

DESIDERATA¹
ROMANS 2:12-16, *WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD?*
OCTOBER 19, 2008

BIG IDEA: BIG IDEA: TRUSTING JESUS CHRIST AS SAVIOR IS ONE'S ONLY HOPE OF SALVATION.

THE HOT QUESTION: Is there any possibility that someone who has never heard about Jesus or the Bible could somehow get saved by having faith in what he knew of God through conscience and nature? (per **Romans 1:20**, *God's invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen...*)

“UNIVERSALISM”

1. Man-on-the-street theology and Liberal Protestantism—*All religions are just different paths that lead to the top of the same mountain.*
2. *Gulley and Mulholland argue from what might be called the logic of grace as they construe it. Since grace is unmerited, it must be equally available to all. And not merely available, for the God they envision regards even a single lost soul as a defeat to his relentlessly loving will. Hence, in the words of Madeleine L'Engle quoted at the end of the book, “All will be redeemed in God's fullness of time, all, not just the small portion of the population who have been given the grace to know and accept Christ. All the strayed and stolen sheep. All the little lost ones.”²*

“INCLUSIVISM”

1. The late Pope John Paul II: He quotes approvingly from the *Council's Constitution on the Church*—*In fact, those who through no fault of their own are nor aware of the Gospel of Christ and of the Church, but who nonetheless search sincerely for God, and with the help of grace attempt to carry out His will, known through the dictates of their conscience—they too can attain eternal salvation. Nor will Divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who have not yet arrived at a clear knowledge and recognition of God, and who attempt, not without divine grace, to conduct a good life” (Lumen Gentium 16)³*
4. Liberal Protestantism—Newbiggin
“What happens to the non-Christian after death?” I want to affirm that this is the wrong question and that as long as it remains the central question we shall never come to the truth. And this for three reasons:
 - a. First, and simply, it is the wrong question because it is a question to which God alone has the right to give the answer.... (177)
 - b. By concentrating on the fate of the individual soul after death, it abstracts the soul from the full reality of the human person as an actor and sufferer in the ongoing history of the world. (178)
 - c. The third reason for rejecting this way of putting the question is the most fundamental: it is that the question starts with the individual and his or her need to be assured of ultimate happiness, and not with God and his glory.... Christians ...have privatized this mighty work of grace and talked as if the whole cosmic drama of salvation culminated in the words “For me; for me”; as if the one question is “How can I be saved?” leading inevitably to the question, “how can anyone be saved?” But this is a perversion of the gospel. For anyone who has understood what God did for us all in Jesus Christ, the one question is: “How shall God be glorified? How shall his amazing grace be known and celebrated and adored? How shall he see the travail of his soul and be satisfied?” The whole discussion of the role of the world religions and secular ideologies from the point

¹ *Desideratum: Something considered necessary or highly desirable.*

² From a book review by John Wilson, “A Distorted Predestination,” *Christianity Today* (September 2003), 73.

³ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 193.

of view of the Christian faith is skewed if it begins with the question, Who is going to be saved at the end? (179-180)⁴

5. “Generous Orthodoxy”—Brian McLaren
- *[T]he centrality of Christ is combined with openness appropriate for generous orthodoxy. For instance, the biblical witness to Jesus Christ as the unique Savior and hope of the world does not demand a restrictive posture concerning salvation for those who have never heard the gospel or those in other religious traditions...His discussion follows in the spirit of the influential missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin who articulated his own position concerning Christ and salvation along the following lines: exclusive in the sense of affirming the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but not in the sense of denying the possibility of salvation to those outside the Christian faith; inclusive in the sense of refusing to limit the saving grace of God to Christians, but not in the sense of viewing other religions as salvific...⁵*
 - *For too many people the name Jesus has become a symbol of exclusion, as if Jesus’ statement “I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father except through me” actually means, “I am in the way of people seeking truth and life. I won’t let anyone get to God unless he comes through me.”⁶*
 - *McLaren stresses that his view is not ...a kind of “everybody-is-okay/all-religions-are-equally-true” relativist/pluralistic tolerance...⁷*

“EXCLUSIVISM OR RESTRICTIVISM—CLASSIC ORTHODOXY, FUNDAMENTALISM, AND MANY/MOST EVANGELICALS [Newbigin calls this “the strictly exclusivist view”]

1. People must hear about and believe in Jesus Christ to be saved.
2. If not, then we would be better to not send missionaries—since the message may condemn them.
3. The idea of the “noble savage” living up to the light he has is an unsubstantiated myth.
4. The “fairness” argument flies in the face of the sovereignty of God and the doctrine of election.
5. Universalism ignores the clear teaching of the Bible about eternal judgment.
 - **Matthew 7:13-14**, *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*
 - **Matthew 25:44-46**, *“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ ⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ ⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”*

THINKING IT THROUGH...

IN SEARCH OF THE NOBLE PAGAN

- The inclusivists believe that there are “noble pagans” (pagan saints, anonymous saints) out there who are eternally saved by living up to the light they have. God respects their faith and applies to them the saving merits of Jesus Christ, despite and because of the fact that they have never heard the objective truths of the Gospel.
- The burden of proof is on the inclusivists to produce credible examples of such seekers after God. The evidence from missionaries is not encouraging. For example, Adoniram Judson worked for seven years (1812-1819) in Burma and suffered much persecution before he had even one convert, Moug

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 173.

⁵ Foreword to Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 13.

⁶ McLaren, 70.

⁷ McLaren, 251

Nau. Where were all the noble pagans eager to hear about the true God? Shortly thereafter a few more were saved.⁸

- *The issue, therefore, is not that the unevangelized have not put their trust in a Person of whom they have never heard, but that they have suppressed the truth they have both received and understood.*⁹
- They are not condemned for rejecting a Saviour of whom they have never heard. There are condemned for sinning against the light they have.¹⁰

THE COLLISION OF CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM

- Calvinism asserts that God long ago elected and predestined all those who would be saved. Then, in point of time, he surely draws those people to himself in salvation. Absent the initiative of God, no one would be saved. The origin of faith is divine.
- Arminianism asserts an ability and responsibility in every man to respond to the salvation offered by God. Predestination is redefined as God's prescience of the future faith of the individual and his resultant choice of that person for salvation. The origin of faith is human.
- Regarding *Those Who Have Never Heard* the Calvinist believes that such people would never be able to respond to God without God's initiative in birthing faith in their hearts. Consulting Romans 8:29-30, it is apparent that what God starts, he pushes on to completion. If God had chosen an isolated heathen to be saved, God would certainly provide him the objective truths to enable him to come to the fullness of faith.¹¹

WOULD THE REAL PAGAN SAINT PLEASE STAND UP

- Inclusivists point to certain Old Testament people before the Mosaic Covenant as examples of "pagan saints," such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Melchizedek. It is clear in Scripture that these people all knew God and were eternally saved.
- However, the common factors in these instances are 1) extraordinary divine revelatory and salvific initiatives and 2) a human faith response.
- These instances do not provide precedence of a human faith response from the observation of general revelation.

THE CORNELIUS FACTOR

- Inclusivists point to Cornelius (Acts 10) as an example of the "pagan saint." But note this: *The narrative really insists that a believer in God must become a believer in Christ...In Acts 10, Cornelius is loftily described as a God-fearer, alms giver, one who prayed continually, devout and righteous, and given angelic direction...Now if this paragon of paganness had to be directed to Christ in this life, why should not everyone else who seeks the true God?*¹²
- Adoniram Judson of Burma wrote, *The spirit of inquiry . . . is spreading everywhere, through the whole length and breadth of the land.* [We have distributed] nearly 10,000 tracts, giving to none but those who ask. I presume there have been 6000 applications at the house. Some come two or three months' journey, from the borders of Siam and China - 'Sir, we hear that there is an eternal hell. We are afraid of it. Do give us a writing that will tell us how to escape it.' Others, from the frontiers of Kathay, 100 miles north of Ava - 'Sir, we have seen a writing that tells about an eternal God. Are you the man that gives away such writings? If so, pray give us one, for we want to know the truth before we die.' Others, from the interior of the country, where the name of Jesus Christ is a little known - 'Are

⁸ Theology through Technology. <http://www.tlogical.net/bioadjud.htm>. Accessed 10.19.08. In 1832 there were 217 converts; in 1836, 1144 baptisms; 47 in 1839. *At the time of his death [1850] there were over 7000 baptized Christians in Burma along with 63 churches and 123 missionaries and pastors.*

⁹ J. Ronald Blue in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, "Untold Billions: Are They Really Lost?"

¹⁰ Robert C. McQuilken, *The Message of Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947), 29.

¹¹ Romans 8:29-30, *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* ³⁰ *And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

¹² Ramesh P. Richard, *The Population of Heaven* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 61.

you Jesus Christ's man? Give us a writing that tells us about Jesus Christ."¹³—Note that these seekers had no assurance of salvation. They had an assurance of peril. They did not find hope until they reached the missionary who gave them the objective truths of God's special revelation in the message of Jesus.

THE PRECEDENCE OF CULTURES OF PERDITION

- Assuming the existence of "pagan saints," it is troubling to see the evidence for widespread wickedness among people-groups of history. For example,
- The whole world was destroyed for excessive wickedness in the Noahic Flood. Only Noah and his immediate family were spared (8 souls). And this despite Noah's persistent preaching of righteousness.¹⁴
- The entire populace of Sodom and Gomorrah was destroyed excepting Lot's immediate family (four souls).¹⁵
- The entire population of Canaan was destroyed before the Israelites because of their wickedness, with the exception of Rahab and her immediate family.¹⁶

NARROW IS THE GATE...

- Jesus affirmed in Matthew 7:13-14, *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it..."*
- In ancient Old Testament times, *Scripture does not portray masses of humans coming into salvation during that time....The redeemed were really few in number at that time, and those left out of the divine initiatives, that we know about, were incredibly large in number. More often there were massive judgments rather than massive salvations.*¹⁷
- *In 1993, approximately 7,000 representatives from more than 125 of the world's religions came to attend the second World Parliament of Religions in Chicago....A hundred prominent leaders from about a dozen creeds discussed, created, signed, and released a nine-page "Declaration of a Global Ethic"....Incredibly, the word "God" had to be left out of the 5,000-word "Declaration of a Global Ethic." Why? To include the word God would have excluded "all Buddhists and many faith groups with different views of God and the divine"....At the Parliament of World Religions, "God" was the offense; "Ultimate Reality" was passable.*¹⁸

UNPACKING THE MACEDONIAN CALL

- If there are noble pagans out there, then why the urgency of the missionary mandate?
- Romans 10:12-17, *[T]here is no difference between Jew and Gentile-- the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³ for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴ 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? ¹⁵ And*

¹³ Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 398-399.

¹⁴ 2 Peter 2:5, *he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others*

¹⁵ 2 Peter 2:7-8, *he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men ⁸ (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)*

¹⁶ Exodus 23:23, *My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out; Genesis 15:16, In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."; Leviticus 18:28, And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you; Leviticus 20:22-23, "Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. ²³ You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them."*

¹⁷ Richard, 40.

¹⁸ Richard, 71-72

how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"¹⁶ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?"¹⁷ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

- In 1811 Adonirum Judson wrote, *How do Christians discharge this trust committed to them? They let three fourths of the world sleep the sleep of death, ignorant of the simple truth that a Savior died for them. Content if they can be useful in the little circle of their acquaintances, they quietly sit and see whole nations perish for lack of knowledge.*
- Why the urgency of the Macedonian call? If the Macedonian seekers could be saved by living up to the light they had, why did they need Paul to come preach to them? Acts 16:9-10, *During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."*¹⁰ *After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

WHAT'S THE HURRY?; I'LL THINK ABOUT IT IN THE AFTERLIFE

- Hebrews 9:27, *[M]an is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...*
- Note that the Rich Man (Dives in tradition) got no second chance. Luke 16:23-26, *In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.*²⁴ *So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'*²⁵ *But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.'*²⁶ *And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'*

REFLECTIONS ON GOD-TALK

- *[S]pecial revelation is specific and contains more information than general revelation. General revelation tells about God's handiwork, but it does not tell about man's sinfulness, God's love, the cross, and the reception of its benefits.*¹⁹
- In pre-Christ times, *It is true...that people were saved without actually confessing Christ, but that does not mean they did not confess anything specific. Every dispensation has a specific and exclusive content to faith. In this dispensation, the actual and concrete confession of Christ is necessary for eternal salvation.*²⁰
- Note in the Acts 14 story of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra, 1) The statement that in Old Testament times God let the nations go their own way—not a very hopeful statement for the inclusivist view, and 2) How unresponsive the inhabitants of Lystra were to the message of Christ--Acts 14:13-19, *The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.*¹⁴ *But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting:*¹⁵ *"Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them."*¹⁶ ***In the past, he let all nations go their own way.***¹⁷ *Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."*¹⁸ *Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.*¹⁹ *Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.*
- **Romans 10:9-10**, *That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*¹⁰ *For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*
- **Acts 16:30-31**, *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*³¹ *They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved-- you and your household."*

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¹⁹ Richard, 89.

²⁰ Richard, 117.

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