

Christ – the only way

Is Salvation through conscious faith in Christ necessary for all?

Introduction

Of all of my theological studies, I am hoping that I am totally wrong in relation to two of them. This may sound a strange thing to say, but it is true.

I hope that my belief that salvation can only be found in Christ through expressing faith in a Christ who is known and His finished work, and that there is simply no other way for any other being on this planet to be saved, is wrong! What I mean is this. As a human being I have concern for my fellow men. It is my wish, therefore, that every single person that has ever been born into this life will eventually be saved. I would dearly like the teaching on universal salvation to be correct and that I am wrong in saying that unless a person has expressed repentance towards God and faith in the Christ – of whom they have heard - they cannot be saved.

The other doctrine that I hope is wrong is that which teaches the eternal torment in hell for all those who have not accepted Christ by faith. I would dearly like to be wrong on this doctrine and that those who teach annihilation are correct. I hate the thought that sinners will suffer for eternity.

It is for this reason that I have set myself to undertake a personal study of these two subjects. Within this paper I intend to address the first, namely that salvation can only be found through a conscience acknowledgement of Christ in whom saving faith is rested. It is my belief that unless a person repents before God and with full awareness of what they are doing, express faith in Christ and His finished work on the cross they cannot be saved. Furthermore, it is my view that God has no other means of saving individuals from whatever part of the planet they may live; irrespective of whether they have heard of Christ or not; that mission is of utmost importance if those who have never heard of Christ are to be saved.

These are bold statements to make in view of some of the teachings of some theologians (and evangelicals) today where the reverse is being stated. As I understand, there are three possible groups of theological thinking in relation to the doctrine of salvation.

First, there are those who proclaim an Exclusive Gospel. This group comprises evangelicals who believe that there is only one method of salvation and that is through repentance towards God and a conscious faith in a Christ who has been preached to them. In this case Christ must be the object of one's attention and in order to be able to express this saving faith some degree of knowledge is needed. This knowledge has to reside in Jesus Christ. There is, therefore, according to this group, no salvation outside of a conscious calling upon the name of Jesus.

Secondly, there are those who proclaim a Pluralist Gospel. For them the major religions of the world contain the potential for individual salvation without the need for evangelisation. Pluralism maintains that all religions are equally effective in bringing salvation to various groups irrespective of the preaching of Christ. Indeed, the preaching of the Gospel of Christ is not needed. Truth and salvation cannot be

considered to be the exclusive possession of any one religion. God is interested in *believers* not necessary *Christians*.

The third group comprises those who teach an Inclusive Gospel. Roughly, the teaching here is that one does not need to know about Jesus or express faith consciously in Christ at all. God, in some way, it is suggested, uses the various great religions of the world to bring people to faith in Himself. This is especially effective where Christ is not known. God is ever present in the world's religions and can be known and encountered through these non-Christian traditions and teachings. Salvation is through the death and resurrection of Christ but this message does not have to be known in order for an individual to be saved.

Inclusivism teaches that even though the work of Christ is the only means of salvation, it does not follow that explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary in order for one to be saved. In contrast to pluralism, inclusivism agrees with exclusivism in affirming the particularity of salvation in Jesus Christ. But unlike exclusivism, inclusivism holds that an implicit faith response to general revelation can be a means of salvation. God expects from man a response proportional to the light given. Saving faith is not characterised so much by its knowledge content as it is by its reverent quality.

In support of this position the following arguments are offered:

- Romans 2 indicates that there are justified law-doers without exposure to the Law--law-doers not in the sense of sinless perfection, but in the sense of the obedience of those in Romans 2:7,9.
- Passages such as Acts 4:12 indicate the ontological necessity of Christ's work, but not knowledge of that work.
- People like Cornelius and Melchizedek show that one can be a God-fearer who pleases God, in right relationship, before hearing special revelation.
- That infants who die are saved, without respect to faith or lineage (something that almost all proponents of exclusivism hold), shows that special revelation is not absolutely necessary for salvation.
- That God is loving and good infers that God would save the unevangelised.
- It would be unjust of God to damn those without knowledge of the gospel.

It is said that *corporate inclusivism*... argues that the non-Christian religions mediate the work of Christ. It then follows that *private inclusivism* contends that one who is accepted by God apart from the preaching of the Gospel is saved in spite of whatever religion to which he may be an adherent. His religious orientation plays no part in his salvation and in fact is a definite hindrance. The non-Christian's ignorant beliefs, if sincere, have no positive role in his relationship with God.

This is all to do with the problem of the unevangelised peoples of the world. It also operates on the premise that God desires all men everywhere to be saved. The question is this, "*How does one equate this supposed desire of God with the many millions of people who never hear about Christ or have had the opportunity to respond consciously to Him*".

C.S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity* wrote the following. "*There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ*

without knowing it. For example, a Buddhist of good will may be led to concentrate more and more on the Buddhist teaching about mercy and to leave in the background (though he might still say he believed) the Buddhist teaching on certain other points. Many of the good Pagans, long before Christ's birth may have been in this position. And always, of course, there are a great many people who are just confused in mind and have a lot of inconsistent beliefs all jumbled up together.

The issue that must be faced is whether there are many and varied ways in which God communicates with those who have never heard of Christ, or is a conscious expression in a learned Christ the only way of salvation? This becomes a significant issue when considering mission. If, as the Pluralists say, all religions portray something of God's revelation to which people can respond without actually needing to be confronted with the Gospel of Christ, we must ask ourselves whether it is right to continue with missions. If we continue to present the Gospel to those who are seeking "God" through their own religions, is it not dangerous to present them with the Gospel, thereby running the risk of them rejecting Christ? Would it not be safer to leave people within their own belief systems? In my view, the same can be said for the supporters of the Inclusive Gospel.

Inclusivism states that God looks for "faith" and not "knowledge". It believes that God is at work in the lives of all people who are reaching out to him based on the truth they have, and their understanding him, given their particular circumstances and understanding. The fundamental premise is that God desires all men to be saved.

Does the NT teach that people need to hear the Gospel to be saved?

a) Some alternative views.

The position held by the exclusive is that salvation can only take place through a conscious trust in Christ and that this must stem from the preaching of the Gospel. It stands opposed to those who claim that people do not necessarily need to hear of Christ and respond to Him directly by faith. It is argued by some that people can respond to God's general revelation of Himself that appears in nature; these folk do not need the special revelation of God that is presented to us through the scriptures. The following scriptures are used in this argument, Romans 1:19-21, "...since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" and Romans 10:18 "But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: "Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world". It is argued that God has revealed Himself through nature for the sake of those who cannot, and will never, hear the preached Gospel of Christ. Through His divine mercy He uses these means to save the lost from many primitive parts of the world.

In support of this it is stated that people were saved in the Old Testament, before Christ, by general revelation. It is then concluded that if Israel had a form of Christianity but without its content and, through their own limited understanding, they found salvation, can this method not be extended to those who have never heard the Gospel.

One of the shortcomings of this viewpoint is that Paul's argument in Romans 1 seems to be that in spite of God's general revelation, mankind chooses to reject God, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although

they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom 1:21-23). Furthermore, all those saved in the Old Testament were reached by God's special revelation. It was for this reason that God sent Jonah to Nineveh. If general revelation was sufficient for the knowledge of the one true God, and if Assyria's religions were Yahweh's means of salvation, then Jonah's missionary endeavours were superfluous. Yahweh's struggle with this reluctant prophet appears to be unnecessary.

Furthermore, there would have been no need for God to give to Israel the complex sacrificial system if He could be found through general revelation. Israel needed a significant amount of special revelation for their sins to be addressed. God did not merely leave it to individuals to seek for Him through nature – He purposely revealed Himself through Moses on Sinai. The books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy bear witness to this special revelation.

Additionally, all other religions were considered to be in opposition to Israel's God. The prophets never accepted Baal worship as an alternative to belief in Yahweh. Other religions were mocked by Isaiah in a very vivid fashion (see Isaiah 44:9-20). There is no indication in the writings of any of the prophets that God revealed Himself through the various religions or idols of the nations. The reverse is true. Yahweh speaks through Isaiah and claims, *"Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other"* Isaiah 45:22.

It may be said that general revelation through nature is sufficient to leave mankind without excuses, but it is ineffective to bring men and women to salvation. As Paul points out, people always restrain the truth – they do not want it and refuse to believe it; *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness"* (Rom 1:18).

Alternatively, it might be suggested that God is able to communicate the Gospel of Christ to an individual who has never heard the Gospel from a preacher, Christian or missionary. This argument could be based on Galatians 3:8, *"The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you"*. The Greek word προευαγγελίζομαι (proeuangelizomai) signifies *"preaching the Gospel in advance"*.

Yahweh Himself became the evangelist and Abraham the only person in the congregation. This was truly a *"one-to-one"* witnessing without the means of a human preacher. What we have here is the absence of any human being witnessing to the Gospel and Yahweh's own choice to give direct communication with Abraham. Is it possible, therefore, that God could accomplish the same kind of announcement of the Gospel to people in lands where the Gospel has not been preached? Furthermore, on the basis of this scripture, is it possible that God could communicate the Gospel, calling for a response, to anyone who might be intellectually unable to comprehend the Gospel through mental disability or age?

If one wanted to give an affirmative answer to these questions it would have to be based on the argument that the OT era itself has not finished and that God continues to operate on the same basis during these *"last days"* of the NT era. Within the narratives of the OT there are many accounts of activities of God that were only done once and no more, and without any indication of their repetition. For example, there has only ever been one single Exodus from Egypt, we do not anticipate this being repeated; there was only one building of the Tabernacle – this will not be repeated; there was only one giving of the Law at Sinai – this will not happen again. On and on

throughout the OT we find God involving Himself in people's lives in the most unique manner without any indication of a repetition. This is where one has to be very careful when reading the OT narratives and seeking to make spiritual applications to current daily living. Because God did something unique in the past, it does not mean that He continues to do the same today.

The circumstances in which God communicated the Gospel to Abraham (Genesis 12:3) were clearly unique and presented the commencement of God's choice of Israel. Abraham, called from Ur of the Chaldeans, was to become the Father of a nation, and also to be the Father of all the Gentiles who would believe in Christ. This was not an ordinary situation where one person is being "*brought to Christ*", as it were. This is the inauguration of the great Messianic history that would culminate in Christ's atonement and the Gospel being preached within the entire world. This was clearly a most unique occurrence and cannot, therefore, be taken to signify God's normal process of communication.

As we are not told within the pages of the NT that it is normal and usual for God to communicate the Gospel to those who have never heard it would be improper to build a doctrine or belief system upon this statement in Galatians. Of course, as this does not rule out the possibility of God's ability to communicate Himself in this fashion, it also does not prove that it is His chosen means. I suggest that if we decide that God does preach the Gospel to individuals privately without external preaching or witnessing, it would greatly affect our belief in mission and cast doubt upon the absolute necessity of preaching and ministry.

b) Christ – the turning point.

When Jesus Christ appeared the Old Testament era came to a close. This was dramatically demonstrated through the tearing of the Temple curtain when Jesus died on the cross. It is also amplified through the teaching of Hebrews which points out repeatedly that everything in Christ is so much "*better*" than that which was found in the Old Testament.

When Paul, who was an apostle to the Gentiles, addresses the issue of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles he emphasises the point that faith in Christ alone is God's chosen method of salvation. In Ephesians chapter three Paul keeps on talking about a "*mystery*". In NT times a "*mystery*" was not anything like a puzzle, something that is difficult to solve, or a secret. It signifies something that had been hidden for a long time but had now become revealed. Indeed, the term "*mystery*" is very closely related to "*revelation*". God has something that He had not fully made known during the OT days, but which He was now making known.

Between verses 3 and 9 in the third chapter of Ephesians, Paul he uses the word "*mystery*" four times. First of all he tells us that he has been given divine insight into this "*mystery*" (3:3 & 4). Then, in verse 6 he tells us clearly what this "*mystery*" is all about, "*This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus*". The "*mystery*" is all about the Gentiles, those non-Jewish nations, becoming part of the Church.

Whilst the OT did convey something of this truth from Abraham onwards (Genesis 12:3 "*...in you all the families of the earth will be blessed*"; see also Isaiah 19:16-25, and note that this latter passage provides a graphic prophecy of Ephesians 3:3-4,6) the actual inclusion of the Gentiles in such large numbers did not take place until the

NT era. It was “*hidden*” as a mystery (3:9), but has now come to full fruition through the preaching of the Gospel. This is now the fulfilment of all those OT prophecies and promises stemming from the words given to Abraham in Genesis 12. It is interesting to note that the OT does not contain anything like the “*Great Commission*” of Matt 28:19-20.

Notice the way Paul shows how the Gentiles are to become part of the Church shared with the saved Jews. It is “*through the Gospel*”. The Gentiles do not enter the Kingdom of God through their own religions, or through general revelation, or through God meeting them in their pagan ceremonies and rites. It is only “*through the Gospel*”. The whole sentence reads, “*This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus*”. The Greek word translated “*through*” is διὰ which means “*through, by way of; or the instrument used to accomplish a thing; by means of; with the help of anything*”. The preached Gospel, i.e., the good news about Jesus Christ, is the system that God has chosen for the inclusion of all the Gentiles. There is simply no other system.

A similar statement occurs in Romans 16:25-26, “*Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him....*” Notice again how Paul speaks clearly of this “*mystery*” that was once “*hidden for long ages*”, i.e., throughout the years of the OT. What is this “*mystery*”? It is that “*all nations might believe and obey him (Jesus)*”.

Although this “*mystery*” which relates to the Gentiles was “*hidden*”, it was “*made known through the prophetic writings*”. In other words, this “*mystery*” was not completely hidden for it was portrayed in the writings of the OT prophets. But, it was not widely known, neither was it brought into operation. During the OT the Gentile nations were often mentioned as being part of Yahweh’s plans and kingdom, but there was never any large scale mission to the Gentiles. It is only now, since the death and resurrection of Christ that this mission is being made effective.

The words that come at the beginning of this statement are also very important. It is here that Paul speaks of the “*my Gospel*” and the “*proclamation of Jesus Christ*”. The reason why this Gospel must be proclaimed is so that the “*nations*” might come to consciously “*believe*” in Christ and “*obey Him*”.

Furthermore, the words in verse 26, “*but now*” show that there has been a turning point in the coming of Christ. It tells us that in the former times matters were operating in a certain way, “*but now*” it is different. We have entered into a new era following the death and resurrection of Christ. God is now doing a new thing. It is the time now for all nations to hear the Gospel and believe in Jesus.

It is interesting to note that these words in Romans 16:25-26 are very similar to chapter 1:5 where Paul begins his letter. In chapter 1:5 he said, “*Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith*”. Paul saw his mission to the Gentiles as one in which he would call people from all nations to a point of conscious belief and obedience to Christ. Sandwiched in between 1:5 and 16:25-26 is his Gospel message, the very message that he brought to the Gentiles.

c) Things are now different

"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:30-31).

What is the meaning and the significance of the words "*in the past...but now*"? Paul seems to be saying that "*in the past*" (τοὺς μὲν οὖν χρόνους, lit, "*on the one hand therefore, these times...*").... "*but now*" (νῦν. Whilst there is no "*but*" there is a contrast portrayed in this sentence) things are different. Something has brought about a distinctive change. God is not acting in the same way that He was in the past. The "*past*" are the days of the OT and the "*but now*" period constitutes the NT era.

A similar expression showing that the NT has ushered in a new era occurs in the statement, "*the last days*" (Acts 2:17). This implies that the OT constitutes "*the former days*". We must see biblical history in these two distinct periods. Hebrews 1:1-2 says the same, "*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son....*" Notice the contrast between "*In the past God...*" and "*but in these last days...*". Things are now different! What things?

Acts 2 and Hebrews 1 present two very distinct changes – one is the coming of the Spirit and the other is the revelation through Jesus Christ. In Acts 17:30-31 however, Paul refers to another distinctive change.

The change here is between "*the times of ignorance*" that God overlooked in the past and His presence command that "*all people everywhere should repent*". This "*times of ignorance*" refers to the Gentile nations in the OT which were ignorant of Him and His salvation. The phrase does not mean that God "*overlooked*" the sins of the nations. It is only their "*ignorance*" that He overlooked.

Very rarely in the OT were Gentiles reached with the message of salvation. We have already looked at Jonah, but added to the people of Nineveh we can include individuals such as Rahab; Ruth; Bathsheba, and Nebuchadnezzar. There were probably many others, but the list was short. In general, the nations were totally ignorant of Yahweh and His grace. These were the "*times of ignorance*".

When Paul says that "*God overlooked*" these times of ignorance it cannot mean that He did not judge the nations for their sins. The prophetic writings of the OT and the teaching in Romans 1 where Paul speaks of God pouring out His wrath, shows that God did judge and deal with their sins (e.g. see the book of Nahum).

God's overlooking refers to His call to the nations to repent. He did not commission Israel in the same sense as He did to the early disciples in Matthew 28; the Gentiles were not called upon to repent and believe as there was no universal preaching to the nations commissioned by God. Yahweh did, however, command Israel to be a "*light to the nations*" (46:7 "*I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth*"). The nation of Israel was to be a witness so that the surrounding nations could see something of Yahweh within their lifestyle and obedience; "*...observe them (the laws) carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we*

pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?"

However, entering into the NT era things are now different. Now, God "*commands all people everywhere to repent*". Notice the phrase, "*all people everywhere*". The NT has been the turning point where God begins to focus upon the Gentiles. It is the turn of the Gentiles. God is now commanding that people from every nation, language, culture, and religion, to turn to Him in repentance.

It is for this reason that Paul was found preaching to these very religious Greeks in Athens. He could not leave them in ignorance, worshipping their idols. Even the altar to the "*unknown God*" was an idol for this was a part of their polytheistic religion. The Gentiles must hear the Gospel about Jesus and so he proclaims "*righteousness by a man*" and the "*resurrection*", calling upon people to repent. They had to repent by turning from their idols to trust in the only true God.

d) God's choice of Gospel preaching to save

1 Corinthians 1:21 "*For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe*".

Preaching the Gospel was not an invention of the Church. It was God-ordained. It was He who decided that "*through wisdom*" He would not be found or known and that only through the preaching of the Gospel, however "*foolish*" it might appear, to save the lost. God Himself chose that He would never be found outside the Gospel preaching however advanced a particular religion; however wise a philosophy; however devoted and sincere an individual. It is not as though the "*exclusives*" decided to limit the power or wisdom of God in salvation, or that they sought to exclude other religions from being valid means of gaining access to God. God Himself chose the method of preaching the Gospel as the means of salvation.

Notice the emphasis in the words, "*what was preached*". It is not the actual act of preaching, but what is preached that is used by God to save. The Greek has κηρύγματος which is a genitive noun from the nominative κήρυγμα. The AV has translated this word as a verb, but this is corrected by the New King James Version and becomes, "*the message preached*".

It is agreed amongst scholars that the κήρυγμα (kerugma) consists of the basic fundamentals of the Gospel message. This means that it is only by means of the message itself, a message heard and understood and then accepted in the heart, that is the system chosen by God to save men and women.

It is also worth remembering that Paul wrote these words to a Church comprising Greeks as well as Jews. And the message that he preached was "*Jesus Christ and Him crucified*" (1 Cor 2:2). Irrespective of whether the cross was an "*offence*" to the Jews or "*foolishness*" to the Greeks (1 Cor 1:23), Paul preached this message. He did not change his message to suit his hearers thinking that God could just as easily reach the Greeks through their own religious pantheon or philosophy. No, for Paul there was only one single means of salvation and that was through expressing faith in a Christ that was preached and heard.

The last words of Jesus echoes this same teaching. Luke 24:46-47, *“He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem’”*.

Not only does Jesus tell His disciples that they must go to *“all the nations”* and that they must preach, but He also gives them the message that they are to take, *“repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name”*. There is no indication that the nations can manage on their own with their religions or that God will communicate with them through their religions.

On the contrary, there are some significant Greek words used in these verses which show that it is vitally important for the Gospel to be preached amongst the nations. Three infinitive verbs are used here, παθεῖν (pathein *to suffer*); ἀναστῆναι (anastēnai *to rise*) κηρυχθῆναι (keruchthēnai *to preach*). The infinitives are known as *“infinitives of purpose”* and are quite common to NT Greek. With this in mind we can re-translate the verses to read, *“This is what is written: Christ is to suffer and to be raised from the dead on the third day, and in His name, repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be preached”*. The preaching of *“repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* is written in the same way that Christ was to suffer and rise again. Just as it was purposed that Christ was to suffer and rise again, so it was purposed that the message of repentance and forgiveness should be preached in the nations.

e) A case history – Cornelius (Acts 10 & 11)

It is possible to misunderstand the case of Cornelius and gain the impression that anyone who does good and has a modicum of respect for God (10:2) can be regarded as a Christian. This is particularly evident in the light of verses 34-35, Then Peter began to speak: *“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right”*. The question is this; *“How can we understand this statement in the light of the exclusives’ claims?”* Many will conclude, from this passage, that it is unnecessary to evangelist other nations because they may already possess a saving knowledge of God and there may be among them people who *“fear God”* and *“do what is right”*.

In the first place, Luke, the writer of this narrative, clearly does not expect us to consider Cornelius as being already saved and to be a Christian prior to hearing Peter’s sermon. In chapter 11:14 we read, *“He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved’”* (underlining mine). This is Peter’s explanation of what had happened to the Elders in Jerusalem.

Furthermore, it is not the angel who brings the Gospel to Cornelius, as he is told to send for Peter who will tell him a message by which he will be saved. If God has alternative methods of salvation, surely, it would have been much easier for the angel to do the work and leave Peter to minister elsewhere.

Peter clearly believed that Cornelius needed to hear the Gospel message and be saved. He did not consider Cornelius to be a Christian because of his generosity and his fear of God because the message that he was to bring to Cornelius was one through which he *“will be saved”*. It is a future verb that is used. Cornelius was not already a Christian – he had to hear the message and then respond to it. He was a man, for all his religious interest, who needed to be saved. He had to hear the words,

"everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (10:43).

When Peter concluded his report to the Jerusalem Elders they all responded by with these words, "*When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).* These folk did not already possess eternal "life"; they had to be converted in order to receive this new life.

It would also appear that even a "*devout man*" (10:2) needed to hear the Gospel and be saved through responding in repentance and faith. At the day of Pentecost many "*devout*" (Acts 2:5) Jews had to hear the Gospel message and "*repent*" (Acts 2:38). Indeed, the term "*devout*" is a translation of the Greek εὐσεβής which means, "*godly*", describing a manner of life lived reverently and respectfully toward God. The Church actually began with these "*godly*" men and women who subsequently had to repent and believe the Gospel.

However, the question still remains; what does Peter mean when he says, "*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right*" (Acts 10:34-35)? A literal rendering of the Greek might read like this, "*Truly, God does not treat one person better than another, but amongst every ethnic group the one who is fearing him and working righteousness is acceptable*".

We must keep in mind the significance of this particular passage. Here, for the first time (except in the case of the Ethiopian, Acts 8) was the Gospel being preached and received by Gentiles. It took a powerful vision to Peter and a lot of explanation given to the Elders spanning two chapters in Acts, for the Church to realise the fact expressed in 11:18, "*When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."* Although Jesus had told the disciples that the Gospel must be preached "*to all nations beginning from Jerusalem*" (Luke 24:47) it took a long time before the Church woke up to the reality of this part of the divine commission.

All through this narrative the most prominent factor is that God has a saving interest in the Gentiles. This is the significance of the words of God spoken to Peter following the vision, "*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean*" (Acts 10:18). Later, when Peter arrives at the house of Cornelius, he repeats these words which, obviously, had had such a profound effect upon him, He said to them: "*You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean*" (10:28). Peter and his friends are all taken by surprise at this event and exclaims, "*The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles*" (10:45). Again, notice the emphasis which is placed on the term "*Gentiles*". Later, we read that Peter defaulted on this issue when, through fear, he went against what he had learned (Gal 2:11-14).

When we come, then, to the words of verses 34-35, "*When Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right"*, again the main emphasis here is not upon the words, "*who fear him and do what is right*", but the opening words, "*God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation*". Peter, is therefore, saying that anyone who comes to God through a saving knowledge of Christ ("*fears Him*") and then leads a life of holiness ("*does what is right*") is then "*acceptable*" to

Him. In other words, you don't have to be a Christian-Jew to be accepted by God; you can be a Christian-Gentile and be acceptable to God! The Gospel is open to anyone from any nation or ethnic background. The important point in the statement is this, "*God does not show partiality*". There is no favourite nation.

f) There is "no other name" by which we may be saved (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.*" In the Greek this sentence has three negatives. Literally, it reads like this, "*There is no salvation in another person, not one, for neither is there a different name under heaven, given among men in which we must be saved*". A little bit clumsy, but it makes the point and shows the three negatives contained in this sentence. This is not meant to be a positive statement; rather it is making an important negative point, showing that salvation cannot be found anywhere else other than in the name of "*Jesus*" (vs 11).

It is as if the writer of Acts, living in a polytheistic world, was aware that people might imagine that they could by-pass the Gospel and rest upon their own religions. So he makes a powerful negative comment to show that men and women must not look anywhere else for their salvation other than in Jesus. Peter utters these words to the Jewish leaders, the ones who were rejecting Christ. Peter made no attempt to protect himself by telling the Jews that they were quite safe within their own belief system as there were many different ways to God. No, Peter is definite as he presents his apologetics.

Why are negative statements important? A positive statement does not necessarily presuppose a negative; but a negative does point towards a positive. If we held that salvation is to be found in Christ this does not necessarily rule out other religions as a mean of salvation. We are in need of as many negative statements as positive ones. For example, it was necessary for Jesus to state negatively, "*No man comes to the Father but by me*" (John 14:6). The first part of the text gives us the positive "*I am the way, the truth and the life*", but to emphasis the point that salvation cannot be found in any other person or name, Jesus has to state the negative. We need both.

An important term within this verse is, the "*name*". In the Bible, "*the name*" stood for the person himself. Something that was carried out in someone's name (as it is today) was done as if the person did it himself. So, in this verse, although it is not mentioned, the "*name*" must refer to Jesus Himself; thus "*name*" becomes a substitute for "*Jesus*". Note that following Peter's preaching the Jewish leaders forbade him to preach or teach "*in the name of Jesus*" (vs 18). Then, again in 5:28 the leaders repeat their warning, "*We strictly charged you not to teach in this name...*".

Therefore, when salvation is said to be in the "*name*", it is a definite reference to the Person of Jesus. On the other hand, when it says that "*there is no other name*" it is make the point that salvation cannot be found in any other person. As a consequence, it is the "*name of Jesus*" that must be preached so that people can be saved. Our text makes a negative statement, but, as stated before, a negative can imply a positive. The strong implication here is that if salvation cannot be found in any other "*name*" it must be found in the "*name of Jesus*".

The New Testament makes much of salvation through the "*name*" and in each case clearly refers to Jesus. For example, Acts 2:21 "*And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*"; Acts 10:43 "*All the prophets testify about him that*

everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name"; Romans 10:13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

The importance here is that the "*name*" of Jesus must be invoked for salvation. It is a "*name*" that must be known and must become the object of one's personal attention. The "*calling*" on the name demonstrates the need for a conscious awareness of Jesus and a positive response.

g) Preaching Jesus is God's only chosen method to save the lost

If salvation is through calling upon the name of Jesus, and this is the only means that scripture lays down as the way of salvation, it follows that preaching Jesus is of absolute necessity. Paul presents us with a very reasonable argument for the necessity of preaching the Gospel message, "*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*" Rom 10:14-15.

Notice the sequence of thought where one leads to another. Given that it is imperative for people to call upon the name of Jesus for salvation, it follows that this would become impossible if they have "*not heard*" about Jesus. And then it is not possible for anyone to hear about Jesus unless someone goes and preaches to them, and these preachers need to be *sent*.

Paul's reasoning does not stop here. He goes on to point out that "*faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ*" Romans 10:17. This "*faith*" that leads to salvation arises from the action of the message of Christ being preached and subsequently the "*hearing*" of the message. If there is any doubt as to what has to be heard, Paul makes it plain, "*the word of Christ*". Notice how he mentions "*hearing*" twice in this verse – "*hearing the message...heard through the word of Christ*". It is for this reason that Paul emphasises the need for the preaching of the Gospel of Christ.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the object of the hearing that leads to salvation is "*Christ*". There can be no salvation without this calling upon the name of Christ and so the message of Christ must be that which is heard. It is not possible to assume that one can call upon God for salvation without hearing about Christ. It also follows that no one can hear about Christ or meet with Him without His message being preached. It rules out completely the concept that someone can come to faith in Christ without hearing about Him or through their own personal religion.

So, these three go together and cannot be separated: preaching the Gospel, hearing the Gospel, and responding to the Gospel.

In support of the need for the Gospel to be preached as God's means of reaching the unevangelised, I wish to return to Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 1:21 become very appropriate; "*For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe*". The context shows that God can never be known through the "*wisdom*" of man (vs 21a). This is a very significant statement.

Since God has decided that He will not be known through the ingenuity of man one might be led to ask, "*Through what method has God chosen to reveal Himself*" and thereby save people? It might be argued that such a negative statement, if left on its

own, does not disallow other methods of revelation such as natural revelation or God revealing Himself to people directly through their own spirits (as it is suggested God reveals Himself to unborn infants) making use of their own particular religions.

I would suggest that this conclusion might be reached if this negative statement was not immediately followed by a positive one explaining what method God has chosen with which to reveal Himself. Following the exclusion of human wisdom being the means of salvation, Paul provides the method that God has actually chosen to save lost mankind, "*through the foolishness of what was preached*". If there were any other means, methods or system through which God saves individuals it would be necessary for Paul to explain at this point otherwise this statement becomes a half truth.

If we are faced with the fact that human wisdom cannot discover God and then, when we enquire how a person can be saved, we are only told of one single method but that there are many other methods that God has not told us about, we would naturally feel cheated. Why are we not told directly that if man, through his own wisdom can never find God, there are various ways in which he can find God? Why are we left in the dark to speculate? Why are we only told of one single method, namely through the preaching of the Gospel? If there are other means by which God communicates His salvation to people, why do we labour to support missions?

The answer is simple; because there is only one method, one means, one way, and one system through which anyone can be saved, and that is through believing in the message that is preached, and that message has to be about the Christ who died and rose again.

Conclusion

I began this short study with a personal comment about wishing and hoping that I am wrong in relation to this theological position. As a fellow human being it is my wish, that the many countless thousands and millions of people that have ever lived upon this planet who have never heard of Christ, could be saved. I do not relish the idea that it is only through the preaching of the Gospel that people have an opportunity to be saved. In my heart I hear the words, "*It is not fair*". But, I am not God, and this business of salvation does not belong to me; I did not engineer the Gospel. No, it is all of God – He must do what He wants to do whether I like it or not. I cannot tell God what He should do.

Equally, I am not in a position to speculate. There is a very subtle danger that our theology can become influenced by our well-meaning speculation. We can easily drift away from what God has actually said in His Word into teaching what we would like Him to have said. There are matters about God which we do not like; which we find distasteful, especially within this age of toleration. But, we must resist this temptation to add to the Word, philosophise or speculate, hypothesis or conjecture. What God has said, He has said, and that is the end of the matter.

In drawing this to a close I wish to sound a warning note which I believe arises from this study. Beware of any doctrine purporting to come from scripture that is not based on firm didactic grounds. Do not extract your teaching from what I call, "*narrative theology*". From the narratives one can make the Bible teach absolutely anything. The narratives themselves do not provide us with the foundation stones of our theology.

Secondly, beware of concluding any doctrine that allows for salvation to be found in any other means other than through faith and repentance in Christ who is heard and known. If you open the door to any other method of salvation you will be forced to open that door wider and wider until eventually you become a universalist. Allow an alternative method for one group and you must of necessity allow it for many, many others.

Keep before you this significant statement made by Jesus, "*No one comes to the Father but by me*" (John 14:6).

Richard Lee. 9 October 2007