

The Salvation of the Unevangelized: What the Literature Suggests

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I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS	2
III.	PLURALISM	3
IV.	INCLUSIVISM	4
A.	Middle Knowledge.....	6
B.	Eschatological Evangelization	6
IV.	EXCLUSIVISM	7
A.	Agnosticism	8
B.	Universal Evangelism - before death	8
VI.	FOUR PROPOSITIONS FOR CLASSIFYING POSITIONS	9
VII.	CONCLUSION	11
	SELECTED RELEVANT LITERATURE	13
	DESCRIPTIVE:	13
	INCLUSIVISM	13
	SUPPORTIVE	13
	OPERATIONAL	15
	EXCLUSIVISM	16
	SUPPORTIVE	16
	PLURALISM:	19
	DESCRIPTIVE	19
	MULTIPLE POSITIONS	19
	MISCELLANEOUS	19

I. INTRODUCTION

Theology of Religions and Open Theology are two areas that are currently being discussed and hotly debated within the evangelical community. These discussions have brought to the forefront an issue that the church has pondered almost from the beginning:

What about the salvation of the unevangelized?

The salvation of the unevangelized is also a personal issue for Christians in at least two ways:

- It is a question we have asked ourselves as we have pondered our own salvation. It is a question that is asked when we witness to others. And if we are involved in a teaching ministry this question invariably arises. It is a question that deserves an honest and compassionate answer.
- Second, we all have families, and unless you can trace an unbroken line all the way back to the Apostles, we have unevangelized family in our past. For people like myself, coming from a Western culture ancestral heritage is not a grave concern; but for many cultures it is an issue of utmost importance and can affect ones attitude toward Christianity and receiving the Lord.

The issue of the salvation of the unevangelized is emotional. As the title of one book phrased it: Through No Fault of Their Own.¹ It brings into question the “fairness” of God which at least in the United States has become a mantra of modern culture also a major concern of “post-modernist.”

How one answers the question of the salvation of the unevangelized will have a profound effect on how one practices missions.

The problem is that there are a bewildering and growing number of positions concerning the salvation of the unevangelized. Although there are three major positions (Pluralism, Inclusive, and Exclusivism) that seek to answer the question of the salvation of the unevangelized, multiple names are applied to these same positions. Some names are coined by a proponent of the position, other names are given by opponents and still others by those just seeking standardization. Also nuanced positions are being proposed as well.

The purpose of this study is to give some order to the current positions and clarify the relationships that exist between them.

II. DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

As we look at the key terms associated with the salvation of the unevangelized, it is good to keep in mind a quote from Douglas Geivett concerning this issue, “In regard to definitions, fuzziness seems to be part of the territory.”²

- “Pluralism” can be is defined as:
A belief that the major world religions provide independent salvific access to the divine Reality.³

Pluralism is also called Relativism, Universalism, and Normative Religious Pluralism.

- “Inclusive” can be defined as:
A belief that the unevangelized may be saved if they respond in faith to God based on the revelation they have.⁴

A belief that, because God is present in the whole world, God's grace is also at work in some way among all people, possibly even in the sphere of religious life. It entertains the possibility that religion may play a role in the salvation of the human race, a role preparatory to the gospel of Christ, in whom alone fullness of salvation is found.⁵

- “Inclusive” is also known by a growing number of names: Wider Hope and Accessibilism.
- “Middle Knowledge” can be defined as:
God will save those who *would* have accepted Christ if they had heard the opportunity of hearing the good news of salvation.⁶

Middle Knowledge is also called the “If” theory.

- Eschatological Evangelization can be defined as:
A belief that those who die unevangelized receive an opportunity for salvation after death. God condemns no one without first seeing what his or her response to Christ is.⁷

Eschatological Evangelization is also known as Future Probation, Second Probation, Postmortem Evangelism, PME, and Divine Perseverance (the name preferred by Gabriel Fackre).

- “Exclusivism” can be defined as:
A belief that Jesus is the only Savior for all humanity and that it is not possible to attain salvation apart from explicit knowledge of Him.⁸

Exclusivism is also known as Restrictivism, Particularism, Ecclesiocentrism, Epistemological Exclusivism, and Traditionalism.

- Agnosticism can be defined as:
A belief that the Bible is silent on the fate of the unevangelized.⁹
- Universal Evangelism (before death) can be defined as:
God is all powerful, and God wants everyone to be saved, therefore if a person is willing to accept Christ as Lord, God will find a way to give that person a way to do so¹⁰

III. Pluralism

John Hicks is of particular importance in understanding Pluralism, because he claims to have started out as a “fundamentalist”, a conservative evangelical, and has moved by stages to the point that he denies all the major doctrines¹¹. As an example:

“And no Atonement doctrine, in the sense of a theory about how God has been enabled to forgive our sins by the death of Jesus, is required, because Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer to approach God directly as our heavenly Father, and to ask for and expect to receive divine forgiveness without any mediator or atoning sacrifice.”¹²

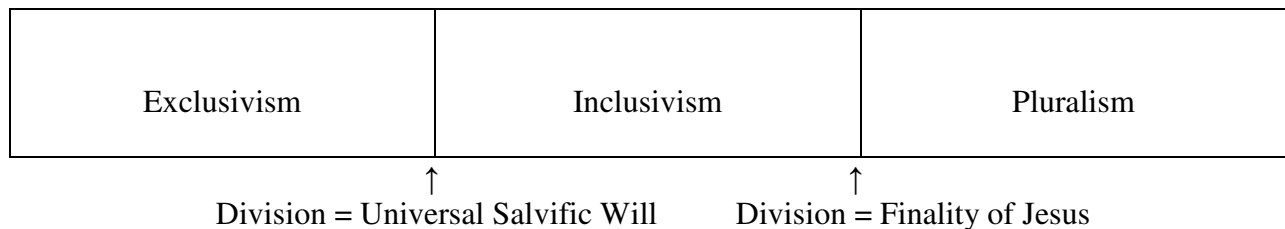
This quote also gives a sense of how Scripture is approached by this position. The Bible is just one of many sacred texts, and is useful if it helps you along the path to “Reality.”

IV. INCLUSIVISM

There are two theological axioms that provide the drive force for Inclusivism.

- God’s universal salvific will. 1 Timothy 2:3-4
This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.
- The particularity and finality of salvation only in Jesus. Acts 4:12
Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

Chart 1 - Inclusivism



God’s love for humanity is paramount and all of God’s other attributes pale in comparison. It appears that for the Inclusivist, God’s universal salvific will is the will of God.

Some of the key arguments that are presented by the Inclusivists to support their position are:

- **The Faith Principle**
People are accountable only for the light that they have. Since many have not heard the Gospel or about Jesus, they cannot be held accountable for not responding. Since God desires for all to be saved, He judges them on the light they do have which is in part general revelation. If they respond in a positive manner they will be saved on that basis. In spite of what Romans 1-3 implies, there are those who will respond appropriately and therefore be saved.
Biblical faith always has content, a belief in something. That content varies as God revealed more fully His plan of redemption. The content in the “Faith Principle” is nebulous in Inclusive.
- **Believer vs. Christian**
Believers are those who believe in God but have not yet heard or never have heard the Gospel or of Jesus Christ. Christians are those who have responded to the Gospel. Believers can become Christians, but even if they do not they will be in Heaven.

Many examples of these believers called “Pagan” Saints are presented. One of the primary examples from the Old Testament is Melchizedek. Others usually listed are Jethro and Job. The premier example comes from the New Testament in Cornelius. The problem with all the examples is that all had contact with special revelation in one way or another.

- Babies and those who are incapable of making a decision

Since it is assumed by many that when infants die they go to heaven because they were never able to make a decision for Christ, the Inclusivist asks why does this not hold true for all who die without being able to make a choice?

Since Scripture is virtually silent on the status of infants, it would not seem to be a firm foundation to build a case for the unevangelized. Inclusive also fails to see a difference between a baby who has never committed an evil act, and one who has repeatedly done so as an adult. Romans 2:15

Some of the Scriptures commonly used to support Inclusive:

John 12:32

But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.

(Does this mean all humans without distinction or all persons without exception?)

Acts 10:43

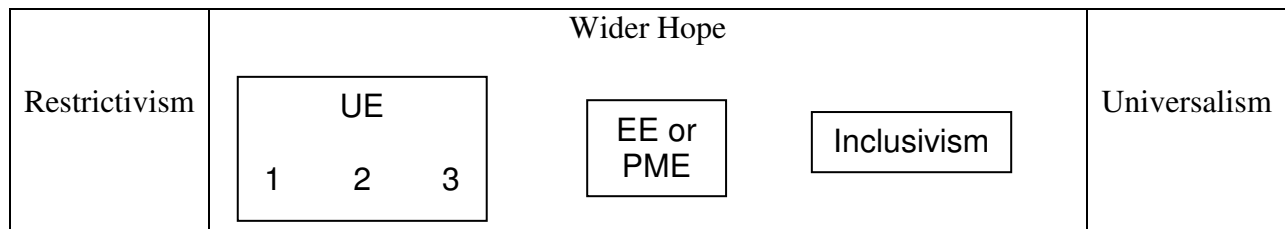
All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

1 Tim 4:10

...that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.

John Sanders includes a number of different positions that he classifies as falling under the classification of Wider Hope (see chart #2) of which Inclusive is one. Although he does acknowledge that not everyone would agree with where he placed them. We will examine two of these other positions: Middle Knowledge and Eschatological Evangelization

Chart 2 - John Sanders¹³



↑
Division = Universal Salvific Will

↑
Division = Finality of Jesus

Universal Evangelism - before death

1. God will sent the message
2. Universal opportunity at death (Roman Catholic)
3. Middle knowledge

Eschatological Evangelization (post-mortem evangelism)
Inclusivism

A. *Middle Knowledge*

God has knowledge of all that could happen, all that will happen, and all that would have happened. On the basis of the knowledge of what would have happened, God looks down through history and saves all those who would have believed in Christ had the gospel been presented to them. Therefore they can be saved without explicit knowledge of Christ.

The Scripture that is most sighted for this position is Matthew 11:21-23,

"Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."¹⁴

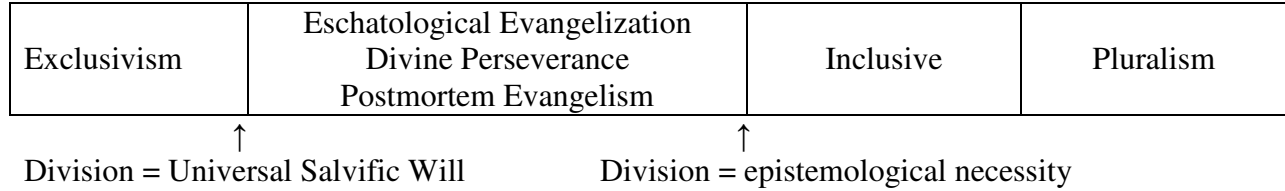
It seems to the authors that this passage applies more to the degree of punishment rather than the place of judgment.

B. *Eschatological Evangelization*

There are three premises underscore this position according to Gabriel Fackre:

- If "justification by faith" is at the heart of the matter, as Luther said, then God must make possible to all the response of justifying faith.
- And if "faith comes from what is heard", (Rom 10:17), then everyone must have the chance to hear the Word.¹⁵
- In *this* world, as well as the next, God does not give up on us.¹⁶

Chart 3 - Divine Perseverance by Gabriel Fackre



The Scriptures that are generally associated with this position are:

1 Peter 3:18-20

through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water,

Even Fackre agrees that this passage of Scripture is one of the most difficult in the New Testament to understand. Yet it is used as a foundational passage for this position.

1 Peter 4:6

For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.

John 5:25

I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

Ephesians 4:8-9

This is why it says:

"When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."

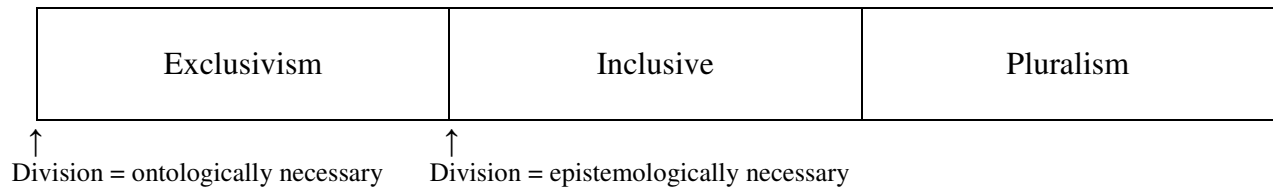
What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?

Fackre sees Eschatological Evangelization as a middle ground between Restrictivism and Inclusive. He believes in epistemological necessity like the Restrictivist and the overriding salvific will like the Inclusivist.

IV. EXCLUSIVISM

Since most of the alternative names for this position are given by those in opposition, we will use the term Particularism in the rest of this section.

Chart 4 – Exclusivism



Some of the Scriptures Particularists refer to:

John 14:6

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Acts 4:12

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

1 John 5:11-13

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

The Particularistic understands that these verses are normative for salvation.

Because Particularism is the majority position among evangelicals, it would be expected that there have been many nuanced positions within Particularism. This paper will examine just two of them: Agnosticism and Universal Evangelism - before death.

A. *Agnosticism*

There are some who are pessimistic about the fate of the unevangelized and some who are more optimistic, but in all cases the Scripture does not give us enough information know.

B. *Universal Evangelism - before death*

Some Particularists believe that God will use any means to impart the Gospel, natural or supernatural. (i.e. an angle, a vision, or a dream)

Other Particularists hold that God will somehow bring a human witness to share the Good News.

VI. FOUR PROPOSITIONS FOR CLASSIFYING POSITIONS

The four following propositions can be used to help determine which major position a person or a position can be classified under.

- A. Jesus Christ is ontologically necessary.
I.e. Is Jesus necessary for salvation to exist? Or does salvation exist outside of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?
- B. Jesus Christ is epistemologically necessary.
I.e. Does one need to know Jesus Christ to be saved? Does there need to be some minimal information required for one to be saved?

Ronald Nash has a very helpful chart (see chart 1)¹⁷ to view the results of the first two propositions.

Chart 5 - Ontological/Epistemological necessity

Characteristic	Position	Position		
		Exclusivism	Inclusive	Pluralism
Jesus Christ is the only Savior		Accept	Accept	Reject
No one can be saved unless he or she knows the information about Jesus' person and work contained in the Gospel and unless he or she exercises explicit faith in Jesus Christ		Accept	Reject	Reject

- C. One can be saved with knowledge of general revelation only.
I.e. Can a person look at creation and by recognizing there is a creator be saved? Or by recognizing they have a God given conscience come to salvation?

In theological circles, two types of revelation are recognized: general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is "God's self-manifestation through nature, history, and the inner being of the human person."¹⁸ Special revelation is "God's manifestation of Himself to particular people at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with Him."¹⁹

Chart 6 - General/Special Revelation

Characteristics	Proposition	Position		
		Exclusivism	Inclusive	Pluralism
One can be saved with knowledge of general revelation only		Reject	Accept	Accept
One cannot be saved with knowledge of general revelation only, must have special revelation		Accept	Reject	Reject

- D. There is salvific value in non-Christian religions.
 I.e. In a pluralistic world that has many religions with millions of followers, what can we say about them? Are they just fellowships of darkness? Are they human attempts at finding God? Are they altogether worthless? Or is God using them to draw the followers to Himself? Is there salvific value in other religions?

Chart 7 - Non-Christian religions Salvific/Non-salvific

Characteristic	Proposition	Position		
		Exclusivism	Inclusive	Pluralism
There is salvific value in non-Christian religions	Reject	Accept *	Accept	Accept
There is no salvific value in non-Christian religions	Accept	Reject	Reject	Reject

* there is a distinction made between a Strong Inclusivist position and a Weak Inclusivist position for a description of this: see “Misgivings” and “Openness”: A Dialogue on Inclusive Between R. Douglas Geivett and Clark Pinnock
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Pluralism in relation to the four defining propositions: Jesus is not ontologically necessary nor is He epistemologically necessary. Neither general nor special revelation carries any special significance other than providing a way to Reality. And of course other religions are salvific.

Inclusive and the four defining propositions: Jesus is ontologically necessary for the unevangelized because salvation is found in no one else, but He is not epistemologically necessary because God judges on the “Faith Principle”. General revelation is salvific again because of the “Faith Principle”. Since the unevangelized are accountable for the light they have and their only contact is with non-Christian religions, there may be some salvific properties in non-Christian religions.

This Middle Knowledge position’s answer to the four defining propositions: Jesus is ontologically necessary for the unevangelized are saved on the basis of Jesus’ death on the cross, but He is not epistemologically necessary since there is no knowledge of Christ or the Gospel needed for salvation. Since the unevangelized are not exposed to special revelation, they must respond to the light they have which is general revelation. Since the only contact the unevangelized have is with non-Christian religions, there must be some salvific properties.

Eschatological Evangelization’s relationship to the four defining propositions: Jesus is ontologically necessary for the unevangelized to be saved, and He is epistemologically necessary since they **must** have this knowledge before they can be judged. General revelation does not save and all **must** receive special revelation. Non-Christian religions are not salvific.

The four defining propositions as they apply to Particularism: Jesus is both ontologically and epistemologically necessary for the salvation of the unevangelized. General revelation is not salvific since knowledge of Jesus Christ can only come from special revelation therefore special

revelation is necessary for salvation. Because non-Christian religions do not have special revelation they are not salvific.

VII. Conclusion

As we have seen, there are a number of positions to the question regarding the salvation of the unevangelized.

Pluralism saves the unevangelized at the cost of all things uniquely Christian. Jesus Christ must be removed as the Incarnate God, the Savior of the world and placed along side the other great human spiritual gurus. As a result missions becomes not only unnecessary but counter-productive. I believe the price is too high. It may “save” others but it costs us our salvation.

The missiological implications of Pluralism are revolutionary. There may be the rare religion that is not redemptive but missions as we know it, is not necessary, in fact it is counter-productive. It alienates and offends our brothers and sisters. It is imperialistic and arrogant. It is proud and not humble. At best, missions should be about improving the lives of others.

Inclusivism teaches us that there are many brothers and sisters among the unevangelized. They are not aware of it and most of us are not aware of it either. Nonetheless, it is true. So why should we take the Gospel to those who are already believers? While the Inclusivists tell us we should go because the unevangelized believers do not enjoy the full benefits of their salvation, neither do they suffer the persecution they would have as Christians. Should we not follow the principle laid out for us in Matthew 13:24-30 about the weeds among the wheat, and wait until the harvest lest we destroy some of the wheat?

What are the missiological implications from the prospective of Inclusive? The Inclusivist would say that there are no changes. Jesus’ command to go has not changed. But really, how can it not change? We already have to make hard choices about the best way to use the resources we have. Is it not human nature to rationalize that if a certain people are “closed” to missions that we can use our resources elsewhere have instead of seeking a way “open” these people to the Gospel? After all they will be saved by the light they have.

What will happen to the unevangelized if they should encounter a Christian but reject the Gospel based on ethnic or cultural difficulties with the Christian? Would it not be better to leave them as believers and not force them to become Christians?

Eschatological Evangelization assures us that there are no unevangelized, everyone will hear the Gospel sooner or later. And if later they will hear it in heaven. And who wants to compete with that?

This assurance comes on a very questionable interpretation of a most difficult passage. It does this by denying a majority held view that death ends our ability to choose.

When anticipating the question on the missiological implications of Eschatological Evangelization, Fackre writes “Doesn’t eschatological evangelization cut the nerve of mission? The answer is a resounding ‘No!’”²⁰

But really how can it not affect missions? If everyone will be given a chance to hear the Gospel after death, then why make the sacrifices necessary to go? One could even rationalize further “Who would be a better witness, an imperfect human witness or the Lord of Heaven and Earth?”

Particularism holds that at best we do not know for sure what God might do about the unevangelized. But unless they hear the Gospel and receive Jesus Christ as their Savior they have no hope. We do not do teach this with any joy but only because we believe this is made abundantly clear in Scripture. Particularism humbles us because but for the grace of God we would be part of the unevangelized. Particularism also causes us to prayerfully ask the Lord what can I do to make sure there are no unevangelized on my watch.

Historically, Particularism has been the motivating factor for missions. Since the unevangelized have no hope without hearing the Gospel, then it is imperative that we obey the command of our Lord to make disciples. That work is not complete, it is new every generation. We go because we love our Lord and we have urgency because they cannot believe until they hear.

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