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W. Gary Phillips

Evangelicals and Pluralism: Current Options

Dr Phillips, a teacher at Bryan College, Dayton, Tenn., gives us a helpful analysis of current opinions regarding the fate of those who have never heard the gospel.

Can those who have not heard be redeemed apart from explicit faith in Jesus Christ? Historically, Christians have said *no*. James Davison Hunter observes,

> over nineteen centuries of Christian missionary activity hinged on this belief alone: that those who did not believe in the salvific capabilities of Jesus Christ had no hope of receiving eternal life. It follows that the unevangelized—those who had lived without the knowledge of the claims of Christianity—would also be damned to an eternity in hell . . . . This exclusivism and finality of the Christian soteriology is also the single most socially offensive aspect of Christian theology; the single most important source of contention between Christians and non-Christians. . . . Yet without this particularity, there is no orthodoxy (historically understood).[1]

In the past an overwhelming evangelical consensus[2] has affirmed this position. However, a recent survey of evangelical college and seminary students showed that 32 percent and 31 percent (respectively) no longer hold these teachings.[3] Hunter observes, 'the existence of such a sizable minority of Evangelicals maintaining this [new] stance represents a noteworthy shift away from the historical

[1] J. D. Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago, 1987), 34.

[2] Roman Catholic teachings on these issues are outside the scope of this essay. Since 1963 Catholic teaching has affirmed that (1). protestants, (2). those in non-Christian religions (Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam) as well as (3). those who are unreached may be saved outside the Catholic church. See W. M. Abbott, S. J., gen. ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, trans. Msgr. J. Gallagher (New York, 1966), 'The Church', ii.16; 'Decree on Ecumenism', i.3; 'Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions', i.2–4. See also P. F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (New York, 1985), 120–144.

[3] See Hunter, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 35–40 for details. See also the recent group discussion 'Evangelical Megashift', *Christianity Today*, Feb 19, 1990, 12–17.

interpretations . . . . If historical precedent is instructive, it becomes clear that these tendencies will probably escalate.'[4]

Two traditional teachings—direct faith in Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation and the understanding of hell as a place of eternal torment—have disturbed non-Christians (and some Christians) as being unworthy doctrines. Further, the point at which these two teachings coalesce most sharply is the destiny of those who have never heard:[5] how could a just and loving God consign to eternal torment those whose *providential* circumstances prevented them from hearing? If there were an exegetically based position which would relieve this (perceived) problem of eternal injustice, it would be of great help in theodicy among both Christians and unbelieving critics.

Unfortunately, our scholars are divided over this issue, as recent discussions have shown. John E. Sanders wrote a detailed essay for *The Evangelical Quarterly* in 1988 entitled 'Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?'[6] Shortly after, Evert D. Osburn's thought-provoking article 'Those Who Have Never Heard: Have They No Hope?'[7] was printed in the September 1989 issue of *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. Both Sanders and Osburn maintained that there was indeed redemptive hope for the Untold through both general revelation and special revelation (oral tradition, dreams, visions, etc.).

Immediately after Osburn's article appeared, the 1989 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society was held in San Diego, California. Both plenary and parallel sessions dealt with the problems of religious pluralism. Dr Clark Pinnock commended Osburn's essay and recommended a 'lenient' view toward the Untold, as well as toward sincere devotees of other religions.[8] John Sanders offered verbal support in a plenary session. Discussion was

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[4] Hunter, *Evangelicalism*, 38 and 49.

[5] Hereafter, the Untold.

[6] J. E. Sanders, 'Is Belief In Christ Necessary for Salvation?' *EQ* 60, 1988, 241–259. See his historical survey, 'The Perennial Debate', in *Christianity Today*, May 14, 1990, 20–21.

[7] E. D. Osburn, 'Those Who Have Never Heard: Have They No Hope?' *JETS*, 32/3, 1989, 367–372.

[8] This is Pinnock's term. See his proposal, 'The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions', in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, eds. M. Noll and D. Wells (Grand Rapids, 1988), 152–168 (endnotes, 318–320). Pinnock recently added another position statement, 'Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions', *JETS* 33/3, 1990, 359–368. The reader should note that the present essay does not discuss those who *have* heard but are comfortable and faithful within their non-Christian religion (although see the *election* model described below); we are dealing primarily with the Untold.

intense and not always clear.[9] Meanwhile, Christian leaders from Asia and Africa watched the American evangelicals closely.[10]

Historically, evangelical exclusivists insist that Jesus Christ is necessarily both the *ontological* and the *epistemological* basis of salvation. Those who die without placing faith in Christ in this life fall under condemnation. While evangelical inclusivists also affirm that Jesus Christ is the *ontological* basis of salvation, they insist that he need not be the *epistemological* basis. But there are still other positions which confuse these neat categories and therefore perplex many Christians.

As evangelicals we can and should reevaluate our schematizations of theology toward both greater coherence (internally) and greater relevance (externally). It is a given that we should *adapt* our message to current needs, but not *adopt* teachings which contradict earlier understandings unless exegetical or theological warrant arises. The purpose of this essay is to clarify some questions which orbit this debate, to summarize and critique three solutions recently being popularized among evangelicals, and finally to suggest some parameters within which we may rest with this issue (if not let this issue rest).[11]

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[9] The issue has not been without its emotional moments (on both sides). Perhaps one should begin by positing that traditionalists are not necessarily Pharisees who delight to consign anyone to hell, nor are they modern Jonahs—angry at God for his mercy on the Untold. They hold their view because they feel driven to it by biblical and theological consistency (see K. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* [New York, 1989], 99–106).

Likewise, those who hold a more 'lenient' view are not necessarily Sadducees flirting with liberalism, trying to shred scripture of its authority. Rather they are facing squarely a dormant issue in theodicy, reexamining the scriptures to see if earlier positions are indeed biblical (see R. V. Rakestraw, 'Clark H. Pinnock: A Theological Odyssey,' *Christian Scholar's Review*, XIX:3, 1990, 252–270).

Presumably all evangelicals would resist allowing apologetic motives to govern exegesis and dull the offense of the Cross simply to enhance cultural acceptance. Such a 'best case' interpretation will allow us to turn to the authority of the Scriptures for solutions, if there be any on this issue.

[10] Asian theologian Bong Ro said, 'We are looking to you, the American church, to make a clear statement on the uniqueness of Christ [as the epistemological basis for salvation]. Frankly, we are fighting a battle for it in Asia.' Heard by this writer at the San Diego meeting, and cited in Terry C. Muck, 'Many Mansions?,' *Christianity Today*, May 14, 1990, 14.

[11] Further details may be found in W. Gary Phillips and William E. Brown, *Exploring a Biblical World View* (Chicago, 1991), chapter six.

I. Three Salvific Propositions

In order to clarify the issues raised by Sanders and Osburn (and the ETS sessions), consider three propositions:

1. Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation.
2. Christ's work on the cross is imputed to any and all sinners who will be saved.
3. The sinner who receives Christ's salvation must place direct faith in Jesus Christ as Savior in this life, or face eternal damnation in the next.

The extent to which these are considered absolute, universal, and unqualified determines where one falls within the spectrum from liberal (universalism), to lenient (inclusivism), to limited (exclusivism).

1. *Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation.*

Although classic universalism denies this first proposition, evangelicalism affirms it as absolute, universal, and unqualified. The proposition may be supported by four affirmations:
(1). Jesus claimed that he is the only way of salvation.[12]
(2). Jesus' followers claimed the same.[13]
(3). Jesus claimed other ways of salvation are false.[14]
(4). Jesus' followers claimed the same.[15]
The conclusion could be stated thus: positively, Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation; negatively, other ways of salvation are false.

2. *Christ's work on the cross is imputed to any and all sinners who will be saved.*

This statement follows from the first, and is again absolute, universal and unqualified. Taken together, Propositions One and Two comprise the *ontological* basis of salvation. The redeemed will have met the following minimal conditions: (1). acknowledgment of Creator/creature distinction; (2). awareness of personal guilt; (3). acceptance of personal inability to save oneself. Universalists

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[12] Jn. 3:18 (if by Jesus); 14:6 (cf. 6:29).
[13] Jn. 3:18 (if by John); Acts 4:12 (see 10:43); 16:31; Rom. 10:9–15; Gal. 1:8; 1 Tim. 2:5, etc.
[14] Jn. 3:18 (?); 8:19, 24, 41–42, 44, 47.
[15] Jn. 3:18 (?); Acts 13:39; 17:22–31; 26:17–18; Rom. 10:9–15; 1 Cor. 10:20; 1 Thes. 1:9; implication of Gal. 2:21 and many other passages.

also deny this second proposition; both evangelical inclusivists and exclusivists affirm it.[16]

3. *The sinner who receives Christ's salvation must place direct faith in Jesus Christ as his/her savior in this life, or face eternal damnation in the next.*

Here the disagreement begins between evangelical inclusivists and exclusivists. The third proposition is not ontological, but reflects the *epistemological* basis for salvation. Exactly how much content must one know to be saved, and by whom (Whom?) must it be known? If the *object* of faith (God) knows, is it necesary or essential that the believing *subject* holds this knowledge? Does ignorance abort grace? Evangelical inclusivists maintain (1). that only Jesus is the Way, and (2). that the salvific knowledge resides in God, but not necessarily in the redeemed. In other words, while God knows Jesus is the only way, the redeemed Untold do not. In fact, other religions may function as 'schoolmasters' to lead them, albeit indirectly, to Christ.[17] Some inclusivists would say that those in non-Christian religions who are saved without direct knowledge of Christ are saved *in spite* of their religion (considered an *attempt* at salvation—J. N. D. Anderson[18]); othes would say they are saved *through* it (considered a *way* of salvation—C. S. Lewis[19]).

II. Three Current Evangelical Solutions

At least three solutions are put forth to argue against Proposition Three: the *Eschatological* solution, the *Election* solution, and the *Exception* solution. All three maintain (in some degree) that Proposition Three is not universal but particular, not absolute but relative.

1. *The Eschatological Solution*

The *Eschatological* solution takes two forms. Some hold a 'later light' view: although exclusivism is true, the Untold will indeed have

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[16] Sanders, Osburn and Pinnock would agree with the thrust (if not the details) of Propositions One and Two. It seemed to this writer that some of the discussion at the San Diego ETS meetings assumed that Dr Pinnock (in particular) does not affirm Jesus Christ as the ontological basis for salvation, when in reality he does.

[17] See Pinnock, 'Finality,' 161–162. We should note that Dr. Pinnock is clearly not a universalist (154–157).

[18] J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Downers Grove, 1970), 94, 109. For salvation, he contends, not knowledge but a right attitude towards God is essential; for *assurance*, however, knowledge is essential (104).

[19] R. Purtill, *C. S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith* (New York, 1981), chapter 7.

opportunity for salvation *post mortem*, based upon 1 Pet. 3:18–22.[20] The Untold are *not* saved in this life, but will have a chance to believe in Jesus Christ in the future. Prior to eternal judgment, some will embrace the 'Hades Gospel'[21] and some will not.[22] This view is based on what Dr Pinnock calls 'the reasonable assumption that God would not reject the perishing sinners whom he loves without ever knowing what their response to his grace would be. One doesn't need many texts to figure that one out.'[23]

Thus far Pinnock, Donald Bloesch[24] and other evangelicals have tendered this offer only to the Untold, but one wonders if this stopping point will hold. Once 'fairness' is used as a criterion (and exceptions inevitably tend to proliferate), other inequities besides ignorance vie for attention: some may have heard the gospel from a parent who abused them, or from a pastor who later committed adultery. Others may be told about Christ from someone whose intellectual abilities did not commend Christianity as a faith for thoughtful people. Still others are unfortunate enough to have wealth—a tremendous hindrance to salvation (Mt. 19:24). All of these, through no fault of their own, would be negatively disposed toward the gospel. Absolute inductive fairness is elusive, and as finite and fallen beings we cannot evaluate all the variables that will comprise final absolute justice.[25]

Further, the exegetical foundation for this view is dubious. While 1 Peter 3 is notoriously difficult to interpret, none of the best options support a 'later light' view: (a). the text is not describing those who

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[20] See Clark Pinnock, 'Why is Jesus the Only Way?' *Eternity*, December, 1976, and 'Finality' (165–166).

[21] The term belongs to D. L. Edwards, in D. L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, 1988), 302.

[22] Eschatological exclusivism is different from eschatological universalism which holds (1). that the *post mortem* offer is extended to all, not just the Untold, and (2). that no one will reject the offer (the latter being a reasonable inference!). Brunner argues that because God's salvific will is universal and Christ's atonement is unlimited, the application of Christ's atonement is necessarily universal. See E. Brunner, *Dogmatics, III: The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consumation*, trans. D. Cairns (Philadelphia, 1962), 415–424. Pinnock observes, 'unfortunately, this seems to be wishful thinking' ('Toward', 367, notes 24). See Mt. 7:13,14; 25:46; Jn. 5:28,29; Rom. 2:6–8; Rev. 21:7,8; 22:11,14,15.

[23] 'Toward', 368. Pinnock's view of God's omniscience is also non-traditional: R. V. Rakestraw, 'Clark H. Pinnock, A Theological Odyssey', *Christian Scholars Review* 19:3, 252-270. See R. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids, 1983), 51–72 for the traditional view.

[24] D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* I (New York, 1978), 245–247.

[25] See Robert H. Gundry, 'Salvation According to Scripture: No Middle Ground', *Christianity Today*, Dec. 9, 1977.

have not heard, but 'disobedient spirits'[26] who had heard and rejected the truth, or who chose not to hear; (b). chronologically the 'spirits' are from the time of the flood; they are not a host of the Untold from all millennia; (c). it is quite likely that Jesus 'preached' through Noah to the spiritually 'dead' (4:6) *prior to* the deluge, not *after* these were physically dead in some nether region (indeed, it seems distracting to insert this notion into the context);[27] (d). other scriptures indicate that choices made in this life are irrevocable (on whatever content they were based; see Jn. 8:21,24; Heb. 9:27).

Although different in kind, a second form of *eschatological* solution which attempts to relieve the perceived problem of eternal injustice somewhat is 'annihilationism.'[28] This view redefines the traditional understanding of damnation—it is not eternal conscious torment in hell, but destruction. Some hold that the Untold will perish with the rest who have not placed faith in Christ in this life. Others, however, combine both forms of the eschatological solution and maintain that after the Untold are confronted by Jesus Christ, those who reject him will be *destroyed* in hell.[29]

While an extensive treatment of this non-traditional view is beyond the scope of this paper, this writer believes that the burden of proof rests with annihilationism, because of: (a). Mt. 25:46, which implies conscious eternal life is coextensive with conscious eternal punishment; and (b) the analogy with angels: they have eternal

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[26] See the usage of *apeitheo* in 2:8, 3:1 and 4:17.

[27] Many commentators believe that Jesus made a post-atonement proclamation of victory to those fallen angels who had served as catalysts for the deluge (Gn. 6:1–13). Even so, this view still would not support Pinnock's application of these verses to the Untold.

[28] Annihilationism has been proposed in E. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Houston, 1982), adopted or tentatively embraced by notable evangelicals such as C. Pinnock, J. Wenham, D. Wenham, J. Stott, etc., and has received critique (Kenneth Kantzer, ed., 'Universalism: Will Everyone Be Saved?' *Christianity Today Institute*, March 20, 1987).

A similar view is called 'conditional immortality', in which death for the unredeemed ends all (there is no final judgment). Eternal life is contingent upon receiving Christ; it is a gift received at the moment of salvation. However, Lk. 12:5 ('fear the one who after he has killed has authority to cast into hell') makes little sense unless the unbeliever's physical death and final judgment are distinct.

Those who cannot embrace annihilationism or conditional immortality may take some comfort in the probability that there are levels of accountability (and hence punishment) in hell (Mt. 11:22; Mk. 12:40; Lk. 12:47–48; 20:47; 2 Cor. 11:15; Heb. 10:29; Rev. 20:12–15; see also Mk. 14:21; Rom. 2:5; Jude 15; Rev. 22:12). Still, the problem remains and grates (see the interesting discussion in Boone, *Discourse*, chaper seven).

[29] See Dr Pinnock's 'Fire, Then Nothing' in *Christianity Today*, March 20, 1987, 40–41. The views are not logically or theologically entwined; one may hold to annihilationism without any accompanying posture regarding the Untold.

existence (Lk. 20;36), and fallen angels are subject to eternal torment (Mt. 25:41).[30]

2. *The Election Solution*

The Election solution is not an exclusive but an inclusive position. The moment of redemption for the Untold is not future (viz., the eschatological solution) but present due to 'other possible present states'. Those who hold this view maintain that since God knows all possible worlds, he knows whether any particular Untold person would have believed had s/he been born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, rather than Sri Lanka. God elects the individual to salvation according to his knowledge of a *potential* present world rather than according to decisions made in this *actual* world. Thus Proposition Three is not universal nor absolute; its referent is not this actual world, but its application is informed by God's knowledge of other potential worlds.[31]

This view was put forth in one of the San Diego ETS parallel sessions and applied to an individual (Person X) who specifically rejects Christ in this *actual* world. The speaker said he was confident that in another (potential) world in which certain circumstances had not prevailed to hinder Person X's belief in Christ, Person X *would have* believed. Therefore, he reasoned, Person X will be in heaven.

Briefly, (a). this solution is not an exegetical insight derived from any text—rather, it seems to be a theological form of behaviorism, and negates the clear meaning of too many passages (e.g. 1 Jn. 2:23); (b). it is doubtful that the word group for 'election' can be enlarged to accommodate this redefinition; (c). while this argument was put forth to support a limited inclusivism, it seems to me that it leads inevitably to absolute universalism. Since the mind of God knows an infinite number of possible worlds, what is to stop one from arguing that every human would be saved in *some* possible world (or perhaps Satan and his demons would not have fallen?) and therefore no one will be in hell? This is a happy thought, but hardly biblical.

3. *The Exception Solution*

This solution offers a form of inclusivism which reasons that redemption of the Untold takes place in *this* life (not in the future or in other possible present worlds), even though there is no explicit

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[30] See C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* III (Grand Rapids, reprint 1973), 872–880. There will undoubtedly be much discussion forthcoming about annihilationism.

[31] See Stott, 325–326.

choice for Christ. The argument is analogical and runs like this: God made a divine exception in at least one case—similar to 'those who *have* not heard' are 'those who *had* not heard' (the redeemed of the Old Testament). Since God redeemed those who had not heard (who were ignorant of Jesus through no fault of their own), would not God be consistent to extend his mercy also to the Untold (who fall into the same circumstantial category)?

More extensive attention will be given to this *Exception* solution, because its proponents try to be more biblical, and because Evert Osburn and John Sanders have made winsome suggestions which have gained wide attention.[32]

Sanders comments, 'God has not been passively waiting for missionaries to reach the unevangelized with the biblical revelation. The Old Testament both declares (Dt. 2:5ff.; Am. 9:7) and gives examples (e.g. Melchizedek, Balaam, Jethro) of God's activity outside the nation of Israel.'[33] He maintains, 'God separates the unevangelized into saved and lost depending upon the response they make to the limited information they have concerning God.'[34] Pinnock states 'how can anyone deny the essential truth of these words: "Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience"? . . . Surely God judges the heathen in relation to the light they have, not according to the light that did not reach them'[35]

Discussion of some specific points may be helpful. We will deal first with some arguments of John Sanders, and then consider the contribution of Evert Osburn.

Sanders discounts all the interpretions of texts which have been used to support exclusivism (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12, etc.) on the grounds that 'it is not certain from these passages that one *must* hear of Christ in this life to obtain salvation. They simply say there is no other way to heaven except through the work of Christ; they do not say one has to know about that work in order to benefit from the work.'[36]

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[32] One should note that Sanders and Osburn are not universal but particular in their application of inclusivism. They maintain the means of salvation (by grace through faith) and the uniqueness of the agent of salvation (only through Jesus Christ). Osburn ('Those Who Have Never Heard') makes it clear that sincerity is not redemptive (372). He does not offer his solution as an 'escape-valve' for other religions, but has confined it basically to 'very few unreached people' (372), and limited its application historically (370–1).

[33] 'Belief?', 246.

[34] Ibid., 242. This is argued more fully as his own view on 252–259.

[35] *Toward*, 367, citing *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*, Vatican II, par 16.

[36] 'Belief?' 246.

As an illustration he cites Rom. 10:9 and summarizes it thus: 'all who receive Christ will be saved.' He then invokes the laws of immediate inference from A-Form categorical propositions to say '[this] is not synonymous with "All who do not receive Christ will be lost." '[37] To say so, he avers, is 'fallacious.' While this is technically true, language communicates more than categorical propositions. There are semantic nuances which are implied. The parent who says to his child, 'If you clean your room, I'll give you a cookie,' means at the same time 'If you do not clean your room you will not get a cookie;' a consistent parent does not mean 'If you do not clean your room, I'll give you a cookie anyway.' Logic may be invoked to serve exegesis,[38] not to exorcise implications.

Second, Sanders maintains that because the 'gospel' was proclaimed (Gal. 3:6) in the OT—and its content necessarily excluded the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus—the same epistemic allowance God made for OT saints could be applied to the Untold through the centuries and today. 'If knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation then how do we explain the salvation of the Old Testament believers whose knowledge was quite limited concerning the Messiah . . .?'[39] But this begs the question. We must be careful when allowing OT patterns for salvation (in which content varied due to the progress of revelation) to become normative for the Untold today.

Third, Sanders argues that Peter broadens the definition of those who 'fear God' (Acts 10:2) to mean 'those who trust and obey God to the extent of the revelation they have.'[40] Thus he concludes, 'Cornelius was already a saved believer *before* Peter arrived, but he was now a Christian believer.'[41] However, Acts 11:14 records the words of the angel: 'he shall speak words to you by which you will [future] be saved.' Salvation entered the house of Cornelius *after* Peter entered, not before.[42]

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[37] Ibid., 247.

[38] See, for example, W. G. Phillips, 'An Apologetic Study of John 10:34–36', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 1989, 405–419.

[39] Sanders, 'Belief?' 256.

[40] Ibid., 254.

[41] Ibid, italics added.

[42] In this writer's opinion, appeals to the case of Cornelius (Acts 10–11) apart from his previous history (he was a *God-fearer* who believed in special revelation), his subsequent history (he did believe the specific content about Jesus), and apart from Peter's subsequent interpretative remarks (where Peter may have defined

Osburn's article also contains problems for this writer. Osburn suggests that individuals may be saved apart from knowledge of Christ, but 'of course, they must have a knowledge of the right God' (368) and believe in 'the one true creator God' (372). Yet this, too, begs the question: do the Untold have knowledge of 'the right God' apart from knowledge of Jesus Christ?

Second, Osburn maintains that oral tradition of the one true God survived and was transmitted from generation to generation, thus continuing a remnant line among unevangelized peoples. This suggestion may have merit, as in the cases of Melchizedek (Gn. 14), Abimelech (Gn. 20), and Jethro (Ex. 18)[43]—redeemed OT saints who had not heard. However, any oral message becomes distorted through centuries of transmission (by deletions and accretions). At what point does a true message which is progressively distorted become untrue?[44] Further, we have more warrant for believing that God gave direct special revelation in OT times—particularly early in the progress of revelation—than we have for assuming that he does so today.[45]

Third, Osburn offers this chain argument: (a). Rev. 5:9 and 7:9 mention individuals from all nations/tribes in heaven; (b). many tribes have been wiped out historically, due to war, disease, etc.; (c). therefore 'God must have dealt with them in a special way' (370). Osburn's inference assumes that people from all epochs are included in point (a). However, John seems to be speaking only of those who came out of 'the great tribulation' (7:13–14), and thus links (b), and (c), are irrelevant. Osburn is allowing a questionable inference from two scriptures and an inference from history to reinterpret explicit Scripture.

Fourth, Osburn allows Rom. 3:25 to govern the application of 'such exclusivistic passages' as Jn. 14:6 and Acts 4:12 (368). He takes the phrase 'in the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously commited' to mean that God 'passed by the debt incurred by their [OT saints] sin,' looking forward to the cross. While this may

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what he meant by 'fear him' and 'acceptable'—Acts 10:42–43) are suspect. See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, 1971), 235.

Appeals to Lk. 18:9–14 are also suspect. The Publican who prayed 'God be merciful to me the sinner' was again (1), one who had received special revelation and (2), probably had placed a faith-sacrifice on the altar (see the only other verbal NT use of *hilaskomai*, Heb. 2:17).

[43] For other possibilities see Ezk. 14, Mal. 1:11, Am. 9:7.

[44] For example, Osburn's opening illustration (367, presumably a clear case of oral transmission of adequate salvific content) did not allude to the concepts of sin, its wages, or atonement. A better—though briefer—example may be found in J. Arensen, 'The Rope Restored', *In Other Words*, 1989, 6.

[45] Dt. 34:10; Heb. 1:1–2; 2:3–4.

be true, this writer fails to see how an analogy from past redemption (BC) supports a redemption model for the salvation of the Untold (AD). His only rationale is that God 'does not necessarily view time sequentially' (368), which is a *non-sequitur*. Besides, the following considerations make his interpretation questionable: (a). Osburn assumes that Paul is referring to 'Old Testament saints' although the text does not say so; (b). Osburn's point would apply to those who died and had not heard prior to the cross, not necessarily to those who have died since the cross without knowledge of Christ; (c). Rom. 3:25 may just as well mean that in past generations God did not inflict judgment proportionate with sins (see Acts 14:16; 17:30).

Fifth, Osburn suggests that oral gospel tradition may have its roots in Pentecost, citing Acts 2:5—the audience consisted of 'devout men from every nation under heaven,' who took the gospel back to their homelands. But again the inferential gap is too broad: (a). their languages (which were specified—vs.13) were those of the 'civilized' world; (b). the phrase 'devout men' refers only to Jews elsewhere (Acts 8:2; 22:12), not people from or returning to an Untold group; (c). these Jews were 'living' in the city;[46] (d). the flow of the book of Acts indicates each mission endeavor (Acts 8–21) is breaking new ground, not harvesting seed scattered at Pentecost.

Finally, Osburn mentions that general revelation may be combined with truth from oral traditions, dreams, miracles, and/or visions, to bring the Untold to repentance. But the motivating point of Rom. 10:13–14 seems to be that God has limited himself to human agency in the preaching of the gospel of Christ.[47]

This is not to say that the interpretations of Sanders and Osburn are impossible, but this writer believes they are unlikely, and that individually they are questionable enough to cast serious doubt on their collective thrust.

Another possible analogy which Sanders, Osburn and Pinnock have not pursued (to my knowledge) might be more promising for theological (not exegetical) reasons, and I mention it here for the sake of completeness. Similar to the case of 'those who *have* not heard' (and 'those who *had* not heard') is the case of 'those who *cannot* hear'—infants, small children, and the severely retarded. Many Christians believe that infants who die are saved through the

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[46] *Katoikountes*, Acts 2:5, 14; contrast *epidemountes* ('visitors from Rome'—v.10) and *paroikeis* ('visiting'—Lk. 24:18).

[47] At least by the time of the writing of Romans—see C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York, 1957), 204–206. Also, Heb. 1:1–2 indicates that special revelation in the past—given in many forms and various ways—has at present narrowed down to Christology.

intervening grace of God.[48] Is. 7:15 implies that infants are unable to choose right from wrong. David was confident that he would 'go to' his infant son (2 Sa. 12:23—contrast his inconsolable grief over the death of unregenerate Absalom, 2 Sa. 18–19).[49]

Regeneration would then take place at the moment of death, because all (including infants) partake of original sin.[50] The point is that most evangelicals embrace the principle of exceptions of grace—due to special circumstances which tug at God's mercy—to the requirement that all who will be redeemed will be in heaven only by believing specific content.[51] If so, God has set a narrow precedent: there exists a category of human beings who might be saved apart from conscious assent to the gospel. This writer places infants, small children and the severely retarded within that category. Should some Untold be placed there as well?

There are, of course, problems in applying this analogy to the Untold. First, infants are guilty of sin (Ps. 51:5), but not of sins (Is. 7:15). Furthermore, they do not have the capacity to respond to general revelation or conscience. Both of these points may be variables which weigh heavily with God's mercy, and neither of these is true for the Untold.

In sum, I hope—deeply—that the *Exception* analogies do in fact support positions similar to those of Pinnock, Osburn and Sanders. At times I might speculate on the *Exception* view as a personal apologetic comfort (as a logical possibility, not necessarily an

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[48] Of course, some may argue that all who die before placing explicit faith in Christ—including infants—are lost. The virtue in this view is theological consistency. Negatively, its consistency is very narrow, and it does not seem to cohere with God's love and justice; rather, this solution seems to compound the problem of evil (theodicy).

Many maintain that some children are elect, but others are lost (*Westminster Confession* [Richmond, 1966], XII.3, 73). Calling this view 'foreseen potential,' Gleason Archer says 'God knows in advance what each child will do and how he will respond when he reaches the age of moral decision' (*The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* [Grand Rapids, 1982], 388–390), and elects accordingly. The view put forth in this paper is that *all* in this category are redeemed.

[49] The New Testament contributes an interesting case: the infant John the Baptist was said to be *filled with the Holy Spirit* (Lk. 1:15). Can there be 'filling' apart from regeneration? Should we then say that John the Baptist was regenerated in the womb? If he was, then we probably have a case of regeneration prior to cognition. If he was not, then we have 'filling' prior to regeneration. In either case, God has done something exceptional in the life of an infant (of course, the reason for this was the exceptional life and ministry of John the Baptist. But the fact of divine exceptions in principle remains).

[50] *Westminster Confession*, XIII.3, 73. See the extended discussion in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* IX (Grand Rapids: 1981 reprint), 411–444.

[51] Faith does not save; it has no intrinsic value except what God chooses to ascribe to it (Eph. 2:8).

exegetical probability).[52] But arguments by analogy are tenuous, and their probability depends upon the number of corresponding entities between the two analogues.[53] The analogies from 'those who *had* not heard,' and perhaps from 'those who *cannot* hear,' have some points of correspondence with the case of 'those who *have* not heard,' but not enough for the confidence with which many evangelicals baptize the Untold.

IV. Conclusion

Within evangelicalism, the exclusiveness of Jesus Christ—as both the *ontological and epistemological* basis for salvation—may become a watershed issue. As we continue to consider alternatives which attempt to resolve this problem, there are certain biblical and theological moorings to which our positions must be tethered:

1. Jesus is the *ontological* basis of salvation.
2. For those who *have* heard, Jesus is the *epistemological* basis of salvation, and a decision to accept or reject Him must be made.
3. God's desire is that no one perish but that all be saved (2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:4). Yet scripture also indicates that man's will overrides God's will (with his permission; Mt. 7:14; 23:37).
4. While it is impossible to determine absolute inductive fairness 'from below,' God is just. No one in final judgment will be able to say, 'I was searching, and I would have believed, but I did not get the chance.'[54]
5. While the company of the finally redeemed will be cosmopolitan (Lk. 13:29; Rev. 5:9), Scripture usually indicates that the quantity of the redeemed will be relatively few (Mt. 7:13–14; Lk. 13:23–24).[55]

This writer believes that the *Election* and *Eschatological* solution have no exegetical support and fall into the category of hopeful speculation. The *Exception* solution seems more promising, but needs to be established with solid exegesis or with the proper qualifiers.

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[52] I am uneasy arguing for exceptions to explicit Scripture (as I suppose most would be who desire hermeneutical consistency). Paul's point seems to be that no one *does* please God because no one *can* please God (Rom. 8:7; Rom. 1:21–31, 3:9–23 and Acts 17:29 indicate Man has deified the creation and ignored the Creator). This assumes (I believe justifiably) that the statements regarding fallen man's suppression of 'general' revelation (found in Romans 1–2) speak in universal rather than in particular terms.

[53] I. M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, sixth ed. (New York, 1982), 397–402.

[54] Indeed, if we knew God's arrangements for the Untold we might say—even now in our fallen state—that they were just and right.

[55] Rev. 7:9 refers to an innumerable multitude of the redeemed, but they are saints who emerged from 'the great tribulation' (v. 14).

At present, we must be partially agnostic; whether we like it or not, Scripture does not clearly make us privy to God's arrangements for the Untold. Apparently he did not feel it necessary to inform those to whom (by definition) those plans would never have immediate relevance.[56] Thus when we adopt a particular view we are making assumptions. We are no longer in the realm of exegetical certainty but are dealing (at best) in probability and inference.[57] With this perspective in mind, three reasonable and theologically consistent positions—intended by this writer to be both descriptive and prescriptive—may be adopted without raising questions of heresy.

The *Neutral Agnostic* would suggest that because there is no explicit revelation on the subject—and because divergent opinions arise when it is pursued—one should not debate the issue but leave all the variables in God's hands. This is permissible, and one cannot fault the wisdom of John Stott's words, 'here we need to ask questions rather than make statements.'[58] Others feel, however, that there are enough hints which allow more to be said (either exegetically or theologically) which transcends mere speculation.

Negative Agnostics hold the following: (a). Primary focus is placed on Jesus as the *epistemological* basis of salvation. (b). The Bible's most explicit statements regarding the way of salvation are exclusivistic. (c). In relation to the attributes of God, holiness (a constant) and justice (a constant) have priority over redemption (a contingent).[59] (d). One must consider the pragmatic concern that

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[56] Perhaps God is less interested in theodicy that we. Logically, other than for the purposes of satisfying our curiosity (and perhaps increasing our apologetic comfort), there would be no point for God to reveal his plans for the Untold and then add, as it were, 'by the way, this message applies only to those who—through no fault of their own—will not or cannot hear this message.' That would be akin to my giving a special message in this paragraph to those who—due to some genetic malformation—do not read footnotes. The problem (lack of exposure to the message, or lack of cognitive capacity to respond to the message) is not solved by enhancing the message.

[57] One would hope that God sends greater light to enlighten those who seek him (Heb. 11:6; some add the example of Cornelius in Acts 10–11 and case studies such as are cited by D. Richardson, *Eternity In Their Hearts*, rev. ed. (Ventura, 1984). But this perspective must be balanced by (a). verses like Rom. 3:11, (b). the consideration that Cornelius (if used as a case study) was actually a 'God-fearer,' and (c). the history of missions (which did not begin in earnest until recent centuries; had so few sought God until recently?).

[58] Edwards and Stott, *Essentials*, 324. Stott does, however, proceed to suggest a 'lenient' view (320–329).

[59] An attribute is something without which God would not be God (Nash, *Concept*, 16–17). If God were not holy or just, he would not be God. But redemption is not an attribute but an action; that is, God could have chosen not to manifest his mercy through redemption, and still be God.

'lenient' attitudes toward the Untold may hinder mission or diminish missionary fervor.[60]

Negative Agnostics take seriously Roger Nicole's warning, 'it is dangerous to be more generous that God has revealed himself to be,'[61] and prefer to err on the side of exclusivism—while hoping that they are wrong! In other words, while they remain open to the logical possibility that God has made special arrangements for the Untold, they believe the wisest course is to assume that the Untold remain under condemnation and get on with the Commission. (This is the position held by this writer.)

Positive Agnostics hold the following: (a). Their focus is more on Jesus as the *ontological* basis for salvation. (b). They remain open to the logical possibility that all of the Untold are under condemnation, are aware that the number of the redeemed may be few, and therefore engage in mission with enthusiasm. (c). However, they believe that the weight of evidence plus inferences from the character of God (as both just and loving) favor 'lenient' inclusivism. In the face of their Judge some Untold will see their Saviour.

With these perspectives in mind, and until faith becomes sight—including faith in our views regarding the Untold—we must admit our limited knowledge, incomplete data and distorted perceptions of fairness. Fortunately, the One Who will judge all men has no such limitations (Jn. 5:22–23). The judge of all men is the same One Who died for the sins of all men.[62] Jesus said, 'my judgment is just' (Jn. 5:30). We have confidence that 'the Judge of all the earth will do right' (Gn. 18:25).[63]

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[60] J. D. Hunter observes, 'this posture would, and in fact does, lessen substantially the urgency to evangelize the unreached' (*Evangelicalism*, 47). One clear manifestation has already come from the WCC: 'the church . . . may be seen as the minister of the new covenant, accepting and dealing with man and society as already belonging to the New Mankind [man redeemed in Christ], however little they look like it, since faith is the evidence of things not seen.' (T. Wieser, ed., *Planning For Mission* [New York, 1966], 54)

[61] Roger Nicole, in K. Kantzer, ed., 'Universalism', *Christianity Today Institute*, 38.

[62] F. F. Bruce said, 'Christians have the assurance, both for themselves and for others, that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will never do anything unjust or unmerciful: he cannot deny Himself' ('Foreword' to Fudge, *Fire*, viii).

[63] Two relevant books on pluralism and evangelicals have recently been published: John Sanders, *No Other Name* (Eerdmans, 1992), and Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness In God's Mercy* (Zondervan, 1992). While their publication does not significantly alter conclusions in this essay, the reader should note that Pinnock is now far more generous in allowing for salvation through other religions.