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# Does Inclusivist Theology Undermine Evangelism?

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## 1. Is Inclusivism A Demotivation for Evangelism?

### *a. The Missiological Context*

Mainline Protestantism, particularly over the past two hundred years (coinciding with the advent of the modern missionary era) has maintained that people living before and after the time of Christ, but who have not heard of the Messiah, are excluded from the blessings of the gospel in this life and from eternal life. Today, however, an increasing number of western Christians doubt this.

Some evangelical scholars[1] revealing their emotional and theological dissatisfaction with the traditional answers have been reexamining the Scriptures to determine whether there is a greater wideness in God's mercy permitted with respect to the salvation of the unevangelized. It is claimed that this greater wideness in God's mercy and enlarged generosity in his salvific purposes, has not been appreciated fully in the past because of evangelicals being influenced by an Augustinian pessimism.[2] These evangelical inclusivists believe that in order to advance evangelical understanding, it is time to reappraise the conundrum faced by the existence of the unevangelized, and in particular, to retrieve related but previously neglected biblical themes which impact their status.[3]

1 This paper will be limited to an examination of evangelical inclusivism. Roman Catholic teachings on inclusivism are outside the scope of this investigation.

2 Pinnock, C. H., *A Wideness in God's Mercy—The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 19.

3 Once again, given the constraints imposed on this paper, I will not be dealing with the nature of the eternal destiny of those who have never heard the gospel, whether that be understood as eternal conscious punishment, annihilation or a variety of universalism.

It has often been observed that the Church's fervour in mission and in evangelism particularly, is in direct response to its commitment to the authority of the Scriptures, to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and to the belief that there is found in him alone, salvation.[4] If, as some evangelical inclusivists claim, salvation is universally accessible on account of the 'faith principle', that is, an explicit hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not required, then significant missiological questions arise. For instance, will the Church's commitment to missions be lessened as a consequence? Does an inclusivist theology act as a demotivation for evangelism? Should Christians go to the effort and expense of evangelism if salvation is already universally accessible?

### *b. Definition of Terms*

In literature dealing with the status of the unevangelized it has been customary to differentiate between the exclusivist (and more recently the restrictivist) and inclusivist positions. Generally, historical orthodox Christianity has been identified with exclusivism. Exclusivism maintains that 'the central claims of Christianity are true, and that where the claims of Christianity conflict with those of other religions the latter are to be rejected as false. Christian exclusivists also characteristically hold that God has revealed himself definitively in the Bible and that Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of God, the only Lord and Saviour. Salvation is not to be found in the structures of other religious traditions'.[5] Today many evangelicals will claim to be exclusivists, although defining their exclusivism in a variety of ways, mainly to do with the relationship of Christianity with other religions. However, whereas exclusivists can be clear that those who wilfully reject Christ meet their fate as depicted in the Bible, difficulty arises when exclusivism faces the issue of those who are sincerely seeking for God, yet with no opportunity to encounter Christ.[6]

An additional category to exclusivism is suggested by John Sanders. He argues that while exclusivism affirms the particularity and finality of Jesus Christ, it does not entail the belief that all who die unevangelized will be damned, since there are some exclusivists who believe that all or most people will be saved by, for example, a postmortem opportunity for conversion. Therefore a further category is required to express the belief that salvation is limited or restricted to those who

4 Gnanakan, K., *Kingdom Concerns—A Theology of Mission Today* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 202.

5 Netland, H. A., *Dissonant Voices—Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 9.

6 Gnanakan, K., *The Pluralistic Predicament* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1992), 24.

hear the gospel and come to faith in Christ before they die. For this category Sanders coins the word, 'restrictivism'.[7] Restrictivism,[8] according to Sanders, holds that those who die never having heard the gospel of Christ are 'necessarily damned' (1994:46) due to their sin of rejecting God the creator. Importantly, for our purposes, restrictivism requires that a person needs to hear the gospel from a human agent in order to be saved.

Frequently in contention with restrictivism is inclusivism. A working definition of inclusivism as offered by Don Carson is 'all who are saved are saved on account of the person and work of Jesus Christ, but that conscious faith in Jesus Christ is not absolutely necessary: some may be saved by him who have never heard of him, for they may respond positively to the light they have received'.[9] Given this definition, Jesus is still understood to be the unique, exclusive and final Saviour of humanity but God is also said to be revealing himself apart from the gospel's proclamation. It is this integration of the affirmation of God's unique revelation in Jesus Christ and God's salvific activity in the wider world which distinguishes evangelical inclusivism from restrictivism. Carson differentiates between 'soft' and 'hard' varieties of inclusivism. According to Carson, 'soft' inclusivists allow for the *possibility* that there might be some who are saved who have never heard of Christ (assuming there is a genuine response of repentance and faith). 'Hard' inclusivists (including Clark Pinnock and John Sanders) go beyond a possibility of salvation to the affirmation that salvation is a definite fact.[10]

### *c. The Charge*

John Piper, Senior Pastor of the Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, is a restrictivist who forcefully argues that even a moderate inclusivism is detrimental towards evangelism. Piper is emphatic that

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7 Sanders, J., 'Evangelical Responses to Salvation Outside the Church', *Christian Scholar's Review* 24:1 (September 1994), 46.

8 A position that, he believes, is found predominantly among fundamentalists and neoevangelicals.

9 Carson, D. A. *The Gagging of God—Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 278.

10 A final comment on definitions is required. The totality of what 'missions' encompasses cannot be equated simply with 'evangelism'. Christian mission involves evangelism but at the same time it is understood as being considerably wider than simply gospel proclamation. This clarification is necessary for it appears that the scholars under review use both words, 'missions' and 'evangelism' interchangeably. The focus of this paper will be upon mission as primarily evangelistic in the sense that at the heart of biblical mission is the call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, which in turn is dependent upon a person's hearing the good news.

the more it is supposed that people can be saved without hearing the gospel the less urgency there will be for missions. He says 'there is a felt difference in the urgency when one believes that preaching the gospel is absolutely the only hope that anyone has of escaping the penalty of sin and living for ever in happiness to the glory of God's grace'.[11]

However, Piper recognises that the abandonment of the universal necessity of hearing the gospel as the precursor to being saved cuts only a *nerve cord* in missionary motivation not *the nerve cord*. That is, saving the lost is not the only focus for missionary motivation. Rather, arching over Christian missions is the great goal of bring glory to Christ (1993:158).

Dick Dowsett is the author of a small book from the same restrictivist stance. He refers to the unevangelized as 'lost',[12] with the preaching of the gospel their only hope. In responding to the question, 'can people who have never heard be saved'? Dowsett appreciates the emotional turmoil of the restrictivist position when it is translated into the lives of real people: 'We would be callous in the extreme if we did not long to find some way whereby some of them could be saved. But the biblical way to achieve this is not to look for hints in Scripture to encourage our wishful thinking' (1993:51). He argues that 'special pleading' can, in fact, dull our sense of responsibility for such people. Instead, true realism will always seek ways to commend Christ in loving and costly friendship and evangelism.

### *d. The Defence*

Evangelical inclusivists hold that inclusivism does not act as a demotivation to evangelism. The late Sir Norman Anderson, an earlier proponent of the view that some may be saved apart from hearing the gospel, cited four reasons (repeated and modified by subsequent inclusivists) as to why the possibility that some unevangelized may be saved should not lead to any diminution of missionary urgency.[13]

Ellenberger responding to the restrictivist fear that if God saved seekers who had never heard the name of Jesus, the 'nerve cord' of missions would be cut, moves considerably beyond Anderson's reasons. He writes that a theology of inclusivism actually *enhances* the motivation to evangelize the lost.[14]

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11 Piper, J., *Let The Nations Be Glad—The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 117.

12 Dowsett, D., *God That's Not Fair* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1993), 51.

13 Anderson, J. N. D., *Christianity and World Religions—the Challenge of Pluralism* (Revised edition. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 155.

14 Ellenberger, J. D., 'Is Hell a Proper Motivation for Missions?', in Crockett, W. and Sigountos, J. (eds.), *Through No Fault Of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 225.

Firstly, he writes that Christians are given a fresh impetus for evangelism knowing that the Holy Spirit has been actively working ahead of them. As with Anderson earlier, Ellenberger (1991:226) cites Acts 18:10 in support.

Secondly, Ellenberger argues that inclusivist theology is said to renew Christian commitment to every individual, for as the great majority of humanity have not responded to general revelation, they need to be confronted by the claims of Jesus. Piper (1993:158) criticises this argument as 'incomprehensible'. It is difficult to know precisely what Ellenberger is intimating.

Thirdly, Ellenberger acknowledges that the fact that God is working above and beyond the working of missionaries and pastors broadens Christians' understanding of the whole gospel. It is said that the good news is not just cognitive information about Jesus, nor is it limited to an escape from eternal punishment. Indeed, all people everywhere deserve a clearly understood invitation to the fullness of salvation. Somewhat surprisingly, Ellenberger (1996:226) seems to be advocating that the opportunity to tell people about the blessings of this life is even more motivating to Christians than the opportunity to share the opportunity of eternal life.

Lastly, Ellenberger holds that believing some are saved apart from the preaching of the gospel 'reaffirms love as the primary motivation' (1991:226). Here Ellenberger's logic is mystifying. Is Ellenberger assuming that the urgency of missions to rescue people from eternal torment arises apart from the motivation of love?

Crockett and Sigountos contribute the disclaimer that, rather than dampening missionary motivations the existence of 'implicit Christians' should increase motivation. They suggest, having already responded to the living God on account of general revelation implicit believers are waiting eagerly to hear more about him. Hence, 'if hundreds of such seekers lived in a given locale, a strong church would spring to life, giving glory to God and evangelising their pagan neighbours'.[15] Piper (1993:118) retorts that it is hard to escape the impression that this is a futile attempt to make a weakness look like a strength.

## 2. Two Contemporary Evangelical Scholars Advocating Inclusivism

### *a. Clark H. Pinnock*

Clark Pinnock is a Canadian theologian teaching at McMaster Divinity College, Ontario. Pinnock's recent articles on the topic of inclusivism

15 Crockett, W. V. & Sigountos, J. G., 'Are The "Heathen" Really Lost?', in Crockett and Sigountos, op. cit., 260.

have caused considerable uneasiness amongst conservative evangelicals. In his controversial book entitled, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* Pinnock proposes an evangelical theology of religions centred upon two 'control beliefs' (that is, dominant hermeneutical assumptions which all bring to texts on the subject[16]). Rather than jettisoning essential doctrines, as some radical pluralists have done, or entrenching himself in a restrictivist counteraction to perceived liberalising tendencies, Pinnock proposes a *via media.* This *via media* replaces the older inherited Augustinian pessimism with an 'optimism of salvation' for all humanity.

Pinnock's first control belief is the 'universality' axiom. That is, God's love extends to all humanity (1 Tim 2:4; Rom 11:32; 2 Pet 3:9) thereby providing a 'hermeneutic of hopefulness'. Pinnock believes that the Scriptures encourage a hope for a substantial redemption of humanity—an optimism in God's salvation based upon the boundless mercy of God. This stands in contrast to the traditional 'fewness' doctrine, a heresy of orthodoxy.

Pinnock's 'universality' axiom seeks to establish humanity's redemptive relationship with God on the basis of the Noahic covenant. He says,

> Because of the obedience of one (Noah), God extends his mercy to many (all humanity). In Noah, God establishes a global or cosmic covenant with all nations, with all Gentiles, a covenant with the whole human race prior to his dealings with Abram and the Jewish people (1992:21).

Pinnock's second control belief concerns the 'particularity' axiom with its Christological affirmations. This axiom affirms that God is reconciling the world through Jesus' mediation (2 Cor 5:19). Salvation for the world (equated with the universality axiom) is reached by way of particularity in Jesus. God saves the many through the One. Grace is universal because it is particular. Pinnock desires to exhibit a 'high Christology' (understood as following the spirit of Vatican II) where people might be saved by Christ *ontologically,* without actually knowing the name of Jesus, *epistemologically.* The basis of this openness and hope is the author's understanding of the work of the triune God and prevenient grace.

In developing his thesis Pinnock wishes to revitalise the 'holy pagan' or 'pagan saint' tradition. Such persons (for instance, Melchizedek, Job and Cornelius) act as a paradigm by which Christians may understand that God accepts those who fear him, even where Christ is yet to be proclaimed. In consequence, Pinnock believes that a large percentage of the human race who have lived their life only under the influence of God's general revelation are nonetheless able to receive

16 Wright, C. J. H. 'P for Pentateuch, patriarchs and pagans', *Themelios* 18:2 (Jan. 1993), 4.

the benefits provided for by the redemption of Christ. Pinnock's 'faith principle' is that God takes account of faith in him and always sees to it that those responding to the light they have encounter Jesus Christ, whether before or after death (1988:163).[17]

Pinnock believes that evangelicals have narrowed the motivation for missions down to the deliverance from wrath, making it the major reason for missions when it is not. 'It is a travesty to maintain that the primary motive of missions is to rescue souls from hell. The purpose of the Christian missions is far broader, and its motivation far more reaching' (1992:178). For Pinnock the deepest motive of all for Christian missions is eschatological, to see the kingdom come and God's rule established. This, incidentally, combines well with his understanding of the impact missions potentially has upon the world's religions.

### *b. John Sanders*

John Sanders, apparently influenced considerably by Pinnock, is a teacher in theology at Oak Hills Bible College, Minnesota. Sanders specifically identifies himself with the inclusivist position in the last page of his book *No Other Name*, and again in the recent article *Evangelical Responses to Salvation Outside the Church*.

Sanders lists five foundations or building blocks of inclusivism.[18] The first building block centers on a distinction between believers and Christians and is usually closely connected with the issue of faithful gentiles. Secondly, God uses general revelation to mediate his salvific grace. He writes that inclusivists 'see general revelation functioning in a similar way to the Old Testament revelation, which was adequate for salvation yet not the complete revelation of God' (1994:51). Hence,

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17 Pinnock further develops this idea by complementing the 'faith principle' with the soteriologically controversial topic of a postmortem encounter. The postmortem encounter, he feels, is not only possible but seems inescapable (1992:170). While Pinnock's hypothesis should not be understood as a 'second chance', it nonetheless fails to take seriously Hebrews 9:27 cited earlier by him. At best postmortem encounter is a speculative area of soteriology. The only biblical support Pinnock musters is the much disputed Petrine material (1 Peter 3:19, 20; 4:6). In response it can be said that Pinnock's interacting with the idea of a postmortem encounter is a 'superfluous suggestion' (Wright, 1993:4) and may have the effect of distracting the reader from the earlier important issues he has raised. Even Pinnock himself agrees that the notion of postmortem encounter has little exegetical evidence to substantiate it, although 'the theological argument is strong' (1992:172). What basis does a theological argument have apart from biblical exegesis? Unfortunately, Pinnock's discussion continues as if postmortem evangelism is a *fait accompli*.

18 Sanders, J., *No Other Name—An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 224–229.

saving faith can be attained with general revelation only. Thirdly, he emphases that the convicting work of the Holy Spirit is and has been present in all ages and locations. The Holy Spirit saves even where Christ is unknown. Fourthly, there is a focus upon the cosmic work of the second person of the Trinity. Finally, inclusivists argue theologically and anthropologically that God is at work redemptively in the lives of all people. God is free to work salvifically in various cultural, temporal, geographical and religious contexts. That is, the particularity of salvation in Jesus is not to be equated with a restrictiveness of salvation.

As to the charge that inclusivist theology undermines evangelism, Sanders (1992:284–6) simply reiterates much of what has already been mentioned. Additionally, he comments, Christians seek the 'glory of God', stimulated by love and generosity. Interestingly, Sanders most recent writing also contains a section on 'Missions'. It may simply be an oversight that the glory of God is omitted (1995:54). Alternatively, the glory of God may have been omitted intentionally in response to John Piper's (1993: Ch. 1 passim) claiming the glory of God (with its particular Christological focus) as a traditional motivation of restrictivists.

Moreover, Christians desire to share with others the private and social blessings that come from a personal relationship with Christ. Sanders acknowledges that to have a relationship with the risen Lord is much more satisfying spiritually than simply experiencing a knowledge of God as creator. Further, God desires mature sons and daughters, maturity which can only come from a relationship with Christ.

However, Sanders goes beyond Anderson's understanding that the good news brings joy, peace and power which communion with Christ brings in stating that 'the Bible indicates that God wants to bring the fullness of eternal life into the lives of people now' (1992:284). It would be interesting to know just exactly what Sanders' fullness of eternal life (referred to as 'abundant life' subsequently [1995:54]) entails. Finally, Christians remain motivated for missions as the reality of spiritual warfare continues. The forces of evil still affect human affairs with a great many people seeking to corrupt and destroy the lives of others. These people need to be rescued from their rebellion against God.

## 3. Critical Exposition Of Selected Themes

### *a. Character of God*

According to Sanders (1994:54) the 'character of God' is the most significant difference between restrictivists and inclusivists. How do Pinnock and Sanders understand the character of God? According to

them, the distinguishing characteristics of God's character are his boundless generosity and love. It is God's generosity, anchored in the universality axiom which elicits an optimism of salvation. Pinnock explains: 'God allows us a generous hope...that salvation will be large and generous in the end. This hope coheres well with the picture of God's love for the whole world and universal covenant he made with all flesh' (1992:154). Likewise, Sanders speaks of 'God's magnanimous desire to save every human being'.[19]

In seeking to support an optimism in God's salvation they frequently quote supposed universalist texts such as John 12:32; 1 Tim 2:3,4 and 4:10; Titus 2:11; 2 Pet 3:9 and 1 John 2:2. These are controversial texts open to varying interpretations. The Scriptures speak of God's ultimate desire that 'all' be saved, yet only those who actually hear the gospel and put their faith in Christ will be saved. One suggestion is that the partial resolution of this tension may lie in 1 Timothy 4:10, which attests a twofold purpose in Christ's death: '[He] is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe' (NIV). That is, Jesus is the 'general' Saviour of all humanity as well as the 'particular' Saviour of each believer. In this way, Demarest argues, the 'universal' intent of Christ's death mediates general benefits for all people: preservation in existence, the common blessings of life and the restraint of evil amongst others, while the 'particular' intent of Christ's death imparts redemptive benefits to the 'sheep'.[20] Others speak of Christ's atoning work as 'sufficient' for all but only 'efficient' for those who respond. Naturally, this raises questions about those who have *no* opportunity to respond to the gospel.

While restrictivists tend to emphasise the particularity of the incarnation, inclusivists stress the universality of God's purposes for humanity. Pinnock states, 'If God really loves the whole world and desires everyone to be saved, it follows logically that everyone must have access to salvation' (1992:157). Sanders, echoing Pinnock, says that if God is serious that none should perish, then it seems he will provide some means for making salvation universally accessible (1994:54). Certainly, it is difficult to see just how God's sovereignty in the affairs of humanity and humanity's freedom coalesce. However, whatever conclusion one arrives at ought not to be achieved at the expense of the integrity of God's character. Pinnock and Sanders call into question God's love and personal integrity, allowing their inclusivist agenda to drive the hermeneutical process. On the restrictivist understanding, the tables

19 Sanders, J. (ed.), *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 24.

20 Demarest, B. A., 'General and Special Revelation: Epistemological Foundations of Religious Pluralism', in Clarke, A. D., and Winter, B. W. (eds.), *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism* (Tyndale House: Cambridge, 1991), 149.

are turned, so that God is 'in the dock' being judged for not trying harder to save humanity.

Several other weaknesses come to the fore. Firstly, there is the tendency for 'hard' inclusivists to force the Scriptures to say what they are not saying. Sanders, perhaps the most forthright proponent of evangelical inclusivism, is particularly guilty. A notorious example concerns God's 'radical love'. Sanders argues that the Exodus account is a demonstration of God's 'radical love' whereby Yahweh was actually trying (but notice that he fails) to 'evangelize Pharaoh and the Egyptians' (1995:27). That is, the God of Israel was patiently seeking Pharaoh's salvation. Indeed, punishment came to the Egyptians only after God did all that he could in order to redeem the situation.

Sanders' exposition is saying that God was unable (even if he chose to, which he did not) to convert Pharaoh. From Sanders distinctly Arminian position, this exposition preserves Pharaoh's free will. Nevertheless, by implication, God must be limited in divine knowledge and power. Sanders treatment of the Exodus mirrors the hermeneutically biased use of the Exodus narrative by some earlier liberation theologians. His feeble argument has the effect, although clearly not by intention, of lessening the inclusivist position.

A second weakness is theological. Sanders utilises the spurious notion of 'inclusion before exclusion'. He states that God has included all in his grace before there is any exclusion: 'No one is excluded from God's grace *who was not already included in it*' (1995:30, my emphasis). That is, only those who decline to accept God's grace are rejected. Exclusion and judgement come because people want acceptance on their own terms not on God's terms.

If Sanders were speaking of God's 'common grace' where the Creator's sustaining care for his physical creation and human society are on view there would be less of a problem. However, Sanders does not define the grace that he is speaking about. There is a minimalist sense in which the idea of 'inclusive grace' is correct. That is, God will not force people to accept his saving grace. God will honour a person's rejection of him, rejecting them on the grounds that they have first rejected him. However, that is not the same as saying that it is only those who spurn God's grace who are liable for judgement. The consequence of the Fall in Genesis 3 has resulted in all humanity being liable to judgement. Humanity (inclusively) stands under the wrath of God—not God's 'inclusive grace'. It is only through God's saving grace and mercy that men and women may *enter* into a living relationship with him. Christians are not sons and daughters of God by nature—it is through adoption that they enter into that state of saving grace (John 1:12; Hebrews 12:5-9). Sanders argument has misconstrued the nature of humanity's relationship to God.

### *b. Christology*

Pinnock's Christological hypothesis contains several aspects. One aspect is his maxim that a 'high Christology', if in fact it is required (1992:50), ought not lead Christians to adopt narrow and exclusive attitudes to those who worship God outside Churches.[21] Pinnock believes that a narrow and exclusive outlook can be avoided if we adopt a trinitarian approach. His trinitarian approach necessarily incorporates discussion of the incarnation.

Pinnock's understanding of the incarnation displays either unintentional ambiguity or an unwillingness to be 'pinned down'. He acknowledges that the incarnation is at the core of historic Christianity's belief system and, moreover, the uniqueness of Jesus is grounded in the uniqueness of Yahweh (1992:50). This is a sufficiently orthodox beginning. However, Pinnock then turns to the functional and ontological categories (is Jesus to be understood as 'God in action' or as 'God in flesh'?) for understanding Jesus. He explores whether there is a possibility that a person might confess Christ on the basis of a functional understanding of Jesus (based upon the synoptic gospels) yet not take into full account the additional Johannine material. He posits 'whatever the other New Testament witnesses say about Jesus, ... it is only John who names the coming of Jesus 'incarnation' ... Incarnation, then, is not the normative category for Christology in the New Testament' (1992:62). The existential reason lying behind this is that Jews and Muslims might more easily accept Jesus (salvifically) for what he did even if they could not accept him for who he was.

The shallowness of Pinnock's reasoning is obvious. What Jesus *did* on the Cross was only possible because of *who* he was. It is impossible to separate the two criteria. Moreover, it is Scripturally inconsistent to offset the Johannine account against the synoptic gospels. Even if we were to dismiss the fourth gospel there are several other New Testament texts which speak clearly to the doctrine of the incarnation (Phil 2:6; Col 2:9 and Heb 2:9). Pinnock claims that he himself does not distinguish between the two categories—but it is apparent that Pinnock is driving a dangerous and biblically unjustified wedge between the functional and metaphysical categories of Jesus. While Pinnock has not arrived at the point where the late J.A.T. Robinson did in understanding the incarnation as mythologically unique *in degree* but not *in kind*—he is certainly exploring the boundaries of orthodoxy.

Pinnock's Christological thinking owes a considerable amount to the pronouncements of Vatican II. In particular, he appreciates that

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21 Pinnock's statement assumes that people outside the Church are *already* worshipping God. The validity of this will be examined in 'Other Religions' below.

the spirit of Vatican II allows for one's holding onto the finality of Jesus Christ while simultaneously giving qualified recognition to the positive value of other religions. Important for Pinnock (and this is something that restrictivists are unwilling to do) is Roman Catholicism's ability to distinguish between the fact that while there is no salvation except *through* Christ, it does not hold that everybody must possess a conscious knowledge *of* Christ in order to benefit from his redemptive action. This distinction between the ontological and epistemological necessity is a key factor in the inclusivists' formulation of a universally accessible salvation.

In seeking to formulate a trinitarian wideness to the perceived pessimism of restrictivism, Pinnock broadens his Christology by affirming the ancient *logos* Christology of the early Church Fathers. The *logos* doctrine is based primarily upon the prologue of John's gospel. The 'hard' inclusivists interpretation of the ambiguous verse 9, is to understand it as saying, 'This was the true light [understood as the *logos*] that gives light to every man who comes into the world' (New International Version margin). Interpreted this way, the emphasis is upon each and every person being illuminated by the *logos* as a consequence of their being made in the *imago Dei*. Pinnock wishes to speak about the *logos* incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth, but present in the entire world and throughout human history. That is, God is not exhausted by Jesus Christ nor totally confined to Him. Not unsurprisingly, Pinnock claims, 'God the *logos* has more going on *by way of redemption* than what happened in first-century Palestine, decisive though that was for the salvation of the world' (1992:77, my emphasis). The recognition of the *logos* at work redemptively prior to the incarnation permits a *widening of God's salvific purposes.*

One difficulty with this is that the primary goal of John's prologue is better served in the translation utilised in the text of the NIV: 'The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world'. This interpretation means that the illumination is (especially) tied to the incarnation and is particularly dispensed to all whom Christ's incarnate ministry effected. However, this ought not to be understood as implying that there was no illumination prior to the incarnation. Furthermore, the light, while enlightening everyone without distinction is not universally redemptive—verses 10 and 11 indicate that clearly enough. Therefore, the enlightening of verse 9 refers to that knowledge of God possessed by humanity being made in the *imago Dei* and therefore open to God's general revelation.[22] It is not implying that some people have a saving relationship to God through the cosmic

22 Wright, C. J. H. 'The Christian and Other Religions: The Biblical Evidence', *Themelios* 9 (Jan. 1984), 12.

Christ. Neither is it saying that through inter-faith encounter Christians 'meet' the Christ who is already present in other religious systems.

In the Christology of 'hard' inclusivists the distinction between the *ontological and epistemological necessity* comes to the fore in such texts as John 14:6b 'No one comes to the Father except through me' and Acts 4:12 'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which they might be saved.' These 'exclusivist' texts are important in that if the atoning work of Christ can be seen to be efficacious apart from a knowledge of his work, then it permits salvation to be universally accessible.

Pinnock laments the fact that generally the commentaries on Acts are 'disappointing' as they nearly all read Acts 4:12 as proof of the exclusivist paradigm.[23] Both he and Sanders accept willingly that John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 insist upon there being no other way to heaven except through the work of Christ. However, they claim the verses do not say one has to personally *know* about that work in order to benefit from it. This is the crux of the issue. Again, Sanders argues that Romans 10:9 'if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord'... you will be saved', is saying that one sure way to be saved is to accept Christ, but that it does not logically rule out other ways that Christ may save. Is Sanders' suggestion acceptable? Phillips, for one, remains unconvinced of Sanders logic, claiming that Sanders is ignoring the implied semantic nuances in passages such as John 14, Acts 4:12 and Rom 10:9. He states, 'language communicates more than categorical propositions'.[24, 25]

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23 Pinnock, C. H., 'Acts 4:12 No Other Name under Heaven', in Crockett and Sigountos, op. cit., 108.

24 Phillips, W. G. 'Evangelicals and Pluralism: Current Options', *Evangelical Quarterly* 64:3 (1992), 238.

25 From a missiological angle see Chapman, C., *The Christian Message in a Multi-Faith Society* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1992), 60. His emphasis wishes us to focus attention upon that aspect of John 14:6, where Jesus is talking about relating to God as *Father*. He believes that the verse does not necessarily mean that people of other faiths have *no* knowledge of God and *no* relationship with him. 'What Jesus claims here is that no person in any religious tradition can know God *as Father* and enjoy that kind of relationship with him, unless he/she comes to know the Father *through Jesus the Son*' (my emphasis). Chapman's suggestion has its merit, but nevertheless begs the question, as to what kind of relationship does a person have with God, if it is not a *saving* relationship with God as *Father*? Chapman's suggestion would not satisfy the 'hard' inclusivists who would want to say that a saving relationship *is* possible, although epistemologically incomplete. Neither would Chapman satisfy the aspirations of restrictivists. Restrictivists would agree that the Bible occasionally speaks about the universal Fatherhood of God in creation (for example, Acts 17:25), but they would question the nature and quality of the relationship a person has with God apart from Jesus Christ.

### *c. Pneumatology*

Pinnock, it was noted, seeks to broaden our Christological framework. A similar desire occurs with the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Pinnock favours the Eastern Orthodox Churches interpretation of the *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed which asserts that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father only, instead of from the Father and the Son. The importance in this understanding lies in the fact that the Spirit, according to the Eastern tradition is not tied exclusively to the Christ-event but rather can operate throughout the whole world in the 'Father's domain' (1992:78). This interpretation is favourable to Pinnock as it permits the Holy Spirit to be active in creation, history and, importantly, in the sphere of world's religions. Moreover, by permitting the Holy Spirit to be active apart from the Church, the grace of God is not tied to a single thread of human history (1992:78).

Pinnock is right in allowing for a re-evaluation of the *filioque* clause. The biblical material supporting the Western affirmation is not that convincing, and ecclesiastically speaking, the Western understanding was subsequent (and perhaps even a partial reaction) to the Eastern interpretation.

Sanders' writing concerning the Holy Spirit pushes the accepted evangelical boundaries still further. He documents that the Holy Spirit's convicting work is universal—throughout the ages and in all cultural and religious contexts. Importantly, he states, 'Whether people have creational or biblical revelation, it is the same Spirit who guides them to God, either through knowledge of the historical Jesus or through creation and providence' (1995:43). The Holy Spirit seeks to develop faith in people regardless of the sort of revelation they have.[26] The Spirit's salvific work is not outside of the work of Jesus but neither is it confined to the Church. The Church is unable to contain the Spirit and salvation. Moreover, the message of Christ is not essential for salvation insofar as the Spirit is able to bring people into a relationship with God even before the gospel reaches them (Sanders, 1995:44). Sanders concludes with the rationale, 'If we perceive the Spirit as being active only in the Church, we fall prey to a Manichean dualism that surrenders the world to antigodly powers. If we perceive the Spirit as being active unipurposely in world and church, we rob the incarnation of God of its decisive significance.'[27]

In response, Gnanakan (1992:86,87) wonders whether the inclusivist

26 It will be seen later that the 'hard' inclusivist understanding of revelation is one of a continuum between 'general' and 'special' and revelation.

27 Schwarz, H., 'Reflections on the Work of the Spirit outside the Church', *Neue Zeitschrift fur Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 23 (1981), 211 (quoted in Sanders, *No Other Name*, 238).

understanding of the activity of the Holy Spirit is one of acting independently of Jesus' teaching. He queries whether the inclusivist understanding of the Holy Spirit is making available the effects of Christ's redemptive ministry within the limits of the instructions of Jesus Christ or outside them (Jn 15:26, 16:14, 26)?

### *d. Faith*

The issue of 'faith' is a major foundation of inclusivism. It arises frequently in the writings of Sanders and Pinnock. For instance, we read, 'People are acceptable to God if they respond in faith, however limited their knowledge is.' (Sanders, 1995:36). Sanders says, ' "Saving faith" (faith required to obtain salvation) does not necessitate knowledge of Christ in this life'.[28] Moreover, 'A person is saved by faith, even if the content of belief is deficient (and whose is not?). The Bible does not teach that one must confess the name of Jesus to be saved' (Pinnock, 1992:158).

Sanders further defines his position on faith, indicating that it involves three elements, namely, truth, trust and effective action:

> Genuine faith in God contains *some truth* about God, whether that truth comes from the Bible or from God's work in creation. Faith means that a person *responds in trust* to the giver of the truth. If people genuinely trust God, they will seek to *live it out* in their lives (1995:36, my emphases).

Utilising this definition, Sanders unfortunately embarks upon a caricature of the restrictivists' position. He twists their argument in seeking to show that the problem for some Christians is in the amount that one has to *know* in order to enter into a saving relationship with God. Sanders claims, there are those who maintain that only a full knowledge of the life and atoning work of Jesus can save. Again, their understanding of faith 'is seen primarily as a matter of understanding certain doctrines rather than cultivating a trusting relationship with God' (1995:37). This approach, he claims, has certain affinities with Gnosticism.

Are Sanders' comments substantiated? Who among even the most committed of restrictivists would claim 'full knowledge' of the atonement as a prerequisite for salvation? Surely that would be epistemologically and existentially impossible for the most saintly of restrictivist scholars. Moreover, restrictivists are not Gnostics. To paint an orthodox understanding of faith with the heretical brush of Gnosticism is ludicrous. Sanders compares two valuable attributes as if they are an

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28 Sanders. J, 'Is Belief in Christ Necessary for salvation?' *Evangelical Quarterly* (1988), 252.

'either/or' choice. Knowledge and understanding biblical doctrine is placed in opposition to cultivating a relationship with God. What biblical Christian would ever claim that faith is simply a matter of understanding certain doctrines rather than cultivating a relationship with God?

Restrictivists posit two primary criticisms against the inclusivist understanding of faith. The first concerns the *object of faith.* Carson (1996:296) asserts that inclusivists rarely listen to what the New Testament has to say about the 'content' or 'object' of faith. For example, Carson quotes, 'Faith in God is what saves, not possessing certain minimum information' (Pinnock, 1992:58). Carson agrees that the issue of faith is not one of possessing minimum information. However, he says, one must not overlook the fact that faith has content.

The second criticism concerns the *subjective aspect* in faith. Nash[29] states inclusivists seem to be saying that if people have the subjective side of faith right (sincerity or a truly seeking attitude) then it is irrelevant that those subjective attitudes turn out to be directed toward a false god or idol. Nash believes that inclusivism distorts and dilutes the New Testament's picture of saving faith. Therefore, in his opinion, if the 'faith principle' rests upon a erroneous foundation, the rest of the inclusivist formula may seem to be errant.

Crucial to the inclusivist stance is the argument that since it was impossible for individuals in Old Testament times to know of Christ and yet experience salvation, it follows that no specific knowledge of Christ is necessary now. This may be called the 'faith principle' position. According to Pinnock (1992:157) people are saved by the 'faith principle' on the basis of Hebrews 11:6, 'without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.' The 'faith principle' acts as the basis for salvation's universal accessibility and for that reason is of vital importance to the inclusivist agenda.

Inclusivists hold that Old Testament believers required the ontological necessity of Christ for salvation, but that the epistemological necessity of knowing Christ was not required. Hence, the inclusivist argument is that genuine believers before the coming of Jesus did not have to exercise faith in Jesus to be saved. Such a faith was impossible, for they had not heard of the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, if people responded in faith to the light they had, would not the same principle apply to people today who are 'informationally B.C.', although they live this side of, but have never heard of, the decisive events of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus? (Carson, 1996:298).

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29 Nash, R. H. *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 114.

Two counter points are offered. Firstly, genuine believers in the Old Testament (from the 'great ones' of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David to the ordinary Israelite) were responding to the information they had. They were taking God at his word and responded to the truth about God in their situations. Yet theirs was not a 'contentless faith' in an 'undefined God' (Carson, 1996:298). Instead, they had a significant relationship to special revelation. Furthermore, as God's activity in revelation and redemption moved on from the patriarchal period, through the exodus and Sinai with its institutions, sacrificial systems and levitical priesthood the content of their faith changed and developed. Their faith (although largely unknown to them) pointed forward to the sacrifice and priesthood of Jesus Christ (Heb 9, 10). Their faith content was an 'epistemology of exclusivisity' similar to the New Testament believers explicit and conscious knowledge and belief in Jesus Christ.[30]

Secondly, arguments by analogy are tenuous with their probability dependent upon the number of corresponding entities between the two analogues. As Phillips puts it, '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' (1992:242, his emphasis). Caution, he argues, is required to be exercised when allowing Old Testament patterns for salvation, where the content varied with the progress of revelation, to become normative for the unevangelized today.[31]

### *e. General Revelation*

'Hard' inclusivists hold that general revelation (sometimes called creational or cosmic revelation) in creation, conscience and history is

30 Richard, R. *The Population of Heaven* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 121.

31 While one might accept Phillips' reservations about arguments from analogy, nevertheless most evangelicals are theologically inconsistent, embracing the 'principle of exceptions of grace'when it comes to the case of those who *cannot* hear, namely, children who die in infancy and the severely retarded. Inclusivists claim that restrictivists show a 'double-think' in that they are quick to affirm that children who die in infancy and the mentally retarded will be saved by God's love. However, when it comes to the question of the unevangelized, sin is seen to prevail, even though both groups are sinful (although perhaps not equally sinful nor responsible) and deserving condemnation. Why, they ask, is salvation possible for the first group but not the second? In response, Nash (1994:135) refuses to venture beyond saying that we can gain very little in speculating upon what God has not chosen to tell us. Yet he does admit that because of its powerful emotional appeal, the salvific status of children who die in infancy and the severely retarded, may well prove to be the inclusivists' most successful argument

salvific because its source is the saving God. In contrast, restrictivists disagree on its salvific nature and limit salvific revelation to special revelation. A point of clarification may be required. Strictly speaking, it is God who saves, not revelation, whether it be general or special revelation.

'Hard' inclusivists believe that as all revelation is from God, all revelation is therefore potentially saving revelation, since it invites the person into relationship with God. Sanders (1995:43) claims that although there are people who are unevangelized, this does not mean they are unreached by God. God's mercy is communicated through, even a fallen creation, because he continues his redemptive work in it.

At the risk of generalisation it may be said that both the restrictivists and inclusivists agree on the premise that some knowledge of God can be found apart from the specific revelation and work of Jesus Christ. Passages such as Psalm 19:1–6; Acts 14:15–17; 17:22–31; Romans 1:18–32 and 2:14,15 indicate that general revelation discloses the existence, and provisionally and imperfectly, the moral nature and requirements of God. Additionally, general revelation shows the insufficiency of the human condition and the need for redemption. Humanity, made in the *imago Dei* stands morally accountable to God.

What is in dispute is the salvific value of general revelation. According to restrictivists, general revelation does not impart any saving content, instead, it acts as an instrument of universal judgement. Demarest (1991:142) states that God provides all people with a genuine knowledge of himself but instead of humanity's bringing forth the appropriate responses of thanksgiving, it asserts its own autonomy. When confronted with the light offered by general revelation, sinful humanity responds to it perversely. Salvation, restrictivists' argue, can only come through an explicit knowledge of Christ mediated through special revelation.

In contrast, 'hard' inclusivists hold that salvation is obtainable through general revelation, by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. Salvation, for inclusivists, is not dependent upon receiving special revelation, but rather obtained in having a right attitude towards God with the light one has already received.[32] Responding in faith to general revelation and the pre-evangelistic work of the Spirit makes one a 'believer', as was Cornelius before his 'conversion', while

32 It has been mooted that the situation might arise whereby an 'implicit believer' has responded to the God of general revelation but rejects the opportunity to respond to the gospel. 'Hard' inclusivists would probably reply, if an 'implicit Christian' has the opportunity to respond to the gospel but does not take it, it shows that he or she is *not a genuine* 'implicit believer' in the first place. A genuine 'implicit believer' would be eager to hear more about the living God of general revelation explained more fully in the Scriptures.

responding in faith to Christ makes one a 'Christian' with the fullness of salvation (Sanders 1994:53). Cornelius is, in fact, cited as an example of the inclusivists' conviction of God's working through a continuity of revelation.

The 'fullness of salvation' that the 'Christian' possesses is to be understood as experiencing the additional blessings that come from a knowledge of what Christ has accomplished on the Cross. Sanders uses the following illustration to highlight the increased benefits of special revelation over general revelation. He writes, 'the Christian enjoys many blessings that the believer does not experience. Though walking will get you from Chicago to Seattle, there are many blessings to going by plane' (1995:49). Completing the illustration, just as both walking and flying enable one to arrive at Seattle, so too, salvation is attainable either through the route of general revelation or by the route of special revelation.

### *f. Other Religions*

The topic of the relationship between Christianity and other religions is quite possibly the most controversial of the six selected themes, and, in all likelihood, the most complex aspect of a theology of inclusivism.

Pinnock views religions as a profoundly ambiguous phenomena. According to him, religious experiences encompass both the false and vile to the noble and uplifting. Initially, 'covering his back' from restrictivists, Pinnock acknowledges the 'dark side' of religion. He writes, there 'are so many evil sides to religion that a fulfilment paradigm...is out of the question' (1992:85). Again, 'The idea that world religions ordinarily function as paths to salvation is dangerous nonsense' (1992:90). Further, 'part of a responsible theology of religions must be an unambiguous judgement against idols of our creation and deceptions of the Evil One' (1992:91).

Following Wilfred C. Smith's distinction, Pinnock differentiates between 'subjective' and 'objective' religion (1992:111). Of the two, in Pinnock's estimation, 'subjective' religion is more important than 'objective' religion. He utilises the 'pagan saint' tradition to buttress support for the possibility of noble religion existing outside of Christ. The inclusivist appeal to holy pagans has already been discussed—although a point not explicitly mentioned previously is worth noting. It has been observed that the most committed practitioners in other religions are often those least open to the message of the gospel. Peters posits that quite possibly their very religiosity insulates and immunizes them against the gospel of Christ.[33] The same can be said of the

33 Peters, G. W. 'Missions in a Religiously Pluralistic World', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (1979), 300.

Pharisees and Sadducees of Christ's time. Those most dedicated to the traditions of their forefathers were the very ones most vehemently opposed to Christ.

'Objective religion', being the cumulative, dynamic and diverse traditions, like Buddhism or Hinduism, is then discussed. Pinnock affirms that while religions play a positive role in human cultures and society, they ought not to be considered divinely inspired. They too need to be confronted on truth issues. Nonetheless there are degrees of noble and ignoble elements in all religions, for God's light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not extinguished it (John 1:5). Therefore, whatever truth we may perceive in the world's religions is understood as evidence of God's work, for religions may 'announce the grace and love of God' (1992:101). As an aside, Pinnock correctly observes that while some present day theologians exhibit a reluctance to engage in dialogue with other religions, no such reserve was shown in earlier engagement with the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. 'Why is Plato worth talking to and not Lao-Tzu?' (1992:141).

However, ambiguity in Pinnock's writing makes it difficult to determine exactly what he is intimating. For instance, he says, 'how does one come away after encountering Buddhism and deny that it is in touch with God in its own way?' (1992:100). Carson (1995:294) comments, what is meant by being 'in touch' with God? Is it implying that Buddhists possess a relationship with God? If, for the sake of argument, it is agreed that Buddhists are seeking God, the question as to 'which God?' remains. Again, one wonders quite what Pinnock is intimating given that most Buddhists' do not think of 'God' as a personal being at all. Pinnock continues, 'the Buddha does not open up salvation for humanity, but this does not mean that Buddhists can not move in Christ's direction' (1992:110). Moreover, Christians need to be more spiritually 'Buddha-like' (1992:140). Surely, the Biblical concern would be that Christians become more spiritually Christ-like not 'Buddha-like'. In his evaluation of Islam, Pinnock states, that Islam as a system is 'is not a reliable vehicle of salvation' (1992:110). This begs the question, what degree of reliability does Pinnock envisage Islam possessing?

Certain issues need to be explored further. Firstly, to what extent do inclusivists view other religions as channels of salvation? The 'soft' inclusivists are confirmed in their rejecting other religions as vehicles of salvation. In fact, at the outset they reject the idea of any religion (including Christianity) as being salvific in its own right. That is, salvation is what God has done, through the historical events of the Old and New Testaments. 'Soft' inclusivists follow the exclusivist line in stating that other religions can not be vehicles of salvation in their own right as they do not tell the biblical story and therefore do not

put people in touch with what God has already done to save them.[34]

In contrast, Pinnock appears ambivalent in his stance. He says, 'the Gospel...may not fulfil the religions as such, but it does fulfil the longings of the soul... There is enough truth in most religions for people to take hold of and put their trust in God's mercy' (1992:102,111). Pinnock moves beyond Anderson and Wright in seeing religions as either *facilitating a person's approach* to God or being used by them to escape from God. Sanders interprets Pinnock's position as affirming that God sometimes works salvifically *through* and sometimes *in spite of* the religions. Quite probably Pinnock's ambivalence has to do with seeking a middle path between not wishing to restrict salvation to special revelation, yet wanting to avoid being identified with certain aspects of Roman Catholic inclusivism.

Secondly, to what extent is God seeking to transform the religions by Christ? While not wishing to advocate a 'fulfilment paradigm' Pinnock's understanding of 'objective religion' sees them as anticipating the eschatological completion of God's work. Pinnock's thesis is that religions' very changeability makes them vulnerable to being transformed by the living Christ. He indicates, it may even be that God will make them more useful in mediating faith to people. However, what sort of 'faith' is being mediated? and, if the world's religions are seen as mediating 'faith' to people, are they bypassing the incarnation? A major criticism is, if the religions are so vulnerable to being transformed by Christ, why do they not readily recognise that God was *in Christ* reconciling the world to himself? As Andrew Kirk observes, 'To talk in general terms about God's presence may be sheer sentimentality, unless one is willing to deal with the hard questions about his particularity.'[35]

Pinnock emphasises the 'high wattage' (1992:180) light of Jesus Christ who is the source of the fuller experience of salvation which awaits many who have already responded to the light they have received. These people will 'be caught up in the kingdom surge' (1992:178). In fairness to Pinnock (1992:146), we should note that his primary desire is still that people become followers of Jesus. For Pinnock the deepest missionary motive of all is eschatological, to see the kingdom come and God's rule established. The eschatological completion of God's work seems to be an increasingly important agenda for 'hard' inclusivists.

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34 See, for example, the Anglican Evangelical Assembly—*Inter-Faith Issues.* Report of the 'Theology, Apologetics and Practice' stream (1992), 2.

35 Kirk, J. A., *Loosing the Chains—Religion as opium and liberation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 186.

### 3. Evaluation, Implications and Conclusion

#### *a. Strengths and Weaknesses of Inclusivist Theology*

This investigation suggests that the strengths of inclusivism are outweighed by its weaknesses. The particular strength of inclusivism is that it affirms that God is active throughout the world. Ellenberger, while unconvincing in several areas, helpfully revitalises the understanding that the Holy Spirit is active and present in the world preparing people for the coming of the gospel.

However, certain significant weaknesses are apparent. It appears that the 'hard' inclusivists misrepresent the total character of God. Their tendency is to focus upon one side of God's character at the expense of the other. In particular, they elevate God's 'radical love' and 'boundless generosity' at the expense of his righteous anger and intense wrath in response to humanity's sinfulness. To possess a heightened appreciation of God's generosity and redemptive love towards humanity is commendable. A problem occurs when the 'hard' inclusivists refer to it as 'boundless' when, in fact, God's love and patience has very definite boundaries. The 'universalist' text from 2 Peter 3:9 is a good example. God's patience towards humanity in order that no one might perish, is mentioned in a passage that speaks of the day of the Lord: a time of definite judgement. To be fair to Sanders, he does speak about the 'corruption of sin' (1995:53) but the wrath of God in response to sin is downplayed.

Secondly, Christology is very obviously essential to evangelism. The 'hard' inclusivist schema desires to soften the epistemological necessity for all people to consciously acknowledge Jesus Christ while leaving in place the ontological necessity of Christ for salvation.

Two points are worth noting. Firstly, if God's salvation is available outside of the particularity of the incarnation, why then was Christ's work necessary? Discerningly, Anderson wrote, 'if God could have adequately revealed himself in any other way, how can one possibly believe he would have gone to the almost unbelievable length of the incarnation?' (1984:139,140). Perhaps one could turn Anderson's question around, and ask, 'as God went to such incredible lengths as the incarnation and the crucifixion why would he choose to bypass them and use some other method?' It might be defended that the 'hard' inclusivists' utilisation of the *logos* as the pre-incarnate manifestation of the incarnate Christ is not bypassing the historical work of Jesus Christ—just extending it. However, talk about the cosmic Christ very soon dilutes to the lowest common denominator, whereas in the Incarnation, while the process is mysterious, the reality is that it is historically concrete.

Secondly, Piper states that something of immense historical signifi-

cance happened with the coming of the Son of God into the world. He explains:

> So great was the significance of this event that the focus of saving faith was henceforth made to centre on Jesus Christ alone. So fully does Christ sum up all the revelation of God and all the hopes of God's people that it would henceforth be a dishonor to him should saving faith repose on anyone but him (1993:127).

In other words, what God desires is that all peoples everywhere will give praise and glory to the incarnated Christ. It is for the *glory of Jesus Christ* that the nations may now respond to God through the preaching of the gospel (Eph 3:4–10). The mystery as to how God was to fulfil his purposes of including the nations into the inheritance of Abraham (Gen 12:1–3) is now occurring through the particularity of the incarnation. Piper (1993:128) argues that to bypass the message of the gospel is to bypass the particularity of the incarnation and therefore the appointed means by which God has ordained that Jesus Christ might be glorified. The nations are to be reconciled to God through the proclamation of the gospel with its foci, the atoning death and resurrection of Christ.

Redemptive history was initiated for the glory of God. If the 'hard' inclusivists' schema is permitted then logically the concept of 'redemptive history' focussed upon the uniqueness of Israel and Jesus Christ is, to all intents and purposes, abolished. If salvation is obtainable *apart* from the outworking of special revelation through God's covenant with Israel and subsequently the gospel, then the particularity of the Christ event is no longer *seen* as decisive. Sanders would hasten to add that Jesus' atonement remains ontologically necessary and that Christ continues as the 'ultimate' revelation of God (1995:23). Ultimate but not unique perhaps? Hence, in reality, the need to hear the gospel becomes only one of two possible routes to salvation. Consequently the gospel's importance is devalued as is the necessity to evangelize. Moreover, God is not glorified *in Christ* as was God's intention through redemptive history (Jn 13:31; 14:13; 17:1). It is hard to escape the impression that in following the inclusivist line the incarnation has been robbed of its unique significance.

Thirdly, what impact might the inclusivist understanding of 'faith' have on evangelism? The 'hard' inclusivists broaden the content of saving faith by defining it in terms of trusting whatever truth God has revealed about himself. This definition differs substantially from the Apostle Paul's teaching which ties closely together faith and hearing the word of Christ. Faith is born out of hearing the word of God (Acts 16:31; Rom 10:9–17 cf. Gal 3:2). Is it correct to speak of 'faith' *apart* from the word of God? It seems inescapable that if saving faith is

understood to be attainable apart from hearing the message of the gospel, then Christians will no longer (quite logically) see the urgency to proclaim the gospel.

Fourthly, the disagreement in the salvific nature of general revelation is also significant. If salvation is obtainable apart from special revelation, then, as has been mentioned in the discussion on 'faith', there no longer remains an absolute *necessity* for the gospel to be proclaimed. While special revelation, being the word of God, provides certain increased and very desirable spiritual advantages (for instance, spiritual assurance; freeing people from the 'ambiguities and futilities of this present life' [Sanders, 1992:238]), the desirable spiritual advantages that come with the proclamation of the gospel are simply that, spiritual 'advantages'. However, spiritual advantages, in this sense, are 'extras' rather than 'essential' matters. Given that the great majority of Christians find evangelism difficult, such a belief would provide a convenient excuse for avoiding the task.

Fifthly, there is the concern of other religions. In bringing history to consummation in Jesus, Pinnock wants to broaden our thinking of missions beyond the salvation of mere individuals and the planting of churches to the renewal of all things, including cultures and history. 'Why bother with missions if it is true that God is going to give an opportunity to be saved to everyone sooner or later anyhow?' (1988:167). His response is to say that we need to view missions as part of God's strategy for transforming the world and changing history. In fact, Pinnock (1992:125) states that the role of missions is, *inter alia*, to stimulate reform and renewal in other religions. Although the question needs to be asked, is missions' role (as opposed to its consequences) reform, renewal or is it better understood as seeking repentance?

Finally, it is appropriate to consider the question of sin and the state of the sinner before grace (Eph 2:1–4; Rom 8:1–8). Pinnock, in particular, is far too vague about the nature and consequences of sin. He speaks of sinners (especially in the context of deficient religions), but sin (as moral rebellion against God) is not adequately discussed. On one occasion he says that God's enemies will suffer condemnation, 'but innocent bystanders will not' (1992:175). Who among humanity is innocent? Elsewhere, Pinnock argues that God will not permit people to be damned because through no fault of their own they never received a gospel message. While this is an emotionally charged statement, it fails to take sufficient account of the biblical concern that every human being stands condemned before God, and that no-one can complain that that is not 'fair' (Dowsett, 1993:42).

### *b. Will Evangelistic Urgency be Maintained?*

The 'hard' inclusivists seek to formulate a theology which posits a universally accessible salvation (apart from evangelisation) by way of the 'faith principle', based upon the affirmation of a salvific, general revelation. If eternal salvation, although not the 'fullness' of salvation in this world, is possible by that route, will that theological rationale undermine evangelistic urgency?

The 'hard' inclusivists have not been slow in highlighting the restrictivist bias in past and present missionary motivations, that, apart from Christ humanity is 'lost'. The dated expression that evangelicals need to 'preach quickly and urgently lest another soul be lost'[36] is a caricature, yet one having a firm foundation. However, Bosch[37] reminds his readers that over the past two hundred years, the accent on the saving of the perishing 'heathen' was only one of several other prominent motivations such as the glory of God, the love of Christ, and in the twentieth century, the social gospel.

In the light of this particular investigation, it needs to be recalled that the issue for the 'hard' inclusivists is not the saving of people from hell *per se*, but the continuing justification for missions even though humanity may be saved *apart* from hearing the gospel. Gillis[38], a pluralist himself, is correct in observing that if Pinnock were to neglect the mandate to proselytise the unevangelized his credibility among evangelicals would suffer significantly, and quite possibly, his inclusivist rationale would be ignored by them as a consequence. In his defence, Pinnock in personal correspondence has indicated, 'I do not wish to undermine evangelism with my theory. But it does change the motivations for mission if it is not true that all non-Christians are necessarily hell bound'.[39] Certainly, *if* it is true that all non-Christians are not necessarily hell bound, then the motivation for Christian missions would inevitably need to draw more heavily upon the so-called 'positive' motives, such as, a desire to share the love of Christ in one's heart, and a recognition of one's duty to obey the Great Commission.

It has been said that Christians must not accept any theology that would tend to lessen their zeal to convert people to Christ. However, in the first instance, Christians are required to accept a particular theology (if it is biblically sound) irrespective of its perceived conse-

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36 Smith (1995:26).

37 Bosch, D., *Transforming Mission: paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991), 286.

38 Gillis, C., 'Evangelical Inclusivism: Progress or Betrayal?' *The Evangelical Quarterly* 68:2 (1996), 143.

39 Pinnock, C. H., Personal letter to author (McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario. June 10, 1996).

quences. Sanders tellingly says, 'It is asserted that missionary fervour would slack off unless the unevangelized are without hope. *This may be correct*, but it is irrelevant to the truth or falsity of the position under discussion'[40]. One suspects that Sanders is entirely cognisant of the demotivation inclusivist theology will have upon evangelism. However, the point is, if after investigation, it eventuates that a fully developed inclusivism is a sounder biblical response than (say) restrictivism, then Christians will be required to accept that conclusion irrespective of how they might feel it undermines evangelism.

### *c. Conclusion*

In summary, Chapman records that Christian motivation for evangelism needs to be undergirded by a coherent and fluent theology that clearly upholds both the justice and the love of God and simultaneously fuels the urgency of the situation.[41] Can this be said of inclusivist theology? This investigation suggests that inclusivist theology has certain positive virtues, namely, its emphasis upon the love and generosity of God, and in particular, its appreciation of the Holy Spirit's active presence in the world preparing men and women to receive the gospel. Yet nonetheless inclusivist theology reveals substantial weaknesses, especially its divorcing the ontological from the epistemological necessity of Christ, the associated issue of faith, the uncertainty as to how the 'hard' inclusivists perceive the salvific nature of other religions, a weak understanding of the gravity of sin, and having a 'driven' and biased hermeneutic. These weaknesses, individually and together, suggest that it is simply 'wishful thinking' on behalf of the 'hard' inclusivists to assert that a unqualified inclusivist theology can maintain the traditional call to evangelism. Rather, the perceived urgency for an evangelistic 'decision' to be made having eternal consequences, would be replaced by a *desire* but not the *necessity* for 'implicit Christians', (one's 'brothers and sisters in God') to appreciate more fully the blessings obtainable in Jesus Christ.[42]

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40 Sanders, J., 'Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?' *Evangelical Quarterly* 60 (1988), 248. My emphasis.

41 Chapman, C., 'The Riddle of Religions', *Christianity Today* 34/8 (May 1990), 20.

42 Finally, a caveat is in order. While the urgency in evangelism would in all likelihood be diminished, the broader 'call' to missions with its focus upon social action would presumably remain unaffected. The social action aspect of missions concentrates on the 'here and now' and so in that sense is largely unaffected by the wider soteriological issues.

**Abstract**

In recent years certain evangelical scholars have questioned the belief that those who die not having heard of Jesus Christ are excluded from the blessings of eternity. Clark Pinnock and John Sanders especially have shown a dissatisfaction with the traditional rationale. They argue that there is a greater salvific wideness in God's mercy and generosity with respect to the unevangelized. This wideness, it is claimed, has been largely ignored in the past due to many evangelicals being influenced by an Augustinian pessimism or 'restrictivism' concerning the numbers of those saved.

In order to support their thesis, Pinnock and Sanders posit that salvation is universally accessible by way of the 'faith principle', whereby people might respond to the light they have received from God through the way of general revelation. A primary conviction in the universal accessibility of salvation is that while Christ's death is ontologically necessary for all who are saved, it is not epistemologically necessary that all hear of the Saviour. In other words, an explicit hearing of the gospel, through the agency of a human messenger, is not necessary in order that a person might be saved.

If the inclusivistic understanding of salvation is accepted, the crucial missiological question is, 'will the Church's commitment to evangelism be lessened as a consequence'? This paper concludes that an unqualified inclusivism as advocated by Pinnock and Sanders would find it very difficult to maintain the same traditional urgency in sending messengers of the gospel to the unevangelized.