

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Copyright 2003 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

May 2002

Email: Jrob1517@aol.com

Website: <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/>

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

Christian Exclusivism

W. Gary Crampton

Christian exclusivism, which has been the view of Reformed and Biblically orthodox churches through the centuries, is the teaching that (1) Jesus Christ is the only Savior, and (2) that it is essential for one to believe in Him in order to be saved. This view is admirably set forth in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 21), the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (10:4; 14:2), and the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q. 60) as follows:

The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: Much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature [general revelation], and the law of that religion they do profess. And, to assert and maintain that they may, is very pernicious, and to be detested.

But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

They who, having never heard the Gospel, know not Jesus Christ, and believe not in Him, cannot be saved...neither is their salvation in any

other, but in Christ alone, who is the Savior only of His body the church.

There are a number of Biblical passages which teach Christian exclusivism. Four of the clearest are *John* 3:16-18, 36; *John* 14:6; *Acts* 4:12; and *1 Timothy* 2:5.

John 3:16-18, 36: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.... He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on Him."

These verses could hardly be clearer. Those who believe in Christ have everlasting life, and those who do not believe in Him are condemned. Faith in Jesus Christ is a *sine qua non* of salvation. One cannot be saved without this faith.

John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Here in Christ's own words we are taught that He is the only way to the Father. "No one comes to the Father except through" Jesus Christ. Once again, words could hardly be clearer. Those who do not

know Jesus Christ cannot be saved. Writes William Hendriksen of this verse, “both the absoluteness [exclusivism] of the Christian religion and the urgent necessity of Christian missions is [sic] clearly indicated.”¹

Acts 4:12: “Nor is there salvation in any other [than Jesus Christ], for there is no other name under Heaven given among men by which we must [dei] be saved.” Peter’s words, as recorded by Luke, are as straightforward and exclusivistic as those that we read in the *Gospel of John*. Christ is the only Savior. According to Simon Kistemaker:

The word *must* [dei] reveals a divine necessity which God has established, according to His plan and decree, to save us [the elect] through the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, this word [dei] signifies that man is under moral obligation to respond to the call to believe in Jesus Christ and thus gain salvation. He has no recourse to salvation other than through the Son of God.²

First Timothy 2:5: “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.” Here in the words of the Apostle Paul, just as there is only *one* true and living God, there is also only “*one* Mediator between God and men,” and that Mediator is “the Man Christ Jesus.” In other words, there is no other way that man can be saved except through Jesus Christ. Charnock wrote:

Christ is said to be the one Mediator in the same sense that God is said to be the one God. As there is but one Creator of man, so there is but one Mediator for men. As God is the God of all that died before Christ came, as well as of those that died after; so Christ is the Mediator of all that died before His coming, as well as of those that saw His day. They had Christ as their Mediator, or some other; some other they could not have, because there is but one. They might as well have had another Creator besides God, as another Mediator besides the Mediator Christ Jesus.... There is but one God from eternity; but one

Mediator, whose mediation has the same date as the foundation of the world, and runs parallel to it.³

Although the true church of Christ has always held to the view of Christian exclusivism, there have always been those who demur. Sadly, the opponents of Christian exclusivism, even within the churches, are on the increase today. Ronald Nash writes:

Once upon a time Christians were identifiable by an unqualified commitment to Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior of the world. But the unity of [professed] Christians has disappeared. Today many people who claim to be Christians choose among three fundamentally different answers to the question, “Is Jesus the only Savior?” These answers can be stated succinctly: No!; Yes, but...; Yes, period!⁴

The negative answer (“No!”) is given by those called pluralists. Pluralists, such as John Hick,⁵ deny both that (1) Jesus Christ is the only Savior, and (2) that it is essential for one to believe in Him in order to be saved. Salvation, say the pluralists, may come by any one of a number of the world’s different religions, and by any one of a number of different saviors. Hick explains: “There is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation...taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious traditions.”⁶

Suffice it to say that the position adopted by religious pluralists is so obviously out of accord with the teachings of Scripture, that it cannot rationally be considered a “Christian” view at all. That is, if *John 3:16-18*, *36*; *14:6*; *Acts 14:6*; and *1 Timothy 2:5* are truly the teachings of Scripture (which they are), then there is no possibility that there is another Savior than Jesus Christ. And if Christianity is the one true

¹ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Baker [1953] 1954), II:269.

² Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Baker, 1990), 156.

³ Cited by the editor in John Calvin, *Commentaries*, Volumes I-XXII (Baker, 1981), *Commentary on 1 Timothy 2:5n*.

⁴ Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Zondervan, 1994), 9. Although the present writer does not agree with everything taught by Dr. Nash in this book, he has found it to be extremely useful in dealing with this subject. A number of Dr. Nash’s insights have been incorporated into this article.

⁵ See John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Westminster, 1982), and *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (St. Martin’s Press, 1985).

⁶ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 34.

religion (which it is), then all other religions are false. It is as simple as that. "Christian pluralism" is a contradiction in terms. Soteriological pluralism is Antichristian. Jesus says it this way: "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters" (Luke 11:23).

There are, however, a growing number of professedly Christians thinkers, such as Gavin D'Costa,⁷ Clark Pinnock,⁸ and John Sanders,⁹ who answer the question "Is Jesus the only Savior?" with a qualified affirmative, "Yes, but..." This group adheres to what is known as "Christian inclusivism." Inclusivists aver that "Yes," Jesus is indeed the only Savior, "but" they say that it is not necessary for persons to know about Jesus Christ or to believe in Him to receive the benefits of His redemptive work. That is, as Nash correctly says, inclusivists "distinguish between the *ontological necessity* of Christ's work as Redeemer and the separate claim that Christ's redemptive work is *epistemologically necessary*."¹⁰ Inclusivist John Sanders explains:

The unevangelized are saved or lost on the basis of their commitment, or lack thereof, to the God who saves through the work of Jesus. [Inclusivists] believe that appropriation of salvific grace is mediated through general revelation and God's providential workings in human history. Briefly, inclusivists affirm the particularity and finality of salvation only in Christ but deny that knowledge of His work is necessary for salvation.¹¹

Inclusivism is becoming the predominant view in Roman Catholicism. As Nash points out, this movement is one of the legacies of Vatican Council II (1962-1965), where it was concluded: "They also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His church, yet sincerely seek God, and moved by

⁷ Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Basil Blackwell, 1986).

⁸ Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Zondervan, 1992).

⁹ John Sanders, *No Other Name* (Eerdmans, 1992).

¹⁰ Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* 23.

¹¹ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 215.

grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience."¹²

Obviously, then, God's self-revelation by means of general revelation is crucial to the inclusivists' theory. For this is (allegedly) the means by which God leads some to salvation apart from belief in Christ. So too, say the inclusivists, there is a necessary distinction between "believers" and "Christians." The former are saved because they have put their faith in God. The latter, on the other hand, are saved because they have put their faith in Christ.¹³

There are several difficulties here. First, the Bible makes no distinction between believers and Christians. That is, believers are called believers because they believe in Christ (*John* 3:16-18, 36). Further, we are taught in Scripture that "whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; [but] he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also" (*I John* 2:23; see also *John* 5:23). Saul of Tarsus is one example of a "believer in God" who was so diligent in his Judaism that he denied Christianity to the point of openly persecuting Christ's church (*Acts* 9:1-3; 22:1-5; 26:1-11). But until he was confronted by Jesus Christ and converted on the road to Damascus (*Acts* 9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18), he considered himself to be the unsaved chief of sinners (*I Timothy* 1:12-16; see also *Philippians* 3:3-16).

Second, Scripture teaches that although general revelation reveals God as Creator, thus leaving men without excuse (*Romans* 1:18-21; 2:14-15), it does not reveal Him as Savior. Scripture is necessary for redemptive knowledge (*Romans* 1:16-17; 10:17), as summarized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1:1):

Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and His will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for

¹² Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* 108-109.

¹³ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 224-225.

the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary.

These things being so, the theory of the inclusivists is completely obviated. The Bible denies inclusivism, and clearly teaches Christian exclusivism: “He who believes in Him [Christ] is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he does not believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God.... He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (*John* 3:18, 36). Simply stated, inclusivism, like pluralism, is not a Christian view at all. Denying the straightforward teachings of Scripture, it is Antichristian.

This essay first appeared in a booklet, Christ the Mediator, published by The Blue Banner, 2000. To buy the books of Dr. Crampton, please visit our website at <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/> His latest book should appear in June: By Scripture Alone, and a second edition of What Calvin Says should be available shortly thereafter.

Editor's Postscript

Not only have we heard a lot of rubbish about all major religions being essentially similar and “meeting at the top” in the past century, and now, as Dr. Crampton notes, we are told that Jesus may be “ontologically necessary,” but not “epistemologically necessary,” for salvation, we are also now being told by some who call themselves Reformed that information—propositions, truth, knowledge—is not necessary for salvation. Further, these spurious-Reformed slander Christians who insist that knowledge of the truth is necessary for salvation as “Gnostics.” Such ludicrous accusations not only betray an abject ignorance of Gnosticism, but a rejection of Christianity as well. The reader is urged to get out his Greek New Testament and note how the Holy Spirit uses the word *gnosis*. Here are a few examples:

Luke 1:76-77: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest, for you will go before the

face of the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge [*gnosis*] of salvation to his people....”

Luke 11:52: “Woe to you, lawyers, for you have taken away the key of knowledge [*gnosis*].”

Romans 11:33: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge [*gnosis*] of God!”

Romans 15:14: “Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge [*gnosis*], able also to admonish one another.”

1 Corinthians 1:4-5: “I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by him in all utterance and all knowledge [*gnosis*]....”

2 Corinthians 4:6: “For it is the God who commanded light to shone out of darkness who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge [*gnosis*] of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

1 Timothy 6:20: “O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge [*gnosis*—by professing it, some have strayed concerning the faith.”

Add to these the similar and synonymous words used hundreds of times in Scripture by the Holy Spirit—words such as *wisdom*, *understanding*, and *truth*—and one can begin to grasp what Scripture is saying. Notice Paul’s exhortation to Timothy: “But as for you, continue in the things which you have *learned* and been assured of, knowing from whom you have *learned* them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you *wise [sophisai] for salvation* through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (*2 Timothy* 3:14-15).

And finally there are Peter’s words in his second epistle: “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge [*gnosis*] of God and of Jesus our Lord, as his divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge [*epignosis*] of him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (*2 Peter* 1:2-4). Here Peter tells us that the divine power of Jesus Christ has given us all things that pertain to life

and godliness, and those things come exclusively through knowledge. The Bible calls those who scorn knowledge, wisdom, and understanding “fools”—it does not call them pious, spiritual, or godly. There is indeed only one Saviour, and there is only one way to receive his blessings: the knowledge he has revealed to us in Scripture. Christ is not only “ontologically necessary,” he is also “epistemologically necessary.” The notion that intellectual understanding is not necessary for salvation is Antichristian.