

Series: Hard Questions for Thoughtful Christians and Inquiring Skeptics

Sermon: **Is Jesus Really the Only Way? (And if so, what about those who have never heard His name?)**

Scripture: John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Romans 1:18-25

Speaker: Michael P. Andrus

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Dr. Robert Yarbrough, a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, was reviewing a book for an evangelical publisher on women's roles in the church, a topic we are going to be dealing with later in this series. In the introduction of her book the author noted that historically the nearly universal position of orthodox Christianity has been that women should not be ordained to the preaching ministry. But she set that tradition aside, and the Bible verses that support it, with one simple question, "But is that fair?" Yarbrough writes,

I admit I was taken aback. I had never learned from the Bible that God is fair—just, yes; but that implies conformity to his own laws, his own promises, his own character. But fair—that implies behavior acceptable to peers. . . Dennis Rodman doesn't always play fair. It may not be fair that you have an office window and someone else doesn't. Fairness is one thing. Justice, rightness, righteousness, is quite another.

Fairness has a great future today, because theology is now being done in the light of it. . . In Wall Street language, society is bullish on fairness.¹

Everywhere today we hear the question, "Is it fair?" We saw it last Sunday: "Is it fair that bad things happen to good people?" And we come across it again today: "Is it fair that God would provide only one way of salvation? Is it fair that people who have never heard the gospel should perish?" In a culture of rapidly disappearing biblical literacy, guess what the answer will be? But it is the wrong question; our question should be, "What does the Bible say?"

Well what does the Bible say about whether Jesus is the Only Way and about those who have never heard that Jesus died for them? Are they lost? Almost certainly you have been asked this question. Anyone who works with college students or shares the Gospel with unbelievers will eventually be hit with the objection, "But what about the heathen? What about the huge numbers of people in the rainforest who have never heard of Jesus? Can't they be saved if they are living good lives and doing the best they can with what they know?"

There are two questions here, and though they are related, I want to separate them in order to answer them more effectively. The first is, "Is Jesus the Only Way to God?" The second is, "If so, then what is the destiny of those who have never heard about Jesus?" I am confident that *if* one accepts the authority of Scripture, the first question can be answered without hesitation, "Yes." There are several Scripture passages I want us to examine. The first is the very familiar verse in John 14:6: "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" That is not an ambiguous statement. It is not susceptible to multiple interpretations. You don't have to believe it, but there is no question what Jesus was claiming—that He is the exclusive path to God.

The other is Acts 4:12, which says about Jesus, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” This text, too, is clear and straightforward. And friends, there really isn’t much more to say this morning about whether Jesus is the only Way to God (that is, if we’re going to use the Bible as our authority). Anyone who claims there are multiple ways to God is using some other source of authority than Scripture—perhaps reason, tradition, philosophy, or some “fairness doctrine.” Christianity is an exclusive religion, and anyone who tries to make it anything else is only distorting it and twisting it.

However, there is a lot to say about the other question—the one about the destiny of those who have never heard about Jesus. Let me start by analyzing the picture many have of the people of the rainforest and ask whether it conforms to reality. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was an 18th century philosopher-theologian who claimed that primitive man was a free and happy being living in accordance with his instincts, without vice. This myth of the “noble savage” in an idyllic setting, untouched by the harshness of society, has pretty much been adopted by modern sociology and anthropology. It has even impacted many theologians, as they seem to have the notion that primitive tribes are, for the most part, seeking God and trying their best to live rightly, but through no fault of their own, they remain ignorant of the Gospel. In fact, one wrote a book advocating the view that these people will go to heaven and entitled it, “Through No Fault of Their Own.”ⁱⁱⁱ But I believe there is something seriously wrong with this picture of the noble savage.

I took a unique opportunity to spend a week with the Yanomao Indians in the heart of the Amazon rainforest in 1997. This is the most primitive tribe in the western hemisphere. A missionary with New Tribes Mission and I were flown in a little Cessna plane for 3 hours across the rainforest until we landed on a jungle airstrip along the Orinoco River. As dozens of stone-age Indians crowded around us, the pilot took off and said he’d be back in a week or so. An elderly Canadian missionary lady named Marg Jenk lived next to the airstrip; she had been in Yanomao territory for 37 years and buried her husband there 13 years before.

While eight days in the jungle certainly doesn’t make me an expert, I must tell you nothing was more obvious to me (and missionaries who spent their whole lives there confirmed it) than that those who have not been exposed to the Gospel are *anything but* innocent seekers after God.

Sin, immorality, murder, deceit, treachery, demon worship, and death were everywhere. The *only* Indians I saw who had any sense of fulfillment, happiness, purpose, basic morality, or even a smile on their faces were those who had given their hearts to Jesus Christ. The difference it made in those individuals was incredible.

So, what about the unevangelized, whose who have never heard? There are four major views regarding their destiny.

Agnosticism is the position that we don’t have enough information to know what their eternal destiny is, so we shouldn’t worry about it. I think agnosticism is a coward’s way to avoid

tough issues.

Universalism is the view that everyone is eventually going to be saved, probably even the Devil. God is love, you know, and He couldn't enjoy heaven Himself if he knew there was even one soul in hell.

Of course, if universalism is true, the preaching of the Gospel and missions are unnecessary, and that's why both of those activities are largely missing from liberal churches. Oh, they still use the terms "Gospel" and "mission," but they don't mean the same thing they used to mean. "Gospel" in some of these churches means the good news that same-sex marriage is acceptable to God, and "mission" means staging an anti-war protest or helping Planned Parenthood open a new clinic in a poor neighborhood. Frankly, I don't think I have to spend too much time on agnosticism or universalism with this audience.

But a third view of the destiny of the unevangelized is one we need to examine carefully.

Inclusivism can be defined as the presumption that the saving work of Christ includes all people of sincerity and goodwill, regardless of what their religious faith is. Inclusivists are different from universalists in that they believe there is a hell, but it is just for the wicked who consciously reject the Gospel. They can't bring themselves to believe God would allow all those who have never heard of Christ to spend eternity in hell.

Inclusivists are more biblical than universalists in that they agree that no one is saved apart from Christ. But they also hold that not all who are saved by Christ are *necessarily aware* of Him or know His name. Thus a truly devout Hindu may be saved by Christ even if he knows nothing about Christianity. Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner has popularized the term "anonymous Christian" to describe this supposedly saved, but unevangelized, person.

Let me say up front, I wish I could be an inclusivist. I am at heart a tolerant person. I grew up in churches with a lot of intolerance, dogmatism, and legalism, and I never want to go back to that.

But while I have changed my perspectives on many things, I have never quit being a man of the Book, and one of the things I have discovered about inclusivists is that conformity to Scripture is not their dominant concern—fairness is.

Now I am going to mention four different twists on this view, all of which fall within the overall category of inclusivism.

1. Some inclusivists believe people are saved *unless they expressly reject* Christ. This stands in contrast to the traditional view that all are lost *unless they accept* Christ. This is becoming a very popular view, and those who hold it appeal to John 3:36 for support: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever *rejects* the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." I would only observe that there are hundreds of Bible passages that describe the only condition for salvation as "active believing"! While it is true that the one who rejects

the Son will not see life, it is also true that the one who *does not believe* will not see life. John 3:18 makes that clear: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

2. Some inclusivists believe in extended probation. That is, they presume there will be post-death opportunities to be saved. Such an opportunity may come at the very point of death, or perhaps the Gospel will continue to be preached in the afterlife to those here on earth who did not hear it, right up until the final judgment. After all, if Christ descended into hell between His death and resurrection, as the Apostles’ Creed says, and if He “preached to the spirits in prison” at that time (1 Peter 3:19), why couldn’t He continue to do that? Of course, Christ can do anything He wants, but 1 Peter 3:19 is clearly talking about a one-time event during which Christ preached to a *particular* group of spirits, namely those “who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.” And it was probably a sermon of condemnation, not a preaching of the Gospel. There is no warrant I know of to view this a continuing ministry of Christ.

Furthermore, the whole tenor of Scripture is that “*now* is the day of salvation.” Don’t delay because tomorrow may be too late. Hebrews 9:27 says, “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” Judgment there is not the word for “inquiry” or “examination” but rather “sentencing.”

3. Other inclusivists believe God will judge the unevangelized on the basis of how they *would have* responded had they heard about Jesus. After all, God is omniscient. He knows not only what has happened and what will happen, but He also knows what *would have* happened had things been different than they are. In His foreknowledge He could tell which of the early American Indians would have believed and let them into heaven.

Frankly, I like that idea; once again, you can’t beat it for fairness. But also once again there’s not a hint of it in Scripture.

4. Still other inclusivists believe that a positive response to *general* revelation is credited as saving faith. In other words, if a person has not heard the Gospel but has recognized from nature and conscience that there is a God, and if he casts himself on God’s mercy as best he knows how, this is acceptable to God, and the person will go to heaven. I don’t want to treat this view too lightly, because though I disagree with it, there are some pretty sharp theologians who espouse it. Furthermore, they communicate it very convincingly. For example, Norman Anderson writes of the unevangelized,

What if the Spirit of God convicts them, as he alone can, of something of their sin and need; and what if he enables them, in the darkness or twilight, somehow to cast themselves on the mercy of God and cry out, as it were, for his forgiveness and salvation? Will they not then be accepted and forgiven in the one and only Savior? And if it be asked how this can be when they have never so much as heard of him, then the answer must be that they will be accepted on the basis of what the God of all grace himself did in Christ at the cross.ⁱⁱⁱ

And John Sanders adds,

This position maintains that the unevangelized are saved or lost depending on their response to the light they have. If they respond positively, in faith, they will be saved; if negatively, they will be lost. ‘Saving faith’ (faith required to obtain salvation) does not necessitate knowledge of Christ in this life.^{iv}

One of the arguments often used by the proponents of this view is that there were many during OT times, like Abel and Enoch and Noah, who were believers and are surely in heaven today, but *they* did not know Jesus Christ. So why can’t we assume there were some among the original American Indians or among the Yanomami who worship the true God but don’t know Christ? I would respond that Abel and Enoch and Noah may not have known the person of Jesus, but they were saved by faith that God would send His Messiah to pay for their sins, and their animal sacrifices were offered in anticipation of that once-for-all sacrifice. They were saved by conscious faith in Christ, just as we are, only they looked forward to His coming, while we look back.

By now it should be apparent that I reject inclusivism as a biblical answer for the question, “What is the destiny of the unevangelized?” That leaves only one more possibility:

Exclusivism is the view that only those who put their personal faith in Jesus Christ are saved. Now exclusivism is a dirty word today, very politically incorrect. But once again, “What does the Bible say?” I want to argue for exclusivism by sharing three key concepts upon which it is grounded, and two key biblical passages upon which it is based.

Exclusivism is grounded in three key concepts.

These three concepts are like a three-legged stool—you need all three to have stability.

1. Conscious faith in Christ is required for the salvation of anyone *capable* of exercising such faith. I include the limiting phrase, “anyone capable of exercising such faith” to make room for infants who die in infancy or those who are severely mentally impaired, who I believe are saved by the grace of God. Now the basis for the salvation of those incapable of exercising conscious faith is another whole topic we can’t get into this morning but will at a later time. But it is my understanding that everyone else must consciously put their faith in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures for this are many:

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

“For God so loved the world . . . that whoever believes . . . will have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

But some of you who are real sharp this morning may spot a loophole. After all, if someone has never heard of Christ, is he *any more capable* of exercising faith in Christ that is a mentally impaired person or a six-month-old child? If *the latter* can be saved by the death of Christ

without conscious faith in Christ, why can't the heathen as well? My answer would be that there's a big difference between the adult pagan and an infant, and that brings us to the second leg of the stool:

2. Every adult person has received sufficient revelation of God's existence and character through nature and conscience to render him *without excuse* if he does not believe. Please turn in your Bible with me to Romans 1:18:

"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 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.

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.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen."

Friends, this is not a very flattering view of the unevangelized pagan, but for the most part, it's accurate. In fact, it accurately describes a great many civilized people as well, including perhaps a majority of those attending our great universities today, faculty included. Mankind without Christ is essentially in the business of suppressing truth. In fact, our politically correct society may be the worst in history at suppressing truth. Charles Colson wrote about a drama professor at Arizona State University who was fired because his classroom behavior was so outrageous that even a morally permissive "anything goes" campus could no longer stomach it. What was his crime? He was teaching the plays of Shakespeare, a dead white European male, instead of plays written by postmodern feminist, gay, and ethnic authors!

But not only does mankind suppress truth. He knows there is an all-powerful creator God, but instead of worshiping Him, he worships the creation—perhaps idols, or the environment, or materialism—you name it—anything but a holy God.

Let me review. The first leg of the stool is the teaching of Scripture that conscious faith in Christ is required for salvation. The second leg is the fact that God has not left any individual of the age of accountability without revelation of Himself. Even if a person has never seen a Bible and never heard the name of Jesus, he *has* received revelation about God in nature and conscience. But what if a person responds to that revelation and tries to worship the true God? Won't he be accepted by God and admitted into heaven even if he doesn't know Jesus; after all, he did the

best he could with what he knew? Here is where the third leg of the stool comes into play.

3. God is willing to do *anything necessary*, including performing a miracle, to bring *the Gospel* to those who respond positively to His revelation in nature and conscience. I have put “the Gospel” in italics because it is perhaps the key concept in this proposition. So let me define it. The Gospel, as narrowly defined in 1 Cor. 15, is “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” I am saying that the knowledge that Jesus died and rose again for our sins is absolutely essential to salvation, but I am also saying that God will do whatever is necessary to provide that information to any true seeker after Him.

Imagine with me for a moment that you are a native American Indian in 1575, before the Pilgrims came, before anyone from Europe had settled on this continent, before the Bible was brought here or the name of Jesus was known here. And suppose you acknowledged the true God and sought to worship Him. Would you be “saved” and eligible for heaven? I would say, “No, not if that’s the whole story.” But would there be any *hope* for you? I would say, “Yes, definitely,” because I believe God would do whatever it took to give you the truth about Jesus. And I say that on the basis of two stories from the NT book of Acts. Let me share these stories and then try to establish my point.

Exclusivism finds strong support in two biblical passages:

1. The first is the story of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, recorded in Acts 10. I wish we had time to read the whole story, but we don’t, so I’ll tell it. Cornelius and his whole family were devout and God-fearing. The author says he was righteous, he prayed regularly, and he gave generously to religious causes. *But he didn’t know Jesus.* I suggest to you that he was as good as a man can be without Christ. Now please understand that God didn’t take the attitude, “Leave him alone. Cornelius is a God-fearer and that’s sufficient. He’s going to heaven.” No, He actually does something amazing, performing a whole series of miracles so that this righteous, good, generous God-seeker could hear about Jesus and be saved.

The first miracle was a vision that came to Cornelius by an angel of God telling him that God had heard his prayers and urging him to send some of his servants to Joppa to find a man named Simon Peter. The next miracle was even greater. God gave Peter a vision that turned his whole world upside down. Up to this point Peter has been an orthodox Jew, abstaining from unclean foods and avoiding Gentiles. But in this vision God sent a sheet down from heaven full of unclean animals and told Peter to kill them and eat.

Peter objected to God’s instructions, saying he had never eaten anything but kosher food and wouldn’t start now. God reprimanded him for calling anything impure that God had made clean. Peter’s problem was that he was still living by the OT Mosaic law and didn’t realize that the death of Jesus had removed the Mosaic Law as a rule of life over believers. He’s not alone. There are a lot of Christians today still laboring under the burden of the Law.

At any rate, this happened three times, and while Peter was wondering what it all meant,

Cornelius' servants arrived asking for him. The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them because God had sent them. When he arrived at Cornelius' house, a two-day trip away, he found a large gathering of people, to whom he said,

"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. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection (perhaps not entirely true, but close). May I ask why you sent for me?" (Acts 10:27, 28).

The rest of the story is fascinating, but the bottom line is that Peter preached "the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all," (verse 36). He preached the perfect life of Jesus, His powerful ministry, His death on the Cross, His resurrection, His post-resurrection ministry, and forgiveness through His name. And the result was that Cornelius and many of his friends heard the message, believed the message, received the Holy Spirit, and were even baptized. That this is the point at which Cornelius is actually saved (not when he was devout and God-fearing) is clearly stated by Peter in Acts 11:14 as he tells the story all over again. I don't think it's any accident that Luke devotes most of two long chapters to this story, giving Cornelius more press than almost anyone in the NT other than Jesus and the Twelve Apostles! The account must be significant in the plan of salvation. I think it's significant because it tells us the lengths to which God will go to take the Gospel to a God-seeker who hasn't heard about Jesus.

2. The other case study I want us to briefly consider is that of the Ethiopian eunuch from Acts 8. You can read the story, and I hope you will. In essence this is what happened. This man was an important official in the government of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians; in fact, he was the Secretary of the Treasury. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship (I suppose he had learned from some traveler that the Jewish people had an inside track with the true God). While in Jerusalem he went to a religious bookstore and picked up a scroll of the prophets, and as his chariot was riding through the Gaza desert on the way home, he happened to be reading the 53rd chapter of Isaiah.

Meanwhile God performed a miracle by sending an angel to Philip the evangelist, who told him to go to the desert and wait by the highway. When the eunuch's chariot came along, the Holy Spirit told Philip to run along side of it. He saw the Ethiopian reading a scroll and asked him if he understood what he was reading. "How can I?" he asked, "unless someone explains it to me?" Eventually the Ethiopian stopped and invited Philip to get into his chariot and ride along. Philip explained to him that the 53rd chapter of Isaiah was a prophecy about Jesus, and Philip shared the Gospel with him. The eunuch believed and was baptized, and as soon as he came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit suddenly took Philip away and plopped him down in Azotus, at least 20 miles north, to do some more evangelistic work there.

Now I would like to ask you this question about these two stories. What's the point? If the God-fearing seeker can go to heaven even though he doesn't know Jesus, why does God bother to go to such lengths to tell Cornelius and this Ethiopian about Jesus? Could it just be possible that they had to know Jesus in order to be saved? I think the significance of these accounts is that God will go to any lengths necessary to bring the good news about Jesus to anyone who

responds positively to the revelation he receives in nature and conscience. God will not leave the seeking person in his ignorance, but will bring him the full truth so he can be saved. If he did it for a Roman and for an Ethiopian, what's to prevent Him from doing it for an American Indian in 1575 or a Yanomao Indian today?

Paul proclaims in Romans 10:13, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. 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?" Paul is attempting to motivate us to be concerned for the lost. We are supposed to be the Peters and the Philips who take the Gospel to those who have never heard.

But, friends, if we refuse to go, do you think God's hands are tied? If there were no missionaries available for the American Indians, do you think they were, *for that very reason*, doomed to hell? I don't. I believe wherever there are seekers after truth, God will provide a way for them to learn about His Son. Jesus once said that if His disciples remain quiet, "the stones will cry out." God is not willing that *any* should perish, according to Peter, and Jeremiah adds, "'And you will seek me and find me, when you search for me with all your heart. And I will be found by you,' declares the Lord!"

So, when the exclusivist, like myself, says that hell is the destiny of those who have never heard, he is not condemning innocent seekers to eternal torment; rather he assumes that if there are true seekers out there (and there are probably very few^v), they will not be left without knowledge of how to be saved, even if it takes a miracle to get it to them.

The bottom line, friends, is that we must avoid becoming calloused and indifferent toward the unevangelized (which is criminal), or unduly optimistic that natural revelation alone will save them (which is unbiblical).

Conclusion: I humbly acknowledge that I may not have the last word on this difficult subject. More brilliant minds than mine have come to different conclusions. But one thing I know—no one in this room can claim he or she has never heard the truth and file an appeal on Judgment Day on that basis. If you never heard the Gospel before you entered this room today, you have heard it today. And in case you missed it, let me say it slowly and clearly. You are a sinner. The wages of sin is death, separation from God. But God solved your sin problem by allowing His own Son, who never sinned, to die in your place. Jesus paid your penalty. And God not only invites you but commands you to turn from your sin and receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

i. Robert Yarbrough, *The Future of Fairness*, lecture at Ministerial Association of the Evangelical Free Church of America, January, 1998.

ii. William V. Crockett, James G. Sigountos (Editor), *Through No Fault of Their Own: The Fate*

of Those Who Have Never Heard.

iii. Norman Anderson, *The World's Religions*, 234-5.

iv. John Sanders, *Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?* *The Evangelical Quarterly*, LX, No. 3 (July), 241-259.

v. Romans 3:11 says there aren't any, but that probably means there are none who seek God *on their own initiative*. A few however, like Cornelius and the Ethiopian, respond to God's general revelation and His conviction, and then they begin to seek Him. These are the ones I am talking about when I say God will see to it that they receive further revelation.