. He waves it in our face to make us run to it, when just in time, He yanks it away from us so that we fall on our faces in despair. This, of course, is asinine fatuity. This is surely not the “eternal power” and “divine nature” of God the Father as represented in the face of Jesus. As I said earlier, revelation does not condemn: Paul believed that Gentiles were using “general revelation” to condemn themselves. The “divine nature” in creation, including ourselves, most definitely can lead one to evil. It does not have to: it is up to us what we do with it.

D. Applications of Inclusivist View

As an inclusivist, what do I believe? (1) The atoning life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is essential to *anyone’s* salvation:

Ephesians 4:4-7 – “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”

This view is known as *particularity*: Jesus is the only “way, the truth, and the life” through which all must go to heaven that are going there. Though there *are* measures “of grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift” in all people, each person decides how to respond to what is given in them.

(2) Not all people have to give in to “condemning” themselves by choosing evil lifestyles. Their lives will not, hopefully, look as righteous as we who have responded to the gospel: of course not, they do not possess the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They will still sin, as Christians do sometimes. Our desire to delineate how *many* sins they can commit before they are “kicked out” is indicative of our twisted sense of legalism. God sees what a person does with the “raw material” she or he has; we will never know how righteous an act is for an unbeliever. What a person has done with the innate “divine nature” given by God will be judged accordingly (cf. Luke 12:48).

(3) Should Christians evangelize? Of course. Firstly, it is a Christian discipline to tell others: we are supposed to be “light” and “salt” in this world. According to Jesus, it is part of our new identity. Not to tell others is like a “lamp that is hidden under a rug.” Those who merely say, “We have to do it because Jesus told us to do it” are right, but bordering on legalism. Jesus’ message declared that those who are his disciples *naturally* “shine.” In fact, if we do not, we may not be his disciples at all. Secondly, we do not know who is responding well to what they have internally. Simply “to hope they’re doing okay” is unchristian. We, who are evangelical Christians, understand the difference conversion makes on a person who is struggling through this life, not knowing the “face behind the curtain” of our constant desire for something beyond this life. Thirdly, the spirit-filled life is utterly important for Christian living and community. The Kingdom of God is most acted in the community of believers, and, since *how we behave now* is indicative of how we will be, evangelizing aids people in maturation. When one asks, “Who cares if they are mature or not if they get to heaven anyway?” Besides this being an immature response to the gospel of

Jesus Christ, any “beating” that is “lighter” will be much better than those who will have to be in the “fire” for a long time.

(4) What about babies and the mentally incompetent? They, too, will be held responsible for what they know. Their sins will probably be far fewer than we who are more competent and older; so their judgment will be unlike ours. Much is required of those to whom much has been given.

(5) In this model, the justice and love of God are not divided or diminished at all. God is still the righteous judge who judges with “no partiality” to what has been done on Earth. His mercy was shown in Jesus and will be shown for those who do respond well to the light they have been given.

Are those who have never heard the gospel “secure” for eternity? We do not know. We do know that the Bible points to the fact that God is merciful and will judge them, and everyone, in fact, according to the decisions they have made in the body. Christians can be secure that the same God who both demands we behave as Christians and who also offers grace, is the same God with the same demands and offers for those not ever encountering the gospel. Particular inclusivism is the most honest estimation of a God who I believe is more interested in mercy than judgment. Judgment is immanent, but eternal punishment is always a last resort. May God grant us the same mercy for others that He has for us, so that we may stop condemning people to hell who may have a better chance for Heaven than we.