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Exceptions to the Rule? The Salvation of Old Testament Believers and the Unevangelised

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“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 whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Romans 10:13-15)

“If Christ declares Himself to be the way of salvation, the Grace and the Truth, ..what has become of men who lived in the many centuries before Christ came? ..What, then, has become of such an innumerable multitude of souls, who were in no wise blameworthy, seeing that He in whom alone saving faith can be exercised had not yet favoured men with his advent?” (Porphyry)¹

“And yet we know, when we stop to think about it, the large majority of the human race who have lived and died up to this present moment have lived either before Christ or outside the borders of Christendom” (John Hick)²

Introduction

Those who affirm the uniqueness and particularity of Christ in terms of truth, revelation and salvation, and who have traditionally maintained that an explicit confession of Christ is necessary for salvation, have always had to deal with the ‘problem’ of the unevangelised: those who have never heard of Christ through no apparent fault of their own. In recent times, and due to the rise of both ‘factual’ and ‘cherished’ pluralism, the fate of the unevangelised has been fiercely debated among evangelicals because the subject appears to form a hub where many doctrinal spokes converge, doctrines which in the past have been integral in shaping the evangelical identity. The position known as ‘inclusivism’ states that the unevangelised can be saved by Christ without knowing about Him (i.e. Christ is *ontologically* necessary for salvation but not *epistemologically* necessary), and has been argued in varying degrees of certainty and sophistication by a number of evangelicals.

In many instances, the foundational theological principles on which the inclusivist justifies his position, are the same as other positions which state that the unevangelised can be saved, namely: God’s wish that all be saved, Christ’s universal provision of salvation, and issues concerning the justice and fairness of God. However, in this paper I do not wish to look at these general principles but rather to focus on one specific piece of evidence distinctive to the inclusivist position proper, that is the analogy drawn between the salvation of those who ‘*had* not heard’ the gospel because they lived before Christ (the ‘chronologically pre-Messianic’) and those who ‘*have* not heard’ the gospel due to geographic, social or cultural factors (the ‘informationally pre-Messianic’). To do this I will focus on the argument as outlined by Clark H. Pinnock who I think presents the most detailed, nuanced (and probably bold) defence of evangelical inclusivism.

The Analogy between OT Believers and the Unevangelised Outlined

Pinnock believes that those who have never heard of Christ can be saved by the "faith principle"³ enshrined in Heb 11:6, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek Him." He draws our attention to the 'holy pagans' of the Old Testament, that is Gentile believers such as Enoch, Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab and Job. Such figures fell outside the stream of revealed religion given to Abraham and then Israel, but were saved because they cast themselves on the mercy of God despite having a conceptually inadequate theology. They had faith and trusted in Him, and God took account of this. Pinnock says that no evangelical today would doubt the salvation of these figures despite the fact they never knew about Christ. Pinnock then asks whether it would make any difference if a figure like Job had been born in A.D. 1900 in Outer Mongolia? He believes God would deal with a person in the same way, for the unevangelised are informationally pre-Messianic and in the same spiritual state: they can be saved by faith like these chronologically pre-Messianic figures. For Pinnock it is not a certain amount of theological information that is important, but the direction of the heart and the way people respond to the revelation of God available to them.

Pinnock believes that the analogy between the chronologically and informationally pre-Messianic is valid because both groups fall under the universal covenant that God established with Noah in Gen. 8. If salvation denotes a relationship with God, then people can be saved under the Noahic covenant, the Old covenant established with Abraham, and the New covenant established in Christ. He admits that although there is more complete knowledge and assurance in the later covenants, God can relate savingly to people in all three covenants, the condition for salvation being faith in all three dispensations. Therefore, another strand is added to strengthen Pinnock's analogy, as it is not only 'holy pagans' who were saved by the 'faith principle,' but pre-Messianic Jews who were also saved by faith while having no knowledge of Christ.

Turning to the unevangelised, Pinnock's argument seeks to widen the boundaries of knowledge required for salvation. Rather than having a restrictive definition of faith which must include knowledge of Christ and which is only available through the gospel proclamation (ie 'special revelation'), Pinnock's definition means that saving knowledge is present in so called 'general revelation': the *imago Dei*, *sensus divinitatis*, and God's providential witness in creation. Salvation can therefore be a universal possibility be-

cause 'general revelation' is a universal revelation. God has not left himself without a witness (Acts 4:17). On the nature and efficacy of general revelation, Pinnock argues against the traditional evangelical understanding which has maintained that it is insufficient to save. Firstly, it is said to be epistemologically deficient and contains no redemptive truths. The most it can do is reveal our guilt before God. What is needed is a more effectual revelation, and this comes through the stream of redemptive history culminating in the incarnation: "this fuller knowledge of God's nature and redemptive purposes provide the objective basis for faith's informed decision."⁴ Secondly, even if this revelation could save, no-one would ever respond positively to it as humanity's sinfulness continually suppresses the truth about God. General revelation is sufficient to condemn but lacks the sufficient grace and enablement which makes faith possible, even faith which involves honouring God, giving Him thanks or casting oneself on God's mercy.

Pinnock strongly rejects both of the above arguments. Firstly, there is enough propositional content in general revelation to fulfil the 'faith principle'. All humanity can know God exists, realise their inadequacy, and throw themselves on the mercy of God, hoping God will answer their plea. Secondly, in response to the claim that even *if* the 'faith principle' was sufficient in terms of knowledge, no-one would ever throw themselves on the mercy of God because of the depth of sin, Pinnock responds by saying that although sin is entrenched, part of being made in the image of God means we are able to respond freely to Him. Far from being a hypothetical possibility we know people can and do respond to the light they have been given because there are many examples in biblical history. The 'holy pagans' of the Old Testament were saved precisely in this way - realising their own sin and casting themselves on the mercy of God. Indeed God ordained that this could be a way to salvation in his covenant with Noah.

The Analogy Between OT Believers and the Unevangelised Assessed

How should evangelicals assess this analogy? While it appears attractive, I wish to outline a number of points which I believe should be borne in mind and which ultimately question the forcefulness of the analogy. Firstly, it is important to note the limited strength of arguments from analogy which rely on inference. As Phillips notes, "arguments from analogy are tenuous, and their probability depends on the number of corresponding entities between the two analogues. The analogies from 'those who *had* not heard,' have some points of correspondence with the case of 'those who *have* not heard,' but not enough for the confidence with which many evan-

gelicals baptize the Untold.”⁵ Secondly, the question must be asked as to what precisely are ‘the points of correspondence’? I contend that Pinnock’s analogy between pre-Messianic believers and the unevangelised decontextualises both parties in, and flattens the contours of, the history of redemption. Pre-Messianic believers were not responding to an abstract and generalised faith principle, but were in direct contact with the Lord Himself. This can be substantiated by the two dominant evangelical redemptive-historical frameworks. Firstly, those of a more dispensational persuasion can argue for an “epoch-related discontinuity.”⁶ Here it is argued that in pre-Messianic dispensations, people *could* be saved without explicit knowledge of Christ. However, in this present dispensation, a confession of Christ is always necessary for salvation. Therefore one cannot parallel the way Abraham was saved with the way the unevangelised are saved. It is not comparing like with like as both parties exist within *sui generis* epochs. Secondly, those who adhere to some form of ‘covenant theology’, can argue for a “Christocentric continuity.”⁷ Here it is held that Israelite believers confessed Christ, albeit in an embryonic and typological way. In other words, there is no material difference between the content of faith in Old and New Testaments. Therefore, if there is an analogy to be drawn, it is not between the unevangelised and pre-Messianic believers, but between pre-Messianic believers and those who explicitly confess Christ today. There is continuity of special revelation to Israel which progresses and develops the truth of God’s promises. There is one covenant of grace which has reached full manifestation in Christ.

But what about the ‘holy pagans’ that Pinnock cites? Here, one needs to be cautious as to the level of certainty regarding what one can prove or disprove with these figures, as the Bible does not go into great biographical detail concerning them. Having said this however, doubts can be raised as to the validity of the analogy between such ‘holy pagans’ and the unevangelised. I suggest that the epithet ‘holy pagan’ is a contradiction either because, the examples Pinnock cites were pagans who *became* saints by virtue of being ingrafted into Israel, or they were never pagans, but were recipients of a special revelation.

Paul makes use of the concept of ingrafting when speaking about the Gentiles: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). The idea of ingrafting may help us to explain the status of figures such as Lot, Jethro, Rahab and Naaman. On coming into contact with Israel they were ingrafted into the Israelite community. This ingrafting meant that they would be saved as any other Israelite.

However, while this may be true for certain figures

it does not explain every case. In dealing with the mysterious Melchizedek in Gen. 14, who apparently had a special relationship with God before ever having come into contact with Abram, one must immediately recognise that perhaps the most important feature of Melchizedek (especially to the writer of Hebrews) is his mysterious and enigmatic nature: “Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest for ever” (Heb. 7:3). The Bible says nothing of his conversion or encounter with God, nor his parentage, and this makes saying anything certain about Melchizedek and his origins, difficult, if not impossible. That said, I suggest that in trying to draw an analogy between Melchizedek and the unevangelised, Pinnock may be guilty of the hermeneutical error which involves identification and universalizability: “what is stated to be true of a particular individual in Scripture is assumed to be true of the whole of humanity *mutatis mutandis*.”⁸ It is important to remember where the Melchizedek story comes in the history of redemption. It appears that God’s way of revealing Himself at that time was not through one particular way, but through a multiplicity of ways: theophany (Gen.15:17;17:1); vision (Gen.15:1;46:2), dream (Gen.20:3), angelic visitation (Gen.16:7;22:11). Melchizedek experienced a divine revelatory and saving initiative, but that this was a time when such experiences were considered normative: this is how God communicated Himself to His people whether Adam, Noah or Melchizedek. They all fall under God’s saving tradition. This is the line taken by Demarest/Harpel who contrast Melchizedek’s knowledge of God with the limited knowledge that can be discerned from general revelation, suggesting that God could have directly communicated with Melchizedek through a dream or theophany.⁹ To compare therefore, this stage of history with post-Messianic history seems problematic, especially when one considers Hebrews 1:1,2: “In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through various prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”

Having said this, and in fairness to Pinnock, what Ramesh Richard and Demarest/Harpel do consider *exceptional* in the Melchizedek incident is the origin of this direct special revelation because they concede that Melchizedek’s knowledge of God was independent of the normative channel of revelation: in this case the Abrahamic line. Demarest/Harpel state that figures like Melchizedek, “offer illustrations of God’s activity outside the usual vehicles of his saving purpose.”¹⁰ However, they are quick to note that cases like Melchizedek appear to be exceptions to the rule and cannot demonstrate conclusively that many are saved this way, as Pinnock would like to believe. Just because God may have revealed Him-

self at a particular time, in a particular way, to a particular person, does not mean that this can be generalised into a universal principal.

Finally, what about Pinnock's claim that both holy pagans and the unevangelised fall under the Noahic covenant? While this is true, the issue to focus upon is the meaning of this covenant in Gen. 9:1-7. Leaving aside the ethical theme of murder and the punishment of murder, evangelicals have traditionally interpreted this covenant in a purely non-saving physicalist way, precisely because the text calls for such an interpretation. As Grudem points out "The covenant that God made with Noah after the Flood was not a covenant that promised all the blessings of eternal life or spiritual fellowship with God, but simply one in which God promised all mankind and the animal creation that the earth would no longer be destroyed by a flood."¹¹ The Noahic covenant cannot carry the weight of Pinnock's interpretation of universal *saving* blessings.

Conclusion

The salvation of pre-Messianic Gentile believers may highlight extraordinary *means* through which God has chosen, and possibly chooses, to savingly reveal Himself. However, in terms of *content* I do not believe there are sufficient likenesses to accept an analogy between the nature of Old Testament faith rooted in a personal redemptive revelation, and the knowledge of God gleaned from general revelation. Inclusivists must look elsewhere to substantiate the claim that Christ is ontologically necessary for salvation but not epistemologically necessary for those who have never heard the Gospel.

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- ⁹ Bruce A. Demarest & Richard J. Harpel, 'Don Richardson's 'Redemptive Analogies' and the Biblical Idea of Revelation' in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (1989), pp. 330-340.
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Further Reading

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With the support of the Whitefield Institute, Daniel recently completed his PhD entitled "The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology" which looks in detail at the work of Clark Pinnock, and which has been accepted for publication by Paternoster Press. Daniel is currently a part-time research associate at King's College London, funded by the Church Mission Society and researching into the area of mission in Western popular culture.