

Exclusivism vs. Inclusivism

A Brief Case for the Exclusive Nature of the Gospel & Salvation

“Can a person be saved by Christ if all they have is universal/general revelation?”

I believe the answer to this question is rather simple, as it is explicitly taught in Scripture. The answer, simply put, is NO. Yet, it troubles me how often I have come across (Evangelical) Christians who respond with a YES. In this post I hope to defend this exclusive characteristic of the gospel—that people must have a knowledge of Christ as revealed in the gospel, and believe in this gospel if they are to be saved. I would recommend the following books for anyone wanting to engage in further study on this issue:

Faith Comes by Hearing (edited by Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson)

Jesus: The Only Way to God: Must You Hear the Gospel to Be Saved? (by John Piper)

Is Jesus the Only Savior? (by Ronal Nash)

The following consists of a brief look at Psalm 19 and Romans 1:18-20 as supporting the exclusivist position, followed by further arguments for the exclusivist position. Real quickly, *inclusivism* is the belief that general revelation (nature; constitution of man; history)¹ is sufficient to save, whereas *exclusivism* is the belief that people must come into contact with the saving knowledge of the gospel to be saved. I personally do not like this terminology, as “exclusivist” has negative connotations. In reality, the gospel is inclusivistic in one sense (for all people; the free offer of the gospel), but exclusivistic in another sense (the only means of salvation, and people must come in contact with it). In this post I have tried to focus on what I have perceived to be foundational and critical issues.

Psalm 19

Verses 1-6. There are at least four essential things that need to be noticed in this passage. First, we *do* find that something of the glory of God is communicated to mankind by means of this general revelation: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (v. 1). However, we are not told what exactly this knowledge consists of. Second, this is a non-verbal revelation, and only so much can be communicated non-verbally. Third, notice that David (the psalmist) uses “God” in this passage. This word is not unique to the one true God and can be used to refer to the gods of the nations. Fourth, there are no spiritual blessings mentioned in this passage.

¹ Please note that history can include special revelation. After all, the Christian faith is a historical faith; that is to say that it is grounded in historical events (e.g. the exodus; crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus).

Verses 7-14. Again, there are at least four essential things to notice in this passage. First, we are now dealing with verbal revelation (the law of God). More knowledge can be communicated verbally, than non-verbally. Second, David does not use “God” in this passage, but he uses “LORD” (i.e. Yahweh), the covenant name of God. This name is unique to the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Third, spiritual blessings are mentioned in this passage as the result of this special revelation (e.g. “reviving the soul;” “making wise the simple;” “rejoicing the heart;” “enlightening the eyes”). Finally, in verse 14 the LORD is specifically referred to as the Redeemer.

Romans 1:18-20

There are a few things we must take note of in this text as well. Obviously, Paul’s focus is on general revelation (v. 20). Now, what does Paul say this general revelation reveals? The wrath of God. Now, I think it’s rather obvious that general revelation does not inherently reveal the wrath of God. In other words, there’s nothing inherent in the nature of general revelation that necessitates it revealing God’s wrath. Rather, the wrath of God is revealed from nature because sinful mankind suppresses the truth of God in unrighteousness. In other words, mankind instinctively knows that God exists and that He is the Creator of all things. However, they live in continual disobedience to Him. Therefore, mankind knows, instinctively, that they are worthy of God’s judgment. It’s as if nature testifies against them! Further, the knowledge of God revealed in nature is minimal: “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived...” While man may garner some understanding of what God is like by observing nature (just think of the ancient Greek philosophers), such knowledge is minimal and open to all sorts of twisting within man’s religions (again, just think of the ancient Greek philosophers). What little knowledge of God is revealed in creation is suppressed by fallen mankind. Yet, just because it is in the sinful nature of mankind to suppress such truth (e.g. Eph. 2:1-3) doesn’t mean that they are not held accountable, no matter how minimal the revelation. Notice also that there are no salvific blessings mentioned with regard to general revelation, which is the same thing we saw in Psalm 19:1-6.

But this is Paul’s point! Remember what Paul just stated before this passage: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (vv. 16-17). This is Paul’s thesis of his letter. Romans is essentially an apologetic for missions (preaching the gospel among the nations, especially to those who have yet to hear; cf. Rom. 10:14-17; 15:23-24). In short, Paul is making the case that mankind is hopeless apart from the saving knowledge of the gospel. I will attempt to develop this in more detail below.

Further Arguments for Exclusivism

1. General revelation is insufficient to save, first and foremost, because it is rooted in or founded from the very beginning (of creation), prior to the need of redemption. This may very well be one of the most overlooked characteristics of general revelation by inclusivists.

Some within the inclusivist perspective have questioned, in an attempt at ridiculing the exclusivists, “What kind of God would reveal enough knowledge of Himself to condemn mankind, but not to save it?” At first glance such a question may seem to have some merit. However, there is a fundamental flaw present within. It assumes that general revelation, which exclusivists believe is enough to condemn and not save, was given sometime *after the Fall of man*. This, of course, is not the case. What is revealed in general revelation today is what was revealed in general revelation from the moment of creation; and, of course, there was no need of redemption when God created. Indeed, He made all things very good (Gen. 1:31). It’s not until Genesis 3 that man sins and so casts all of humanity after them into spiritual depravity. Now special revelation is necessary (e.g. Gen. 3:15, 21), for special revelation communicates that knowledge of salvation not present within general revelation. In short, it was never God’s intention that general revelation communicate knowledge unto salvation.

2. General revelation fails to respond to the sinful nature of mankind. Of course, as already noted, general revelation was never intended to “respond” to mankind’s problem of sin and condemnation. But this is why it is not sufficient to save. According to Scripture, mankind is evil, corrupt, wicked, darkened, hard-hearted, by nature children of wrath, etc. (e.g. Gen. 6:5, 11-12; Jer. 17:9; Mk. 7:20-23; Eph. 2:1-3; 4:17-19). What fallen, sinful mankind needs is a radical, powerful transformation; they need to be born again (Jn. 3:3-5). Yet, it is not in the power of general revelation, as glorious as it may be, to do such a thing. Rather, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, specifically because the righteousness of God received by faith is revealed in it (Rom. 1:16-17). Further, the Holy Spirit works through the proclamation of the gospel to bring about regeneration, repentance, and faith (e.g. 1 Thess. 1:4-5; 2 Thess. 2:13-14); but this cannot be said with regard to general revelation. In short, general revelation does not communicate the saving knowledge of the gospel, and therefore does not have the power to save.

3. The Scriptures specifically teach that men and women must come into contact with the gospel if they are to believe and be saved. Perhaps one of the most striking passages is Romans 10:13-17 (please read). The text is rather straight-forward; people must call on the name of the Lord in faith if they are to be saved. But Paul then notes what must logically take place for this to happen: People can’t call on the Lord if they haven’t believed in Him; they can’t believe in Him if they haven’t *heard* of Him; they can’t hear without a *preacher*; and a preacher can’t preach unless he is *sent*. Then comes the capstone of the text, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (v. 17). In short, people must come into contact with the gospel if they are to be saved. Note these other passages as well:

1 John 1:1-4 “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—*that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have*

fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.” (Emphasis added.)

2 Timothy 2:8-10 “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, *as preached in my gospel*, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. *But the word of God is not bound!* Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, *that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” (Emphasis added.)*

Before drawing to a close, let me briefly respond to what seems to be a common question posed by inclusivists to exclusivists. I have heard and seen it asked (in various ways), “What about Old Testament saints? If people have to come in contact with the gospel to be saved, then how were they saved?” Simple, they were likewise saved by the gospel. Let us not forget that the Israelites were God’s specially chosen people from among the nations. They were surrounded with special revelation (e.g. prophets; the tabernacle along with its sacrifices). Their revelation of the gospel certainly wasn’t as full as it has been since the first advent of Jesus Christ, but that doesn’t mean they didn’t have the gospel. In fact, Paul explicitly tells us that they were saved in the same way (Rom. 3:19-26; note especially v. 26; cf. Gal. 3:8). Whereas they looked forward to the promises of God as revealed by the prophets and the tabernacle sacrifices (etc.), we look back to the finished work of Christ recorded for us in the New Testament.

Concluding Remarks

I believe a fundamental problem that leads to the inclusivist position is the denial of God’s sovereignty in salvation. Many within the inclusivist perspective speak as if God owes salvation, or at least a “chance” at it, to mankind, as if God would be unjust not to make it universally accessible. Such, of course, goes against the very concept of grace. Grace cannot be merited or demanded, otherwise it is no longer grace. Second, those within the inclusivist perspective typically have a less-than-biblical view of mankind. They typically believe man to be better than he is actually presented in the Bible. I get the sense that many inclusivists view mankind as victims in the world (or God’s court), rather than suspects. People think that mankind deserves salvation, but we don’t. That’s what’s so amazing about it, that God would choose to save any (amazing grace!). Finally, I believe many inclusivists have an unbalanced view of God’s character, often focusing on His love, to the exclusion or minimization of His other attributes (e.g. holy; righteous).

The reason I wrote so much² is because of the great importance of this subject, and because of the many supposedly evangelical, conservative Christians that believe salvation can be found outside of explicit faith in Jesus Christ as revealed in the gospel. We must stand up and defend and proclaim the exclusive nature of the gospel and salvation. People must hear the gospel if they are to be saved, and Christ has commissioned His church to take it to the world (e.g. Mt. 28:18-20; Lk. 24:44-49). The gospel is the means by which God saves!

² This was originally written as a Discussion Board post in response to an assignment question for one of my seminary classes. We were required to write at least 300 words, whereas this post contains over 2,000 words.