

The Legitimacy of the Use of Old Testament Pagan Saints as an Argument for Inclusivism

Alexander Ellis Stewart

Introduction

How can a loving, just God send people who never had a chance to hear about Jesus to hell? This is not simply a theological question discussed in ivory towers, but a question that has haunted millions of Christians over the centuries. Because of the severe, eternal ramifications of the answer it has been a very emotionally charged question with strong opinions on every side. Several answers have been presented in response to this question. In evangelical theology the two positions exerting the greatest influence are inclusivism and exclusivism or particularism.¹

The inclusivist position argues from two primary axioms to the conclusion that the unevangelized (those who have never heard about salvation through Jesus) can experience eternal salvation based on their response to the truth they did possess. These axioms are universality (God's desire to save everyone) and particularity (that Jesus is the particular person through whom God accomplished salvation for the human race).² Genuine faith in God is evidenced by good works

¹ Most inclusivists consider themselves entirely evangelical. There are other evangelicals who disagree and believe that inclusivism excludes one from the label "evangelical". See Daniel Strange, "Presence, Prevenience, or Providence? Deciphering the Conundrum of Pinnock's Pneumatological Inclusivism," in *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*, ed. Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson (Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2000), 256-258 for a discussion of the issue.

² John Sanders, "Inclusivism," in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 23-24.

and is sufficient grounds for the salvation accomplished by Jesus to be applied to the unevangelized. Inclusivists generally hold a very positive view of the world religions and general revelation.

The exclusivist position argues that there can be no salvation for anybody unless they actually hear the good news of salvation and forgiveness of sins through Jesus and respond in faith to Jesus. Exclusivists generally hold a very negative view of the world religions as false religions that keep people from true belief in God and believe that general revelation is not enough to communicate salvation.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Biblical evidence for a limited aspect of the debate, the existence of pagan saints in the Old Testament.³ Several questions will be asked and answered. What is the role of pagan saints in the argument for inclusivism? Is there a difference in how God relates to individuals before and after Christ's completed work? On what basis were pagan saints included in the people of God in the Old Testament? Is the univocal analogy of pagan saints with the unevangelized an accurate comparison? The thesis of this paper is that a Biblical argument for inclusivism based on the inclusion of pagan saints in the people of God in the Old Testament is not legitimate. Arguments for

³ Throughout this paper "pagan saints" will be used as a general phrase to include all pre-messianic believers saved in the Old Testament whether they are Jews, non-Jews, or pagans.

inclusivism should not be based on the analogy of Old Testament pagan saints and the unevangelized.⁴

What is the role of Old Testament Pagan Saints in the inclusivist argument?

Old Testament pagan saints are a crucial part of a Biblical argument for inclusivism. After accurately establishing the two primary axioms (God's universal salvific will and the particularity of Christ's work in salvation) inclusivists must give an explanation of how it actually works. How does the argument logically flow from the premises of their two axioms to the conclusion that the unevangelized can be saved? The essential link is "the faith principle" by which, "People are acceptable to God if they respond in faith, however limited their knowledge is."⁵ The essential cognitive content of saving faith is greatly minimized.⁶ Old Testament pagan saints, or pre-messianic believers, are used as the primary Biblical evidence for this generic "faith principle."

Pinnock sums up the inclusivist position succinctly on this point when he writes, "A person who is informationally pre-messianic, whether living in ancient

⁴ Because of the power of unacknowledged presuppositions in shaping interpretation and conclusions it seems appropriate to make a few brief comments. This author is a particularist (exclusivist) more closely aligned with Alister E. McGrath (see Alister E. McGrath, "A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach," in *Four Views On Salvation In A Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 149-180.) than Ronald H. Nash (see Ronald H. Nash, "Restrictivism" in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 107-139.). Having said that, the Biblical evidence presented in this paper has had a formative influence in that decision and not vice-versa. The conclusions presented here do not flow out of exclusivist presuppositions, but rather form them.

⁵ John Sanders, "Inclusivism," in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 38 writes, "The central problem of salvation is not knowledge of God but faith in God. Having a right attitude toward God is much more important than doctrinal information."

or modern times, is in exactly the same spiritual situation.”⁷ Inclusivists present the analogy between Old Testament pagan saints and the unevangelized as univocal (an analogy with every point in common). Old Testament pagan saints, pre-messianic believers, and modern unevangelized are exactly the same. Old Testament pagan saints experienced salvation without knowing anything about Jesus so the unevangelized in any time period can be saved in exactly the same way.

Is there a difference in how God relates to individuals before and after Christ’s completed work?

The first point to determine in this investigation is whether there is any Biblical evidence for a univocal comparison of pagan saints and the unevangelized. Phrased another way the question becomes, did the Christ event (Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection) change the way God saved people? Two passages in particular are important in answering this question: Romans 3:21-26 and Acts 17:15-32. These passages are especially important because both sides of the debate use them to attempt to prove their respective points.

In Romans 3:21-26 Paul argues that it was necessary for God to offer Jesus as a sacrifice for sins in order to be able to justly offer righteousness to individuals who believe in Jesus (Rom 3:21-25). This offering of Jesus as a sacrifice of

⁷ Clark H. Pinnock, *Wideness in God’s Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) , 161. On page 162 Pinnock also writes, “Abel, Noah, Enoch, Job, Jethro, the queen of Sheba, the centurion, Cornelius—all stand as positive proof that the grace of God touches people all over the world and that faith, without which it is impossible to please God, can and does occur outside as well as inside the formal covenant communities.”

propitiation or atonement was even more important because it proved that even though God “passed over the sins previously committed” he was still just because the penalty for sin had been paid by Jesus. These verses indicate that God had not given Old Testament pagan saints a “get out of jail free card”, but that a real price had been paid. A real sacrifice had been made. If God had just let Old Testament pagan saints by he would have no justice or righteousness.

These verses are very clear in supporting the particularity axiom of inclusivism. Old Testament pagan saints were saved on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone. Unfortunately for inclusivists the verses also indicate that there is a difference in how God related to individuals before and after the Christ event. Before Christ God passed over sins and saved people on the basis of Christ’s future sacrifice, but “at the present time...he justifies *the one who has faith in Jesus*” (Rom 3:26).⁸

In Acts 17 Luke presents an account of Paul’s teaching that is in continuity with what Paul says in Romans 3:25-26. In dialogue with various philosophers in Athens Paul declares with reference to idol worship, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).⁹The words unambiguously indicate that now (after the Christ event) all men in every place must repent. The context also indicates that this repentance

⁸ See Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 231-244.

⁹ Space limits discussion of the use of this text to indicate a universal salvation of pre-messianic humanity. Only universalists would try to argue such a conclusion despite overwhelming Old Testament evidence to the contrary.

includes an element of exclusive, cognitive information because in the very next verse Paul introduces the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead knowing that Epicurean and Stoic philosophers would likely reject his message at that point. Despite the fact that it would cause rejection among most of his listeners, Paul intentionally included the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as an integral element to his preaching.¹⁰

Both of these important texts indicate that there is a difference in how God related to people before the Christ event from how he relates to them after the Christ event. Unfortunately for all involved, very little is written by Paul about the precise nature of the difference. Paul's main point was to vindicate God's justice in Romans 3:25-26, and to call the Athenians to repentance and belief in Jesus in Acts 17:30-31 not to settle a debate between inclusivism and exclusivism in the 21st century.

The idea of any salvific difference between how God related to individuals before and after Christ is dismissed by inclusivists as absurd and ridiculous.¹¹ How could it matter if someone in China died 10 minutes after Christ was resurrected? It is too bad for him. If he only would have died 10 minutes earlier he would have been in good shape, but since he died when he did he would have had to put explicit faith in Jesus in order to be saved.

¹⁰ At this point, Paul does not seem to be preaching like an inclusivist. See Nash, "Restrictivism" in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 136-138 for a brief discussion of the non-inclusive preaching of the book of Acts.

¹¹ See John Sanders, "Response to Nash" in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 142-143.

The lack of further explanation by Paul in Romans 3 and Acts 17 concerning the salvific differences before and after Christ along with the seeming absurdity of a hard and fast line in history means that a clear understanding of the comparison of OT pagan saints and the unevangelized will require an integrated examination of the Old Testament evidence. These New Testament texts will be examined further in the conclusion.

On what basis were pagan saints included in the people of God in the OT?

It is abundantly clear from the New Testament that individuals were saved in the Old Testament without exact and clear knowledge of or belief in Jesus Christ. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Job, Abimelech, Jethro, Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, the Queen of Sheba, the Ninevites, and Melchizedek do not exhaust the list of individuals listed by inclusivists as support for their argument. The question is not about whether these people were saved or not, but on what basis they were saved. Are these OT believers legitimate evidence that unevangelized individuals can be saved by general, genuine faith in deity and good works? Most evangelicals look to either covenantal or dispensational theology for an answer to that question.¹²

Covenantal theology generally holds the position that everyone saved in the OT confessed Christ in some way.¹³ From the fall of mankind in Adam the

¹² Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelized* (Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2001) is a good example of the covenantal position while Ramesh P. Richard, *The Population of Heaven* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994) represents a dispensational approach. Like all broad theological positions, there is diversity among adherents to both these positions and general statements will not apply to every covenantal or dispensational theologian.

¹³ Strange, *The Unevangelized*, 169 writes, "From within the covenantal framework, my argument has been that all Old Testament believers confessed Christ in some embryonic way. Developing this idea somewhat,

protoevangelium (Gen. 3:15) provided minimal cognitive belief that Yahweh would one day provide a seed of the woman to reverse the effects of the fall. Throughout Old Testament history the protoevangelium was enlarged upon by special revelation so that most Old Testament believers would have known to look with faith to Yahweh for salvation based on the coming of a specific figure at some point in the future (Messiah, Son of Man, Emmanuel, suffering servant, etc.).

Dispensational Theology argues that, “The legitimate, universal principle is that there are divinely revealed specifics of salvation for all humans regardless of time and location of birth.”¹⁴ The content of faith is not the same from dispensation to dispensation, but it always is what God reveals and establishes it to be for each dispensation.¹⁵ Saving faith must always respond to some form of special revelation.

The Biblical evidence *on this point* favors the approach of dispensational theology. It is not possible to convincingly demonstrate that all Old Testament believers confessed Christ in some way as covenant theologians attempt to do. It is possible to demonstrate that all Old Testament believers looked to and trusted Yahweh (specific, exclusive, cognitive) for salvation.¹⁶ Despite the differences,

the second point I wish to make is that there is a close relationship between this confession of Christ and of God’s revelation of His name ‘Yahweh’ with its emphasis on God as the Covenant-Redeemer.”

¹⁴ Richard, 136.

¹⁵ Richard, 136 also writes, “Dispensationalism insists that pre-Christ believers did have explicit, concrete content to believe, in their temporal location in the history of salvation. There was divinely revealed, specific content of which there had to be explicit knowledge in order to receive salvation.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-33 states this point clearly by writing, “The faith principle in any God – without or with another name, unknown or unknowable—is unsustainable from these passages. The ‘calling upon the name of the

both positions would probably agree with the statement, “Salvation in the Old Testament requires a faith response to special revelation from Yahweh.”¹⁷

The preceding point can be demonstrated by examining Old Testament individuals at the center of the debate. Melchizedek is easily the most important figure in the argument for inclusivism. Sanders writes that Melchizedek, “...worships the same God as Abraham (14:19)—and this evidently without any special revelation from God. The Bible apparently is not as protective of God’s worship as some Christians are.”¹⁸

Unfortunately for Sanders, the story of Melchizedek in Gen 14:18-20 does not support his point in the way that he wishes.¹⁹ The narrative of Genesis clearly presents the God of Melchizedek as Yahweh, the God of Abraham, not as a different Canaanite deity.²⁰ As a result, Melchizedek received saving knowledge of Yahweh the same way everyone who was saved before God’s self-revelation at

Lord’ is the pre-Flood (Gen. 4:26); post-Flood (Abraham, Gen. 12:8); Israelite (Jer. 33:3); Christian (Rom. 10:13); and eschatological (Joel 2:32) condition for deliverance. It is a necessary and epistemological condition for God’s intervention in human history. The Genesis writer notes that Enoch (Gen. 5:22) and Noah (Gen. 6:9) walked with God. Assuming a unified view of Pentateuchal authorship, the Lord on whom people called was the God with whom they walked. Salvation was through a “faith-in-YHWH principle” for all peoples.”

¹⁷ Covenantal theologians would only insist that saving special revelation must be related to Christ in some way. Timothy S. C. Zulker, “The Destiny of the Unevangelized: Evaluating the Usage of Biblical Texts As Justification for Inclusivism and Exclusivism” (M.A. Thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1993), 53 states “Saving faith involves not just the inclination of the heart toward a general notion of God. Saving faith is a trusting response to the very words of God—his promises made specifically regarding his seed.”

¹⁸ Sanders, “Inclusivism,” in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 44. See the conclusion of this paper for a contradictory statement by Sanders in the same chapter. It gets even harder to argue that Melchizedek had no special revelation from God when his role in the book of Hebrews is examined.

¹⁹ See Strange, *The Unevangelized*, 179-189.

²⁰ A canonical narrative approach can clearly demonstrate that the author intends the reader to see *El Elyon* and *Yahweh* to be one and the same God. This is contrary to a historical critical history of Israelite religion approach.

Sinai was, through special revelation from Yahweh. Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Melchizedek all represent individuals who had special revelation from God outside of the revelation of God's will in the Sinai covenant.²¹ How else could one worship the same exact God? There was special revelation available in the ancient world through direct revelation from God (i.e. to Adam, Noah, and Abraham) and through the content of those direct encounters being passed on orally through generations.²² The most that can be said from Melchizedek is that one recipient of special revelation from Yahweh (Abraham) acknowledges and gives respect to another recipient of special revelation from Yahweh (Melchizedek).²³

Jethro, Naaman, Ruth, the Queen of Sheba, and the Ninevites all received saving knowledge of Yahweh through contact with his people, the Israelites. After the Sinai covenant mediated by Moses the Israelites had a large degree of special revelation from Yahweh to which they could respond by faith. These Old Testament pagan saints who gained saving knowledge by contact with the Israelites are a partial fulfillment of God's promise to bless all the nations through the seed of Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3).

Is the univocal comparison of pagan saints with the unevangelized an accurate comparison?

²¹ See Richard, 32-33.

²² An example of generational passing on of the content of direct, special revelation is Yahweh's revelation to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacobs children and grandchildren. There can be little doubt that these parents orally passed on to their children what Yahweh had spoken to them. Without this oral transmission of special revelation there would be no Biblical accounts of creation and the patriarchal narratives. There is no reason to believe this didn't happen through the genealogies of Adam and Noah as well.

²³ Ibid., 40.

The preceding discussion makes it evident that the analogy between pagan saints and the unevangelized is analogical rather than univocal. There are some points in common, but not every point. The main point in common is that both Old Testament pagan saints and the unevangelized have not heard about Jesus' saving work and have not had any opportunity to hear. The primary difference between them is that Old Testament pagan saints had exclusive, special revelation from God to which they had to respond to in faith in order to be saved. The unevangelized have no such special revelation to respond to.²⁴

Richard discusses this point by writing, "One could also add a "correspondence" criterion in comparative religious observations. What Old Testament saints confessed does not correspond with what the unreached masses all over the world believe today."²⁵ No world religion outside of Christianity or Judaism presents Yahweh as the object of faith.²⁶ This fact precludes a univocal comparison of the unevangelized with Old Testament pagan saints.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence from the pagan saints themselves it becomes clear that the presence of pre-Messianic pagan saints in the Old Testament is not a

²⁴ It is entirely possible, given God's sovereign freedom and desire to save, to give the unevangelized direct, special revelation similar to Enoch, Abraham, and Melchizedek in order that they might be saved, but this is not what inclusivists try to prove from Old Testament pagan saints. Inclusivists try to demonstrate that special revelation is not needed for salvation.

²⁵ Ibid., 88, footnote 11.

²⁶ Several factors need to be taken into account with Judaism. One of which is that even though Judaism confesses Yahweh, the authors of the New Testament still evangelized Jews with the message of exclusive faith in Jesus for salvation. The views of Paul presented in Romans 3:25-26 and Acts 17:30-31 discussed above explain this evangelism. After Christ's death and resurrection belief in Jesus became the new standard, effectively replacing a general belief in Yahweh and the Mosaic covenant.

legitimate argument for inclusivism. Although Sanders does not agree with this conclusion he agrees with the evidence when he writes, “Furthermore, the Bible does not contain any pure examples of believers without any contact with special revelation for the simple reason that the Bible tells only of those people who came into contact with God’s special activity in human history.”²⁷ It seems strange that inclusivists can acknowledge the fact that there are no unevangelized believers in the Bible and still argue that Biblical characters give support for the existence of unevangelized believers. Even though Sanders acknowledges this fact he still attempts to argue for inclusivism from the presence of Old Testament pagan saints. The only way Old Testament pagan saints could legitimately function in the inclusivist argument would be if the analogy with the unevangelized were univocal. It clearly is not.

The evidence from Romans 3:25-26 and Acts 17:30-31 supports this conclusion. There is a difference in the response required of people for salvation before and after Christ, but it is not the kind of difference that inclusivists enjoy ridiculing. To claim that it is absurd that someone who died 10 minutes after Christ’s resurrection is out of luck is to misunderstand the Biblical evidence. The difference is not between an inclusivist God in the Old Testament and an exclusivist God in the New Testament, but between the necessary, exclusive, cognitive content of saving faith in both Testaments. The New Testament simply adds to an already existing content of necessary saving information. The

²⁷Sanders, “Inclusivism,” in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 40.

information itself does not save. Biblical evidence indicates that God saves people who respond with faith to accurate information about himself.

The Old Testament evidence examined above demonstrates that exclusivism is a point of continuity between the Testaments. When inclusivists use figures like Noah or Melchizedek they fail to notice the vast number of their contemporaries who were excluded from salvation in Yahweh as a result of not responding in faith and obedience *to Yahweh* whether they had heard of Yahweh or not.²⁸ Noah and the great flood is not an example of inclusivism since almost the entire human race was judged for sin (Gen. 6). Canaan was filled with people who did not know and serve Yahweh and were judged during the time of Melchizedek (Gen. 19:24-25).

This paper only addresses one point in the debate between inclusivists and exclusivists. The debate will not be settled one way or another by simply clarifying the legitimate role for pagan saints in the argument. In some ways just presenting the issue as an inclusivist/exclusivist debate portrays a false dichotomy. There are other solutions to the difficult problem and a plethora of opinions in both main camps.²⁹ More work clearly remains to be done in presenting a Biblical

²⁸ Richard, 40 writes, "Scripture does not portray masses of humans coming into salvation during that time, which would justify the inclusivist's wider-hope conclusion. The redeemed were really few in number at that time, and those left out of the divine initiatives, that we know about, were incredibly large in number. More often, there were massive judgments rather than massive salvations."

²⁹ Gabriel Fackre, "Divine Perseverance," in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 71-95 presents an argument for the possibility of a postmortem encounter with God for the unevangelized. An example of the wide variety of opinions among both inclusivists and exclusivists would be the fact that Pinnock practically views McGrath as an inclusivist. See Clark H. Pinnock, "Response to Alister E. McGrath" in *Four Views On Salvation In A Pluralistic World*,

response to the difficult, legitimate questions raised by inclusivism. Paul was clearly concerned with rationally defending the justice of God in Romans 3:21-26. In the same way, evangelicals must give a Biblical, rational response to those who accuse God of unfairness by excluding people from salvation who never had an opportunity to hear and respond.

Bibliography

- Campbell, I. D. and Daniel Strange. "The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology." *The Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003) : 390-392. .
- Erickson, Millard J. "The Destiny of the Unevangelized." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, no. 605 (Ja-Mr 1995) : 3-15.
- Fackre, Gabriel, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders. *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, ed. John Sanders. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995.
- Gillis, Chester. "Evangelical Inclusivism: Progress or Betrayal?" *The Evangelical Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (April 1996) : 139-150.
- Gray, Tony, and Christopher Sinkinson, eds. *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*. Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2000.
- McWilliams, Warren. "Spirit Christology and Inclusivism: Clark Pinnock's Evangelical Theology of Religions." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1997) : 325-336.
- Moo, Douglas. *Romans 1-8*. The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, ed. Kenneth Barker. Chicago: Moody Press, 1991.
- Nash, Ronald H. *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994.
- Netland, Harold. "Exclusivism, Tolerance and Truth." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 12, no. 3 (Jl 1988) : 240-260.
- Okholm, Dennis L., and Timothy R. Phillips, eds. *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996.
- Pinnock, Clark H. *Wideness in God's Mercy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.
- Porter, Stanley E., and Anthony R. Cross, eds. *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock*. Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2003.
- Richard, Ramesh P. *The Population of Heaven*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994.
- _____. "Soteriological Inclusivism and Dispensationalism." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151, no. 601 (January-March 1994) : 85-108.

Strange, Daniel. *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelized*. With a foreward by Gavin D'Costa. Waynsboro: Paternoster Press, 2001.

Zulker, Timothy S. C. "The Destiny of the Unevangelized Evaluating the Usage of Biblical Texts As Justification for Inclusivism and Exclusivism." Thesis (M.A.), Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1993.

Appendix 1

Alexander Ellis Stewart

Master of Divinity

Columbia Biblical Seminary

Ph.D. Candidate

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary