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The Salvation of the Unevangelized in the Light of God's Covenants

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Arminians (and other synergists) most naturally allow for the salvation of the unevangelized, because they characteristically believe that God wills the salvation of every human being and that he has graciously done everything possible to save the maximum number of people. For Calvinists (and other monergists), however, the situation is different. They believe that God has graciously chosen to save effectually a vast number of people who, if left to themselves, would have wilfully died in rebellion against him. If we believe that God has unconditionally chosen those whom he will save from out of sinful humanity, it is not logically problematic if God does not make available the means of saving revelation to those whom he has not purposed to save.

Following the lead of Calvin himself, therefore, many monergists have asserted gospel exclusivism, which gives no hope for the salvation of the unevangelized. But there has never been a consensus on this point among Reformed theologians, for others follow Zwingli's lead. They assert that God can save people through Christ, by forms of revelation less complete than the gospel, if they are inculpably ignorant of it. This view is commonly called 'inclusivism' but I prefer the term 'accessibilism', as more descriptive. Many other Calvinists are agnostic about whether God saves any of the unevangelized.

Within a Reformed framework, how can we account for this difference between gospel exclusivists on the one hand and agnostics and accessibilists on the other?

1 Perspectives on Gospel Exclusivism and Accessibilism

I find no texts in the Bible that state explicitly that *only* the evangelized will be saved, nor any that state explicitly that *any* of the *un*evangelized will be saved. Gospel exclusivists cite numerous biblical texts to support their position, but four problems are common in their interpretation of these texts: first, texts asserting the uniqueness of Christ as the world's only Saviour are

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read as assertions that knowledge of Christ is necessary to benefit from his saving work (e.g., Acts 4:12); second, texts asserting the saving efficacy of belief in Jesus are read as assertions that *only* such fully informed faith can save (e.g., the citation of Joel 2:32 in Rom. 10:13); third, Scripture is clear that all who believe in Jesus are saved and that all who *reject* Jesus remain condemned. But it is often not observed that texts which speak of not believing (i.e., rejecting) Jesus are in contexts where knowledge of him is assumed, and so these cannot be extended to refer to the unevangelized (e.g., Jn. 3:16-18); and fourth, the context of texts is ignored, as in Romans 10, where Paul rejects, as a possible explanation for widespread unbelief in Jesus as the Messiah, that Jews were ignorant of Jesus. So, this much cited text is not speaking of the unevangelized, though it does state clearly the necessity of revelation for saving faith.

This absence of texts explicitly stating gospel exclusivism is probably the main reason for widespread agnosticism on this point among evangelicals these days. I propose that the decisive factor accounting for some Calvinists affirming gospel exclusivism while others assert agnosticism or accessibilism, is their different understandings of the metanarrative concerning God's saving program.[1]

1 The gospel exclusivist metanarrative

Stephen Wellum writes: 'In order for one to benefit from the saving work of Christ, Scripture teaches that one must exercise explicit faith in the covenant promises of God, now, given our place in redemptive history, centered in Jesus Christ.'[2] He states further: 'Scripture presents the work of the Spirit always in relation to the Son, entailing that when the Spirit is at work in people, his unique work *is to bring people to faith in Christ* which must always be viewed in a covenantally defined way.'[3]

Taking Wellum's reference to 'a covenantally defined way' together with his earlier statement, he looks to be explicitly asserting that, in order to be saved, one must know the particular revelation related to God's most recent covenantal activity. This raises the necessary revelational bar very high, for it entails a belief that, as God further reveals himself in the process of making new covenants, the knowledge derived from previous covenantal revelation ceases to be sufficient for saving faith.[4]

1 See J. Nelson Jennings, 'God's Zeal for His World', in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, eds. Morgan, Christopher W. and Robert A. Peterson (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 235, for a similar approach to this issue, though from a gospel exclusivist perspective.

2 Stephen J. Wellum, 'Saving Faith: Implicit or Explicit?' in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, eds. Morgan, Christopher W. and Robert A. Peterson (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 146.

3 Wellum, 'Saving Faith', 165.

4 Cf., Francis Turretin *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Trans. George Musgrave Giger. Ed. James T. Dennison Jr. Vol. 1: First Through Tenth Topics (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1992), 402-03; Topic 4, Q XVII, # XXIII; John Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God: Must You Hear the Gospel to Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 76; R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, 'A Particularist

2 The accessibilist metanarrative

Accessibilists may grant to agnostics (as I do) that Scripture does not explicitly declare that God saves particular individuals who have no knowledge of the revelation God gave in conjunction with his establishment of covenantal relationships. But we are not agnostic about this possibility, because we do find lines of biblical teaching that lead us to be hopeful about the expansiveness of God's saving work. We acknowledge the lack of examples or teaching concerning people saved completely beyond the reach of God's covenantal revelation, but we see this as completely expectable, given the narrow focus of Scripture—it was addressed to God's covenant people and told them what they needed to know for life and godliness in their particular contexts.

That nothing is said about what God was doing in the Americas, in east Asia, or in sub-Saharan Africa, at the time that he made his foundational covenant with Abraham, is not at all surprising. For God to have communicated to the people of Abraham's day what he was doing savingly among peoples of whom they were completely ignorant, in parts of the world of which they had no awareness, would have been far more surprising than Scripture's silence on this matter. To conclude from that silence, however, that God was doing *no work of saving grace at all* in those areas of the world is unwarranted, unless Scripture specifically states this, which it does not.

A few factors stand out to me as particularly important in the accessibilist metanarrative that differentiate it from the big picture of gospel exclusivism.

a) The graciousness of the sovereign God

We have been impressed by the amazing graciousness of God who described himself as Yahweh, 'a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin' (Ex. 34:6-7) and who is 'rich in mercy' (Eph. 2:4), whose redemptive work is directed toward the restoration of his creation.

Christopher Wright, noted for his biblical theological exposition of God's mission, writes: 'We have seen that the whole emphasis of the Bible lies on salvation being something that God has accomplished in history and that belongs to God in his sovereignty. It seems to me to be presumptuous for us to limit the sovereignty of God's grace to the evangelistic obedience of the church (or, more often, the lack of it).' Wright is unable to say 'that God is somehow unable or unwilling to save anybody at any time in human history, unless and until a Christian reaches them with an intelligible explanation of the story of the gospel'. If true, that 'would mean that in the end, … the total number saved (by God) will be smaller than the total number evangelized (by us). And that *seems to restrict the operation of God's grace* to the limits of the operation of our human evange-

View: An Evidential Approach' in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 240; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), 41, 42, 46-47.

listic efforts'[5] (emphasis mine).

Instead, 'the Bible gives us grounds to believe that the reverse will be true. That is, those who will have responded to explicit Christian evangelism will be a subset of the finally elect and redeemed. For *God operates in his sovereign grace to reach out to and touch people to the ends of the earth and at all times of history*.... What the Old Testament prepares us to expect—namely the appearance of God-fearing people in the most unlikely places (even among the enemies of God's people)—is replicated in the history of cross-cultural mission'[6] (emphasis mine).

b) The covenant people as instruments of God

God's gracious covenants, since the fall, are all the outworking of his plan to restore his rule, to reconcile alienated bearers of his image through redeeming them from sin, and ultimately to restore his creation in a new heaven and earth. The covenants are thus the context in which God's *objective* acts of salvation are done. God's covenants, though made with particular people, are always in pursuit of his extensive gracious purposes. They bring about communities which are God's primary agents in his redemptive program, though not all members of those communities are saved. The covenant people are set aside as a special priestly people for the blessing of the nations, as a light to the nations, to minister salvation to them. Fulfilment of this missionary role depends upon their being personally in saving relationship to God and living in obedience to his covenant requirements.[7]

In God's *subjective* acts of salvation, individuals are reconciled to God through faith, on the ground of God's objective redemptive act in Christ. From Abraham onward, this work of reconciliation is carried out by God as part of his *normal or ordinary* work in the midst of his covenant people, first Israel and then the church. But God does not restrict his subjective saving work in individual lives to the boundaries of the covenant community, even though his saving of people outside of that community may rightly be dubbed *extraordinary*.[8]

c) Saving faith and knowledge of the divine self-revelation

D. A. Carson softens his usual gospel exclusivism when he states: '*Most* of the pre-Christ believers are those who enter into a covenantal, faith-based relationship with the God who had disclosed himself to them in the terms and the extent recorded up to that time' (emphasis mine).[9] But accessibilists

5 Christopher J. H. Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God: Celebrating the Bible's Central Story* (Nottingham, Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 176.

6 Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God*, 176.

7 Particularly helpful for demonstration of the role of the covenant people as instruments in God's mission are Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006), and John Walton, *Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994).

8 Neal Punt deftly addresses the question 'Will only covenant members be saved?' in *A Theology of Inclusivism* (Allendale, Mich.: Northland Books, 2008), 171-78.

9 D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 298.

can push the window open further, by proposing that *no one lives outside of one of God's covenantal arrangements* even if that covenant is limited to the one made with Adam and reaffirmed with Noah.

The *critical issue* is whether the line of redemptive history applies across the entire population at a time, regardless of their knowledge, that is, of whether they are aware of the revelation connected to the latest covenant God has made. I believe that we must take into account not only God's providence relative to his redemptive historical timeline, but also his providence relative to the spread of knowledge through particular divine revelation.

If God had made knowledge of the latest covenant revelation necessary for saving faith, a very peculiar situation would have arisen. God's fulfilment of his covenant promises to Abraham is central to God's saving action in the world. But, in choosing Abraham, God states his intention to bless 'all the nations of the earth' (Gen 18:18), through his covenantal relationship with Abraham and his descendants. If one must know this new revelation that God has made to Abraham (or later parties to further covenantal developments) then each new revelation actually makes smaller the reach of God's saving work! With each new covenantal revelation, the circle of people *able* to be saved because of Christ's atoning work, and by the illuminating and enabling work of the Spirit, grows *smaller*.

This gospel exclusivist thesis runs counter to the expansive tenor of God's stated intentions in making covenants with particular people and groups. It is doubtful that God narrowed his saving work to the small part of the world aware of the covenant with Abraham and his descendants, thereby excluding from his saving work a large part of the world until such time as the church would reach them with the new covenant gospel, hundreds and even thousands of years later. God's interest in all the peoples of the world began long before the church had grown sufficiently around the world to get the gospel to many people groups.

Romans 2:12-16 makes clear that people's duties are defined by the covenant revelation they have received, which defines the covenant relationship with God in which they exist. For good reason, Protestants defend the *sufficiency* of God's revelation in Scripture. I propose that we can also speak of universal revelation as sufficient relative to God's purposes in self-revelation. John Frame enunciates the critical principle at work here: 'At any point in redemptive history, the revelation given at that time is sufficient.'[10] This is an excellent general principle, particularly if we keep in mind that individuals do not all live at the same point of redemptive history, epistemologically. The chronological line and the epistemological line coincide only for those who have received God's latest revelation.

Frame observes that even though universal revelation was sufficient, God added to it 'by speaking to Noah, Abraham, and others'. He did this because 'Noah needed to know more than Adam did. The history of redemption is pro-

10 John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*. A Theology of Lordship Series. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2008), 161.

gressive. In Noah's time, God planned to judge the world by a flood, and Noah had to know that. The Adamic revelation was sufficient for Adam, but not for Noah… . Noah needed more, for he had additional duties. He needed more in order to do God's will in his time.'[11] A major point concerning the role of God's covenants is being made here—a significant factor in them is that they entail duty, the doing of which is essential if the work God has chosen to do through his covenant people is to be accomplished. Frame notes that 'Scripture, then, is clear enough to make us responsible for carrying out our present duties to God'.[12] The same can be said about all revelation. This is extremely important because it underlines the point that responsibility is proportionate to revelation—thus, a person who has only the revelation God gave to Noah is required by God only to respond appropriately to *that* revelation. Whatever means God uses to communicate his truth to people, it suffices for God's purposes for those people.

d) Salvation through Christ

Salvation was accomplished solely through the Christ, the son of Adam, of Abraham and of David, the one mediator between God and humankind. Anyone who has ever been saved, is now saved, or ever will be saved, is saved because Jesus died in their place, satisfying God's righteousness, and because Jesus rose again from the dead, as public demonstration of his vindication and hence of the vindication/justification of all who are 'in him'. In the centuries between God's covenant promise to Abraham and his covenant heirs and the coming of the Word incarnate, God progressively revealed himself through prophets within the covenant community, and he typified the saving work of Christ in the system of sacrifices offered in the tabernacle and then the temple which was God's dwelling place—a place to which the nations of the world could come and worship the one true God (cf. Solomon's prayer concerning 'foreigners', in 1 Kings 8:41-43).

But those whom God has saved are not all members of the Abrahamic or new covenant communities; some may not even know about these communities. From this starting point, we are as hopeful for salvation as Scripture allows us to be and so the lack of specifically gospel exclusivist texts speaks loudly.

II Covenant as ground of the hope of salvation

Since we believe that God will save all those whom he has chosen to save, and since we know that God is gracious and merciful in his eternal nature, we are naturally hopeful concerning the final numbers of the inhabitants of the new earth, who will be there because they were chosen by the Father, to be redeemed by the Son, and illumined and given faith through the Spirit. The saving work of God throughout human history is the outworking of the eternal purpose of God that has been described appropriately as a covenant between the members of the Trinity (Eph. 1:3-6).

11 Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 161.
12 Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 150.

III Covenant obligations and blessings

The Spirit of God enables and elicits saving faith in the lives of individuals in accordance with the situation of each one. The essence of saving faith was always the same, but the theological content of that faith varied with the individual's situation. The hope shared by accessibilists is grounded in the belief that God's saving work is not co-extensive with his formation of a covenant people. Some whom God has chosen to save in Christ by the Spirit are saved by God within covenantal relationships less advanced than those which are focused on the development of the missionary people who are God's normal instruments in the proclamation of God's fullest revelation to date. D. T. Niles rightly asserted that 'the mission of the Church is a mission *within* the mission of the Holy Spirit',[13] and Adam Dodds correctly affirms that 'the Spirit's mission is not coextensive with the church's mission but broader in range and scope'.[14]

Herman Bavinck notes that restoration of sinners to communion with God 'requires grace, which in biblical revelation assumes the form of a covenant' and 'this covenant begins immediately after the fall',[15] with the enunciation of God's covenant of grace in Genesis 3:15. Salvation was available immediately—it did not wait for God's covenant to be made with Abraham, though that covenant was foundational in the redemptive historical program that reached final fulfilment in the Mediator of the new covenant. Christ was not only the fulfiller of the Abrahamic covenant and of the Sinaitic covenant, he was the second Adam.[16]

This framework of the covenant of grace provides the context for hopefulness that some of the unevangelized will be saved. The elect have always been saved by grace through faith, but the faith required by God, like the obedience required by God, is an appropriate response to the revelation God has made available. Because the standard to which Israel was held was the particular covenants that God established with them, Israel's prophets warned their people of the blessings or curses that would follow covenantal obedience or covenant breaking.[17] But, for those who are ignorant of the latest covenantal revelation, the terms of their relationship with God are therefore determined by the revelation God has given them, which, in some instances, is the revelation given under a less developed covenantal administration.

Geerhardus Vos writes:

13 D. T. Niles, *Upon The Earth: The Mission of God and the Missionary Enterprise of the Churches* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962), 71; cited by Adam Dodds, 'The Mission of the Spirit and the Mission of the Church: Towards a Trinitarian Missiology', *ERT* 35/2 (2011): 224.

14 Adam Dodds, 'The Mission of the Spirit', 224.

15 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics. Vol 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ*. General ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 193.

16 See Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 226-27.

17 See, for example, F. C. Fensham, 'Covenant, Alliance', in *New Bible Dictionary*. Second edition. J. D. Douglas, ed., N. Hillyer, revision ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1982), 242-43; Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (BakerBooks, 2006), 46-53.

> [Abraham's] kind of faith is a faith in the creative interposition of God. It trusts in him for calling the things that are not as though they were [see Rom. 4:17-23]. This does not, of course, mean that the objective content of the patriarch's faith was doctrinally identical with that of the N.T. believer. Paul does not commit the anachronism of saying that Abraham's faith had for its object the raising of Christ from the dead. What he means is that the attitude of faith towards the raising of Isaac and the attitude towards the resurrection [of Christ] are identical in point of faith able to confront and incorporate the supernatural.[18]

Most significant for our consideration of the unevangelized may be the situation of those saved prior to the Abrahamic covenant. Robert Reymond finds 'indications of this faith in the Messiah's future deliverance even in pre-Abrahamic times'. He cites the reference to Enoch in Jude 14 and posits: 'One must conclude that Jude viewed the Messiah as present (in his preincarnate state) and active throughout the history of the Old Testament.'[19] Reymond posits that 'Abel's parents know about the need for a blood "covering" before God' from 'their observation of God's killing an animal, even before they were banished from the garden of Eden, and making for them covering garments from the skin of the animal (Gen. 3:21) and most likely by his own direct instruction to them. This divine work, coming as it did hard on God's *protevangelium* (Gen. 3:15), according to which the Seed of the woman would destroy the Serpent's power through his own death work, illustrated the "covering" significance of that Seed's death.'[20]

I find this proposal significant with regard to animal sacrifice for the appeasement of God, among the unevangelized. This may well be part of the communal memory of primal particular revelation. It is a good reminder that those who, by virtue of their revelational situation, live their relationship with God under the administration of the creational covenant, may not be restricted to the universal revelation provided in God's creative and providential work or in the conscience. Testimony to, or recollection of, the particular revelation made to Adam and Eve and later to Noah may be widespread even where it is blurred by generations of tradition not informed by Scripture, and it may be instrumental in the Spirit's saving work among these people.

IV Salvation between Adam and Abraham

Jeffrey Niehaus asserts that 'all humans live under the benefits of the Adamic covenant (and its renewal in the Noahic covenant) and are all accountable to God as his children.'[21]

18 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1954), 99-100; cited by Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 536.

19 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 534.

20 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 534.

21 Jeffrey J. Niehaus, 'Covenant: An Idea in the Mind of God', *JETS* 52/2 (June 2009), 228; cf. also 244, re: a Babylonian, 'whose only

In the statement of God's gracious promise that is fundamental to all his later covenantal arrangements (Gen. 3:15-19), no new commands are given nor conditions stated. The obligations placed upon humankind in the creation covenant are assumed and reaffirmed—the consequences of their disobedience are described in terms that clearly assume the continuing obligation of the creation mandate to be fruitful and multiply and steward the earth (Gen. 3:15-19).

The fact that all humans live under some divine covenantal administration, at least the covenant of creation, makes this the most basic place for us to consider what God may be doing savingly among people whose *only* knowledge of God derives from the covenant of creation. The work of God's grace in the lives of those who live cognitively under the creation covenant is a fruit of Christ's atoning work, as is all 'common grace' and, 'as long as it counters any type of evil and is purposefully performed in ways that help and heal, is connected either knowingly or unknowingly with the *missio Dei* in the world'.[22] Having said this, it is worth reminding ourselves that we are limited in our ability to define the line between common and special grace.[23]

Writing concerning the means by which the covenant of grace was administered from Adam to Abraham, A. A. Hodge finds evidence 'that this administration of the covenant of grace reached many of the people of the earth, during this era', in 'the history of Job in Arabia, of Abraham in Mesopotamia, and of Melchisedec in Canaan'.[24] Similarly, Gerard van Groningen observes that 'after Yahweh had given absolute assurance to Noah and his sons that the creation covenant would continue, there are not many direct references to it again. But its presence and role are constantly and consistently present.'[25]

Before the covenant with Abraham, we have numerous examples of people in saving relationship with God. Abraham himself had been justified by faith before he was circumcised (Rom. 4:10-11), and Hebrews 11:8-9 indicates that it was 'by faith' that Abraham had set out from Ur, some 25 years before God's covenant with him in Genesis 12:1. Jeffrey Niehaus correctly observes that 'Abram was indeed in covenant with the Lord—but under the Adamic covenant and, more proximately, under the Noahic covenant… . He is already Abram's Suzerain under the Noahic covenant, and has every right and freedom to give him commands and/or make promises to him.'[26]

Other individuals of particular note include: Abel (Gen. 4:4; Mt. 23:35), Enoch (Heb. 11:5-6; Sirach 44:16), Noah,

"covenant relationship" to the Lord was under the Adamic and Noahic covenants'; see also Jeffrey J. Niehaus, 'Covenant and Narrative, God and Time', *JETS* 53/3 (September 2010), 557. Cf., Wright, *The Mission of God*, 214.

22 Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*, trans. and ed. Dale Cooper (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 4; cited by Dodds, 'Mission of the Spirit', 224.

23 Cf. Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 100.

24 A. A. Hodge, *Outlines*, 376.

25 Gerard Van Groningen, 'Covenant', in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996), 126a.

26 Niehaus, 'Covenant and Narrative', 544.

(Gen. 6:9; 7:1; Heb. 11:7-8; cf. Ezek. 14:14, 20; Sirach 44:17; Mt. 24:37-39; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5), and Job (cf. Ezek. 14:14, 20).

Hopefulness that God may be working savingly among people whose only possible covenantal relationship with God is the covenant of creation, established with Adam and confirmed with Noah, may be found in Jeffrey Niehaus's reason for considering even the original covenant of creation among 'God's overall program of covenants that lead to renewal', because 'redemption is implied in creation. That is, because of God's character, God as Creator has an ultimate covenantal commitment to restore all that he has created, including a new heavens and earth and a new humanity. Put another way, the new heavens and earth of Rev. 21:1 are a result of God's original gracious covenant commitment, which was in place when he made the original heavens and earth (Gen. 1:1).'[27]

Taking into account this 'ultimate covenantal commitment' of God to the restoration of his fallen creation, we should actually be surprised if God excluded from the application of Christ's saving work all those who are inculpably ignorant of God's special covenants with Abraham and those that followed on it, including the new covenant. The establishment of the new covenant was brought about by the obedience of the second Adam, which undoes, for all who are in him, the disobedience of the first Adam and the many acts of human disobedience that followed from it. The descendants of Abraham who had the faith of Abraham were saved by faith because of the righteousness of Christ. Likewise, descendants of Adam who have the sort of faith possible for Spirit illumined people who relate to God under the covenant of creation, were (and are) saved by the righteousness of the second Adam, even though all of these were necessarily ignorant of the way in which God would eventually bring about within human history the *ground* upon which he could be just while justifying sinners. All of them will someday worship the Lamb who was slain (Rev. 5:13).

Every divine revelation that a person receives (whether it is universal, particular and universally normative, or particular and of limited applicability) calls for a faith response, and God justifies those who, by his grace, respond with the faith that God seeks, appropriate to the content of the revelation. The minimum is clearly defined in Hebrews 11:6, the belief that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

V Abrahamic Covenant

The purpose and effect of God's covenant with Abraham is the formation of a missionary community set up by God as an instrument through whom he will bless the nations, rather than the development of a community *within* which God will *exclusively* do his saving work. That covenant was for the blessing of the nations, and for the undoing of the curse that had come upon the human race through the failure of Adam to obey the very basic requirements of the covenant that God had made with him and, in him, with the whole race

27 Jeffrey J. Niehaus, 'An Argument against Theologically Constructed Covenants.' *JETS* 50 (2007), 272.

(Rom. 5:12-19).

Enjoyment of the full blessing of any of God's covenants requires knowledge of the covenant, so that no one experiences the full benefits of the Abrahamic covenant as fulfilled in Jesus, until they have the new covenant faith that requires knowledge of the Mediator of that covenant. *But* eventually this will happen for all who have saving faith, even if its realization must await the moment of their meeting Christ at death.

After God's covenant with Abraham, we have examples of people in saving relationship with God but outside of the covenant community. Like Abraham himself, a Gentile who worshipped Yahweh could be saved, without being circumcised as a member of the Abrahamic covenant community, but he would not then be part of the people who were set apart by God to be his priestly ministers in the world. Even under the old covenant, there were Gentile God-fearers, and Gentiles were not excluded from the hope of salvation after the special covenant with Israel was established. Bryan Widbin finds 'never a hint that Israel saw "the fear of God" among the nations as something less than a redemptive experience. She accepted it on both practical and theological grounds. Israel's exclusive calling was to be a testimony to the nations. What happened apart from that was Yahweh's business.'[28]

In Romans 4:11-16, it is clear that the *quality* of Abraham's faith, not its knowledge content, was the key in his justification. Those who have faith of that quality, like the list of men and women in Hebrews 11, are deemed righteous by God, despite the very different ways in which their faith is shaped by the knowledge of God that they were given. Where this provides a ground for hopefulness concerning the unevangelized is that those among them whom the Father chose in the Son, and in whom the Spirit produces repentance and the faith prescribed by the revelation they had received are beneficiaries of the atoning work of Christ, the promised Seed of Abraham, because they have the 'faith of Abraham', in its *context-appropriate manifestation*. In this way, the 'many nations' of which Abraham is father are more numerous even than our awareness of God's work in the world gives us reason to rejoice in. All of these will be among the 'many' who 'will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven' (Mt. 8:11 NRSV).

God fearers during the time of the patriarchs included people such as: Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20; Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7)[29] and Lot. Sarah and Ishmael are an important case study in this regard, at the time when God identified Isaac as the heir of the covenant promise to Abraham. Here, we see very clearly that the nature and purpose of the covenant community is not primarily that it is the body of the saved but that it is the community through whom

28 R. Bryan Widbin, 'Salvation for People Outside Israel's Covenant?' in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Mich.: Baker, 1991), 82.

29 See Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 77.

God normally and primarily pursues his mission in the world. As a 13 year old member of Abraham's family, Ishmael was given the sign of the covenant, indicating his inclusion in the Abrahamic covenant community (Gen. 17:17-21). When God instructed Abraham to accede to Sarah's request that Hagar be banished and cut off from inheritance (Gen. 21:1-20), Ishmael was part of Abraham's household and included in the covenant community but, with the implementation of Sarah's request for banishment, Ishmael is cut off from the covenant community and hence from the blessings of the covenant, in particular, from being the line through whom the natural people of the covenant are descended.

The critical issue, therefore, is what significance banishment from the covenant people had, relative to salvation. In God's covenant promises to Abraham, nothing is said about salvation, as such. Being in the Abrahamic covenant entailed a special relationship to God, but there is no indication that it was the only relationship in which people received saving grace. Thus, we cannot assume as a matter of course that Hagar and Ishmael were unsaved because of their removal from the covenant family. Though we have not yet seen evidence either of faith or of unbelief on Ishmael's part, we have certainly seen that Hagar had a personal relationship of dependence upon God and an appreciation for God's care. From the description of her time in the wilderness, I gather that she had a saving trust in God. Hagar's banishment from Abraham's family put her outside of the covenant community but its purpose was to remove Ishmael from the line of covenant descent (a consequence of God's choice of Isaac for that role), not to make a statement about their salvation/condemnation, i.e., about their relationship to God.

In later provisions under the Mosaic law, being cut off from the covenant community was often based upon sinful behaviour that indicated radical unbelief. In those cases, it was a statement both that these people were not in saving relationship with God, and that they were no longer part of God's missionary people. In the case of Hagar and Ishmael, the second of these was true but there is no indication that the first was true. The critical thing within the Mosaic covenantal context is that people were being cut off because they failed to fulfil the obligations of the covenant. Means were provided to restore them to the covenant community. But it would be a mistake to extrapolate, from the procedures at work within the covenant community, conclusions about the status of people who had never been a part of that community. Furthermore, in the case of ceremonial impurities that led to alienation from the community, it seems quite implausible to deem such people 'unsaved'. The orientation of the individual's heart, as evident in obedience/disobedience was critical in the latter regard.

Esau is another interesting case study. With reference to what John Frame dubs 'historical election', 'Isaac is chosen over Ishmael (Rom. 9 vv. 7-9), and Jacob over Esau (vv. 10-13).'[30] But Frame notes that 'we cannot say on the

30 Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*. A Theology of Lordship Series (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 333.

basis of Scripture that either Ishmael or Esau, or the national groups formed by their descendants, are eternally reprobate. Paul is not distinguishing here between historical and eternal election. Rather, he is focusing on the principles that these two forms of election have in common. In both cases, election is by grace, apart from works (v. 12). In all these cases, election is in accordance with God's purpose (v. 11) and calling (v. 12). Esau is reprobate (whether historically or eternally) before he is born (v. 11), hated by God (v. 13).'[31] This is an excellent illustration of the importance of accurately representing the purpose of God in choosing those in the covenant line ('historical election'), which is not to be conflated or confused with 'eternal election', even though God's sovereignty in both cases is equally clear.

VI Mosaic Covenant

A new point of election occurs at Sinai. In Genesis 17:7, God had established an eternal covenant between himself and Abraham and his descendants, 'but now God expands his election to Israel: "I will take you *as my own* people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians" Ex. 6:7 (italics are Walton's). They are now God's chosen people, chosen to reveal him to the rest of the world, as the context indicates. They have become the "revelatory" people of God.'[32]

Prior to God's establishment of the covenant at Sinai, he had acted mightily to deliver Israel from their bondage in Egypt, a fact to which God refers in the beginning of the Decalogue. Exodus describes a massive power encounter between Yahweh and Pharaoh, so that, in the narrative of the plagues in Exodus 7-14, the motif recurs that 'YHWH, the God who would make himself known to the Israelites by delivering them, would simultaneously make himself known to Pharaoh by overthrowing his oppression.'[33] Aptly, Christopher Wright sums up the situation: 'Clearly, the motivation from God's point of view was not only the liberation of his enslaved people but this driving divine will to be known to all nations for who and what he truly is. The mission of God to be known is what drives this whole narrative.'[34]

Israel was chosen by God to be his instrument in blessing the nations by means of God's self-revelation in and through this people, but the covenant community was not the boundary of God's saving work during that period.[35] Outside the covenant community during the Mosaic period, we meet Jethro (Ex. 18:1, 11), Rahab (Josh. 2:9-11; 6:23; Heb. 11:31; Jas. 2:25), and the resident aliens who lived within Israel in Moses' time (Num. 15:14-15; cf. Ex. 12:48-49).

VII Davidic Covenant

Perhaps Hiram, King of Tyre was saved

31 Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 333.

32 Walton, *Covenant*, 65.

33 Wright, *The Mission of God*, 93.

34 Wright, *The Mission of God*, 95.

35 As C. Wright says, the election of Israel was 'fundamentally missional, not just soteriological' (*Mission of God*), 263.

(see 2 Sam. 5:11; I Chr. 14:1; 1 Kings 5:1; 2 Kings 5:7; cf., 2 Chr. 2:11-12). Others that we know about include: Gentile God-fearers referred to in Psalm 118:4 and other places in the Psalter which call the nations to praise God; Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:3-4); Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5:15-19); at least some among the Ninevites (Jon. 3:10); and Ebed-melech (Jer. 39:15-18).

Particularly interesting is the case of people saved in the time of Jesus, but prior to the establishment of the new covenant in his blood and the inauguration of the church at Pentecost with the gift of the Spirit. This is a transition period in which God continued to do a saving work in the hearts of people who were not members of the Abrahamic covenant community. Of similar interest is the way in which the maturation of saving faith is observed in the lives of people within the covenant community as God revealed to them the identity of Jesus. Not all who were saved by their Abrahamic faith were illuminated by the Holy Spirit immediately to grasp the identity of Jesus or the meaning of his teaching. Thus the Gospel of John continually speaks of people 'believing', even when those people had previously 'believed'—there is a growth of faith as there is a growth of knowledge, both objectively and subjectively, within the life of the saved.

The experience of the eleven of Jesus' disciples whose salvation is certain makes us aware of the importance of drawing a distinction between being 'saved' and becoming a Christian. Scripture indicates that there is a moment in the life of each person who is saved when they move from darkness to light. The experience of the first disciples of Jesus illustrates for us, however, just how difficult it is to identify that moment.

VIII Salvation Under The New Covenant

If I am on the right track in regard to my earlier reflections regarding the exclusion of Hagar and Ishmael from the covenant, when we move to the new covenant situation, we can likewise see the local church (a new covenant community) as having two aspects: it is a community of those who are believed to be saved, having been united to Christ by faith—the church of Christ visible and local, and it is the community that God has blessed with a fullness of revelation and a commission to be agents of God's mission in the world. It is a category error to confuse these two aspects, making the church not only the community graciously called by God to be agents of his mission in the world but also the *exclusive* community of the saved.

In short, Scripture clearly states that all who believe and obey God's revelation are saved and that all who *reject* God's revelation remain under condemnation. In numerous texts (such as John 3), gospel exclusivists hear a judgment of those who do not believe, where Scripture is speaking only of those who *receive* the particular revelation, not of those who are ignorant through no fault of their own. In concurrence with a long tradition of New Testament interpretation, I understand Romans 2:12-16 to be a reference to Gentile God-fearers, who do not have the law of Moses but whom God will judge according to the law written on their hearts.

Examples of saved people outside the church are found in Acts. These include: the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27-39), and possibly Saul of Tarsus.[36] Cornelius is a particularly interesting case study and is probably the most important individual in the New Testament for the focus of this inquiry. Although he lived at the time of Jesus and became a Christian after Pentecost, Cornelius exemplifies the Gentiles who lived outside the community of the old covenant people of God but who worshipped their God. In Luke's narrative, we learn that he was a 'devout man who feared God', he 'gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God' (Acts 10:2); his 'prayers and alms' had 'ascended as a memorial before God' (Acts 10:4); and meeting him brought Peter to the realization that 'in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to him' (10:35).

In its context, the primary meaning of Peter's statement is that 'God is not prejudiced in restricting salvation to a particular nation'.[37] The critical question remains, however, whether Cornelius would have gone to be with Christ if he had died *before* his encounter with Peter. One line of gospel exclusivist interpretation asserts that he would have gone to hell. It hears a clear statement that Cornelius was not saved, in the instructions of the angel to Cornelius which told him that Peter would give him a message 'by which you and your entire household will be saved' (11:14). If one starts with a gospel exclusivist assumption, the salvation spoken about by the angel is identified as the experience which follows upon Peter's preaching; people are not saved, therefore, until they actually encounter Christ.[38]

Other gospel exclusivists, however, have proposed that Cornelius was saved before Peter arrived but that his case is exceptional.[39] But a problem is created for gospel exclusivism, by Aquinas, Calvin, Turretin and more recent exclusivists who follow this course: one 'exception' leaves us wondering whether there might be others.

Why should we not grant that someone today who had the faith of Abra-

36 Cf., *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 49-50, 54, 82, 98-99 and J. M. Everts. 'Conversion and Call of Paul', in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 162.

37 Bruce A. Demarest, 'General and Special Revelation: Epistemological Foundations of Religious Pluralism', in *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, 2nd ed., eds. Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce Winter (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 191. Cf., Carson, *Gagging of God*, 307.

38 Cf. Wells, *God the Evangelist*, 23; John R. Stott, "Dialogue, Encounter, Even Confrontation", in *Faith Meets Faith*, Mission Trends No. 5, eds. Gerald H Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 5:167; John Piper, *Jesus: The Only Way to God: Must You Hear the Gospel to Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 81-84, 87); Walter Kaiser, 'Holy Pagans', 139).

39 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q.10, a.4, ad3, cited by Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 114; John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, (commenting on Acts 10:4); *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Library of Christian Classics, vols. 19-20 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.17.4; Francis Turretin (*Institutes*, 1.4.19).

ham, and who could have no greater faith given his knowledge, would be saved? Once that principle is accepted, there is no good reason not to extend the reach of his saving grace to others who had the faith acceptable to God, though they lived, epistemologically, even prior to God's covenant with Abraham.[40]

The twelve disciples of John the Baptist whom Paul met in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7) provide a further interesting case.[41] The issue for us now is whether or not they were already 'saved' before receiving the Spirit of the risen Christ. My own conclusion is that these were old covenant believers who had received John's baptism of repentance but who had not been baptized in the name of Jesus, the one who would baptize them with the Spirit. They were even less knowledgeable concerning Messiah than the followers of Jesus who had gathered in the upper room, in Jerusalem, awaiting the gift of the Spirit. They typify the old covenant believer, after the epochal sending of the Holy Spirit, who has still not received the new covenant Spirit personally. When Paul had taught them further, they were baptized in the name of Jesus and, as the Spirit came upon them, they spoke in tongues and prophesied, just as the 120 had done on the day of Pentecost. This was, therefore, not an experience of subsequent baptism with the Spirit by people who had already been united with Christ by the indwelling of the Spirit. They had previously had an old covenant experience of the Holy Spirit's saving work, like that which John the Baptist had known, and they now moved personally into the new covenant experience of the Spirit and were united with the body of Christ, being baptized in his name.

The situation in Ephesus raises the question: 'When (if ever) does salvation cease to be possible for Jews with an Old Testament faith and for God-fearing Gentiles who do not know of Jesus?' J. N. D. Anderson asks: 'Might it not be true of the follower of some other religion that the God of all mercy had worked in his heart by his Spirit, bringing him in some measure to realize his sin and need for forgiveness, and enabling him, in the twilight as it were, to throw himself on the mercy of God?'[42] J. I. Packer responds to Anderson's question:

> The answer seems to be "yes." It might be true. Who are we to deny it? If ever it is true, such worshippers will learn in heaven that they were saved by Christ's death and that their hearts were renewed by the Holy Spirit. They will join the glorified Church in endless praise of the sovereign grace of God. Christians since the second century have hoped so, and perhaps Socrates and Plato are in this happy state even now. Who knows?[43]

40 Cf., R. W. F. Hootton, *Christianity and Other Faiths: An Evangelical Contribution to Our Multi-Faith Society* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), 24.

41 Terrance L.Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 197.

42 J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 101-02.

43 J. I. Packer, 'What Happens to People Who Die Without Hearing the Gospel?' *Decision*, January 2002, 11.

IX The importance of the church's missionary work

When expressing an accessibilist understanding of salvation, it is essential to underline the importance of the missionary obligation of the new covenant community. The church is empowered by the Spirit of the risen Christ, and given a commission to disciple the nations, by the Lord himself. It is God's *ordinary or normal* means of reaching the lost with the gospel message in response to which the Spirit elicits the faith in that Jesus that saves individuals and makes them part of the new covenant community of God's people through whom new covenant revelation reached them.[44]

Gospel exclusivists are afraid that an accessibilist understanding will cut the nerve of the church's evangelistic mission.[45] That concern is commendable, for it would be very sad if any teaching reduced the church's commitment to serve God energetically in his mission in the world. But, if gospel exclusivism is really a significant motivator, and if the New Testament authors were gospel exclusivists as those concerned believe, it is very surprising that the New Testament nowhere offers gospel exclusivism as motivation for evangelistic mission, despite frequent reference to the truths that *did* motivate the apostles to proclaim the gospel wherever and whenever they could.

Gospel exclusivists often seem to assume that if people can be saved through universal revelation, there is no need for Christian mission, but John Sanders rightly points out that although God does reach people through his witness in creation, 'he wants much more for their lives. He desires that we all receive the blessing that can come only through a personal relationship with Jesus.'[46] It is wrong to say that the whole episode in the house of Cornelius is 'superfluous if Cornelius already has salvation'.[47] It would, perhaps, be superfluous if eschatological salvation were God's only goal for people, but God not only wanted Cornelius to be 'acceptable' in old covenant terms, he wanted him to receive the new covenant gift of the Spirit and to become part of the new covenant people of God in which the wall between Jew and Gentile is broken down.

Paul's passion to 'win' as many as possible (1 Cor. 9:19-23) is instructive. Although the verb to 'win' has been taken to refer to Paul's goal of *converting* 'as many as possible' (v. 19), including Jews and Gentiles (vv. 20-21), it cannot refer only to their conversion, since in verse 22 he speaks of his aim of winning 'the weak', a designation which should be understood of Christians (rather than non-Christians; cf.

44 See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Vol. 1. Jesus and the Twelve*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 423-24.

45 Cf., Köstenberger, 'Gospel for All', 216.

46 John Sanders, 'Responses', in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?: Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 145.

47 Cf. William J. Larkin Jr., 'The Contribution of the Gospels and Acts to a Biblical Theology of Religions', in *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions*, Evangelical Missiological Society Series, no. 2, eds. Edward Rommen and Harold Netland (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1995), 281.

Rom 5:6) whose consciences trouble them about matters which are not in themselves wrong (cf. 1 Cor. 8). Paul's goal of winning Jews, Gentiles and weak Christians has to do with their full maturity in Christ and thus signifies *winning them completely*. To win Gentiles has to do with his ultimate purpose for them, namely, their being brought to perfection in Christ on the final day. Nothing short of this will fulfil Paul's ambitions for them. Similarly, his goal of winning 'weak' Christians has to do with their full maturity and blamelessness at the second coming.[48]

Paul's vision to see Christians brought to full maturity in Christ can obviously be extended to indicate the importance of bringing into the church those whom God has graciously reconciled to himself outside of the church, so that they can come to understand the glorious work of God's grace and grow to full maturity in Christ. It is, after all, one of the tasks of congregations of believers in Christ to nurture one another, through the gifts given to us by the Spirit, until we all grow up into the fullness of Christ.[49]

It is because 'God has summed up and concentrated the vastness of his grace in creation and Israel in his action in Jesus of Nazareth' that 'the whole world has a right of access to such grace. So generosity and love compel Christians to share the unsearchable riches of Christ.'[50] William Abraham therefore considers it to be 'only right that those who have already responded to the light of God that they have received outside the gospel should know of the true source of that light'. Such people 'should also have access to the full measure of God's grace and power, which is made available in Jesus Christ',[51] and, I would add, through the distinctive new covenant gift of the Holy Spirit which we receive as we are incorporated into the body of the risen Christ, the church.

We must not underestimate the importance of the formation of the church, as a community of those who are consciously endeavouring to be obedient to Christ in every avenue of life. Donald Macleod notes that those who are freed from sin by Christ's atoning work

> become themselves an irresistible force for social change. They can never themselves become oppressors of others; or be cowed into silence by the blusterings of earthly potentates. The saving grace which produces free individuals also produces free communities… . The Christian is free: free because Christ has died. It is the life lived out of this freedom (including our prophetic witness, our cross-bearing and our willingness to be nothing) which changes the sinful structures.[52]

This should bring home to us a

48 Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*. New Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 11, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 181.

49 William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 220-21.

50 Abraham, *The Logic*, 221.

51 Abraham, *The Logic*, 221.

52 Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*. Contours of Christian Theology. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 259.

dimension of God's purpose in the church's evangelistic mission which is missed if we focus only on the salvation of individuals and assume that our mission work is less important if God can save individuals without it. Wonderful things happen to communities which are transformed by the gospel, as they follow Christ together and seek to do his will socially, as well as personally. God does not only want to save individuals, he wants to build churches as communities which give the world a small foretaste of the shalom of God which is produced when the kingdom of God breaks into our history. The manifestation of God's gracious work in the life of these communities of the redeemed is itself a powerful witness to the world which longs for God's shalom, even when they are unable to name it.

X Conclusion

Summing up, I propose that a study of God's covenants, their purpose and their effect, provides us with a metanarrative that fits accessibilism better than gospel exclusivism. Salvation was objectively accomplished by Jesus the Christ, the second Adam, and the one in whom all God's covenant promises are fulfilled, so that God's great and gracious purposes for human redemption and cosmic restoration are brought to glorious completion. God formed a special people, the covenant community, particularly beginning with Abraham and on through the church. But membership in that community was never the boundary of God's redemptive work, and knowledge of the revelation which God had entrusted to that community, for the blessing of the world, was not necessary for the Spirit to create saving faith in the people's hearts.

Everyone lives under the administration of one of God's covenants and is judged by God according to the requirements pertaining to that covenant. Likewise, the faith that pleases God is the sort of response that God requires of a person with the particular knowledge and privilege with which he has graced that person. We whom God has blessed with the knowledge that enables membership in the covenant community must strive to bear witness to God's work in Christ, wherever we can, thereby being God's instruments in his work in the world. Much as we long for everyone to know, now, the joy of life in Christ and in his church, we can rejoice in hopefulness that God's saving work is even greater than the awareness of any of us.