

**GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION:
EXPLORING THE QUESTION OF
INCLUSIVISM AND EXCLUSIVISM**

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The Issue

I want to address the question: Is general revelation sufficient for salvation, on its own? In order to wrestle with this topic adequately for an answer to the question, I will be taking a closer look at the two main camps of thought on the issue, inclusivism and exclusivism. These two approaches to the above question, will aid in demonstrating how important this topic is for the church and the individual today. My hope is that this brief survey of the issue will be thought-provoking and informative for the reader, as well as beneficial for their walk in Christ. Later in this work I will provide why I believe that exclusivism is the most accurate and faithful to the Scriptures when we speak of how one comes to salvation through the living God revealing himself to us.

Defining Terms

It will be helpful to know what is meant by general and special revelation before diving into the issue. My understanding of general revelation aligns with that of Millard Erickson who writes, “General revelation is God’s communication of himself to all persons at all times and in all places... General revelation is not something read into nature by those who know God on other grounds; it is already present by God’s work of creation and continuing providence” (p.122, 136). Another way of thinking of general revelation is the common graces of God such as sunrises and sunsets, seasons, weather, harvests, food and drink, relationships, etc. These are all things that can be had by all people at all times, that point to the fact that there is a God out there somewhere. It is often thought of as what can be found in nature. Again Erickson is helpful here, “General Revelation is most frequently thought of in connection with the creation’s amazing and impressive character, pointing to a very powerful and wise person, capable of designing and producing intricate variety and beauty” (p.123). The apostle Paul speaks of a law written on the hearts of those who do not have special revelation (Rom. 2:11-16) or what we would call a moral compass or conscience. However, I hold the belief that general revelation in itself is insufficient for salvation (which will be dealt with shortly). A few biblical

examples confirming general revelation would be psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” Acts 14:15-17:“He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons...”, the knowledge of God through history: (Job 12:23; Ps. 47:7-8; Isa. 10:5-13; Dan. 2:21; Acts 17:26), and knowledge of God through human mental capacity and physical structure: (Romans 2:11-16, Acts 17:22-31, Rom. 1:21-23).

What is meant by special revelation is, “...God’s manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places enabling those persons to enter into redemptive relationship with him” (Erickson, 144). Special revelation at its core is salvific in content. The need for revelation rests in light of the fall of man in Genesis chapter three. We no longer live in a world where God walks in the garden with man (Gen. 3:8). In other words, “...God’s direct presence, the most direct and complete form of special revelation, was lost” (Erickson, p.145). Sin now obscures the general revelation in such a way that there must be special revelation from God in order to come to a saving faith. For the, “...Primary result of special revelation is knowledge of God. By this we mean knowledge not only of the person of God, but also of what he has done, of his creation of the nature and situation of humans, of the relationship between God and humans” (Erickson, p.157). A few biblical examples confirming special revelation: Incarnation of Jesus Hebrews 1:1-2, Pharaoh Gen. 41:37-39; Nebuchadnezzar Dan. 2:47,3:26; Jonah Jon. 1:3-16 (Erickson, 127), “Anyone who has seen me (Jesus) has seen the father” (Jn. 14:9) and “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 Jn. 5:11-12). Further, in Romans 8:29-30 the apostle Paul says, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Unless one is a universalist, this text speaks of a separate call, an effectual call that is different than the general call of the gospel to all, thus showcase further the need for special revelation.

Positions

Inclusivism

“Jesus is the only way to God” and “One must place faith in Christ in order to be saved” are two statements, according to Trevin Wax, that most evangelicals believe to be sound and true biblical teachings (p.9). However, some evangelical leaders teach that, “...Jesus is the only way to God (Affirming statement 1) but that hearing and believing the gospel is not always necessary for salvation (denying statement 2). We call this position ‘Inclusivism’” (Wax, p.9). The inclusivist camp came about essentially to try to answer or remedy the question of salvation for those who have never heard the gospel proclaimed or who practice different religions. Where will they spend eternity? Can they be brought to saving faith in God without special revelation? Amos Yong helps us understand this position better,

An evangelical inclusivism does not propagate the notion that the religions themselves save as such, but only opens up the possibility that sufficient general revelation may predispose non-Christians toward the salvation that has been secured by Christ. (p.341)

There are many arguments for this viewpoint, but perhaps the most popular arguments for inclusivity in the biblical text come from the book of Acts, particularly chapters 2:10-11. The context of Acts chapter two is the day of Pentecost. As Matt Barret explains, “According to the inclusivist, the Spirit poured out on all flesh demonstrates that there is a saving, universal work of the Spirit even apart from the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (p.1). They come to this conclusion through Acts chapter ten where we learn about a man, an imperial commander, named Cornelius, who was, “...a devout man who feared God” and “prayed continually to God” (Acts 10:2). The question brought to light is, “Was Cornelius saved prior to hearing the gospel?” Prominent researchers and self-proclaimed inclusivists like Clark Pinnock and John Sanders state that, “...many like Cornelius have faith in God, wherever they live in the world, and therefore are accepted by God even though they have not yet heard the gospel of Jesus (Pinnock)” and, “Cornelius was already a saved believer before Peter arrived but he was not a Christian believer (Sanders)” (Barret, p.1). In his paper Barret cites Yong on this issue

who says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (p.3). Under this assumption of those in favor of inclusivity, one can be included among God’s people whether or not they have heard the gospel if they simply “fear God.” This includes even if they don’t know who the God is that they are proclaiming. For the inclusivist Cornelius is the perfect example.

Another layer to the argument is that of the holy pagan tradition in scripture (Yong, p.333).

Pinnock adds,

...numerous believing men and women, including Abel, Enoch, Noah, Job, Daniel (from Ezk.14:14, not to be confused with the biblical author), Melchizedek, Lot, Abimelech; Jethro, Rahab, Ruth, the Queen of Sheba, the Magi from the East... and others, 'who enjoyed a right relationship with God and lived saintly lives, under the terms of the wider covenant God made with Noah. (Yong, p.333)

For the inclusivist, general revelation is sufficient for salvation.

Exclusivism

According to D.A. Carson, “If we understand the message of the cross, it is because ‘God has revealed it to us by his Spirit (1 Cor. 2: 10)’” (p.52). This is essentially what is meant by special revelation. For the exclusivist one cannot come to saving faith without special revelation. When speaking of salvation, those in this camp believe that there is no salvation without knowing who Jesus is and what his cross work has accomplished. Todd Miles one of my seminary professors at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon in an article in *Credo Magazine* states that,

Jesus is of such singular importance in making God known, that to misunderstand Jesus is to misunderstand God. To reject Jesus is to reject God. Therefore it is not surprising, and ought not to be unsettling that Jesus would say, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me (Jn. 14:6).” (p.33)

Amos Yong, who self attests to leaning towards an inclusivist view of salvation, is helpful in defining the other party’s position, “For exclusivists, then, other religions are not salvific because Christ is neither present nor proclaimed through those traditions” (p.9). They rely on such texts as 1 Jn. 5:11-12 “...Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

Rom.10:9-17: ...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved....” Acts 4:12: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (verses taken from Miles’ argument p.30). To sum up the view of the exclusivist, Miles states that, “Jesus Christ does not save people unless people hear of Him and they repent and believe that gospel” (p.35).

Support/Objections

I find the argument for exclusivism much more compelling and true to Scripture than the one for inclusivism for three reasons: the straightforwardness of the scriptures on the issue, the place in redemptive history for which examples are drawn and questions are posed, and evangelism.

As Todd Miles states, “One of the most compelling arguments for why explicit faith in Christ is necessary for salvation is that there are a number of passages that explicitly say so, 1 Jn 5:11-12; Rom.10:9-17; Acts 4:12” (P. 30 and briefly explained above). John in his gospel defines the purpose of his book in chapter 20:31 to be, “...so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” Further, Miles points out something that should be obvious to the reader from John 14:6. He says, “Jesus’ language in John 14:6 is emphatic. ‘No one’ literally means ‘No one.’ There is no wiggle room in his language for alternative ways to the father” (p.32). Even more, in Romans 10:9-17, Paul taught that salvation comes through confession that Jesus is Lord and belief that God raised Jesus from the dead (Miles, 31). What we get from the three passages mentioned above by Miles are the words of Jesus, written by the apostle John and the words of the apostles Paul and Peter attesting to the fact that belief in Jesus is necessary for salvation.

Doubtless the question will be asked of the exclusivist, “What are we to do then with the story of Cornelius in Acts 10-11?” How are we to answer the question of fairness in salvation and those who have not heard the gospel? These are valid questions. Other passages such as, “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all

to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9); and "This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:3-4)" (Yong, 10), have been used by inclusivists to push back against the seemingly harsh exclusivist claims. I would ask a couple of questions of my own. Are we judging fairness by mere human terms, or are we sitting under the authority of the sovereign living God? Where in Scripture does it say man deserves or has a right to heaven? As Trevin Wax adds,

We cannot simply adopt the world's standard of "goodness" and apply it uncritically to the people around us. Scripturally speaking, the problem is not that good people do not go to heaven; the problem is there are no good people. (p.10)

In the same vein Miles answers the question at hand for us, "To the Biblical authors, the answer to the question, 'what about those who have never heard the gospel?' was 'Go tell them!'" (P.30). The issue of what to do with "god-fearing" Cornelius and the like can be better understood in a broader context. Inclusivists argue that Acts 10 exemplifies Acts 2. Matt Barret answers this question well,

In Acts 1 Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come upon the disciples so that they may be witnesses to Christ in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The same exact promise is made in Luke 24:48... Therefore, to come to Acts 2 and argue that the Spirit is being poured out in such a way that even those who never hear the gospel will be saved, is to completely misunderstand why the Spirit is being poured out in the first place, namely, so that many become witnesses, proclaiming not only the death and resurrection of Christ, but that forgiveness is ready for those who repent of their sin and trust in this resurrected Christ. (p. 5-6).

In Acts 2:17 where Peter quotes Joel, the "all people" when referring to the out pouring of the Spirit is all of those in the New Covenant who have put trust in Jesus Christ for salvation (Barret, 6). The spirit is poured out on every believer and is given to give witness of Jesus. One can't be saved without the Holy Spirit. Cornelius is never to have said to be with the Spirit and we must remember that God revealed himself "specially" to Cornelius in a vision (Acts 10:1-8) asking him to send for Peter, so he could hear the gospel and be saved. Notice in Peter's account in Acts 11:14 the future tense "will be saved" for Cornelius and his house hold's salvation. This means that Cornelius though he feared God, was not saved until he heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. Why then is there an argument

by the inclusivist that those who fear God are saved? I think one reason could be the misunderstanding of our place in redemptive history. In the Old Covenant, yes this would have been enough, as Miles states,

Under the Old Covenant, the prophet could declare that, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Joel 2:32), but after Jesus finished his work, the Lord who is to be called upon for salvation is specifically identified as Jesus (Rom. 10:9-13). (p. 33).

Thus to fear an abstract god is not the same thing as fearing the God-Man Jesus Christ. D.A. Carson expounds,

Thus, against the claims of other intermediaries, Colossians insists not only on the supremacy of Christ but also on the exclusiveness of his sufficiency...Christians recognize one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one hope, and one God (Eph. 4:4-6). (p.45)

On Mars Hill in Athens in Acts 17 Paul says essentially that gone are the times in which God overlooked ignorance,

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31).

Earlier in the chapter we learn that in Athens there was an altar dedicated to “the unknown god” (v23). Paul brings this to their attention and says he is there to proclaim to them who the unknown god is. Therefore, this worship of the unknown god even if it were exclusive, would not be enough for salvation either. Salvation is in Christ alone. Todd Miles is helpful here in this context as well writing that,

The apostles had ample opportunities, particularly in the Greco-Roman context, to speak of other ways of being saved, if any existed...but the apostles stayed on message regardless of the context and the reception. I suspect they did so because they had no alternative means of salvation to offer. (p. 32)

For the question of evangelism, I would have to ask an inclusivist, “What is the point, if one doesn’t have to know who Jesus is? If they can come to belief another way, why go to the ends of the earth?” Trevin Wax argues that, “adopting the inclusivist approach does harm to our Christian witness by lessening the urgency of taking the gospel to people who have never heard of Jesus Christ” (p.9). It seems to me that the importance of Jesus for Salvation is somewhat put on the backburner for the

inclusivist and runs the danger of becoming relativistic. As Erickson notes, “It was now (given Christ) insufficient simply to know of God’s existence and something of what he is like” (P.145). Inclusivism then takes the objective truth of salvation in Christ alone and makes it more subjective and even puts salvation somewhat in the hands of man, rather than Christ.

A just judge we do have, and he can reveal himself through many avenues in regards to special revelation, such as personal encounter (Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus, Cornelius’ dream, etc.) and mighty act, and propositional revelation (Scripture for example). However, general revelation is insufficient for salvation. General revelation is not at conflict with special revelation, for general revelation helps us to understand special revelation. It can tell us there is a God, but not who that God is and what we must do to be in right relationship with him.

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