

REVISITING THE INSUFFICIENCY OF GENERAL REVELATION

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*I affirm the honor code.

REVISITING THE INSUFFICIENCY OF GENERAL REVELATION

Those truths about God and humanity that are unveiled by the triune God to all mankind externally through creation and provision, and internally through human conscience and the *imago dei*, are categorized as general revelation.¹ By contrast, special revelation identifies truths about God and humanity that are only particularly communicated by the triune God through direct means such as divine encounters, Scripture, and most profoundly in God incarnate, Jesus Christ.² Two key differences between these types of divine revelation are their availability and content: general revelation is universally available rather than only particularly available, and its content is limited in comparison. Design and order in the universe, the conviction of moral right and wrong, the encounter of God's active providential care, and the intrinsic spiritual awareness that each human being is created to know God—all of these function

¹ Compare to other definitions: “‘General Revelation,’ sometimes called ‘natural revelation,’ may be defined summarily as *God the Trinity’s disclosure of certain truths to all human beings about himself and his relation to humanity through both external evidence and internal evidence.*” David S. Dockery and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *Special Revelation and Scripture*, Theology for the People of God (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024), 46. “General revelation is God’s communication of himself to all persons at all times and in all places.” Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 122. In his exposition of “revelation,” Paul Tillich strongly emphasizes and explicates the objective concept of “mystery.” Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:108. “Natural revelation” must be distinguished from what can be called “natural knowledge.” Knowledge of the sciences, mathematics, history, politics, or everyday experience, for instance, does not *necessarily* qualify as general revelation, for God must disclose something previously unknown apart from His revealing grace. Likewise, “natural theology” is not equivalent to general revelation. Natural theology is a type of theology that explores the study of God’s existence and nature *as derived from* natural revelation and natural knowledge *without reference to special revelation*. It reflects upon the contents of general revelation to deduce theories and arguments about God.

² “Divine encounters” is used here as an umbrella term that can be further divided into historical events, dreams or visions, divine speech, and mighty acts of God. Together, Dockery and Yarnell advocate for the indispensability of Christology as the centerpiece of special revelation Dockery and Yarnell, *Special Revelation and Scripture*, 47.

as the foundation of divine knowledge for every human being.³ Under dispute is the (in)sufficiency or (in)adequacy of this general knowledge as it relates to the salvation of people under the new covenant. In this paper, I argue that general revelation does not provide sufficient knowledge for a person to be saved today because (1) Scripture overwhelmingly points to this view, (2) thematic continuity between Israel and the Church makes more sense on this view, and (3) a *saving* relationship requires the illumination of the gospel.⁴

“What is Inclusivism?”

Does general revelation offer sufficient knowledge for a person to be saved in Christ?⁵

This question affords two mutually exclusive views. The negative position (thesis), which will be

³ Erikson refers to this intrinsic sense of God as a human being’s “religious nature.” At every point, “humans have believed in the existence of a higher reality than themselves... While the exact nature of the belief and worship practice varies considerably from one religion to another, many see in this universal tendency toward worship of the holy the manifestation of a past knowledge of God, an internal sense of deity,” which continues operating in human experience. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 124.

⁴ Herein lies a prime example of how the intra-doctrinal connections within the discipline of systematic theology raise the significance of a particular issue. While revelation is the keynote doctrine of discussion, other doctrines also contribute to the arguments at hand, such as soteriology, Christology, anthropology, and Scripture. It is far from an isolated topic. Not only is internal consistency between these various doctrines an implicit criterion as we evaluate opposing viewpoints, but there is also the potential for inadvertent ramifications upon a multiplicity of doctrines. We ought to be aware of these and diligent in avoiding them. Moreover, this topic has fashioned its way into a hotly debated apologetic question: “*What about those who have never heard?*” However, this paper is argued from a systematician’s vantage point, and therefore will not address apologetics. Furthermore, John Sanders notes that “Many have been driven to universalism [the belief that literally every person is saved], or even away from the faith, due to the harshness of the restrictivist teaching that God justly damns all the unevangelized because they are sinners.” John Sanders, “Inclusivism,” in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 26. Knowing how this topic can elicit emotional or moral concerns due to its salvific implications, I will attempt to deal with these arguments sincerely and sensitively, and I urge the reader to focus on the logic of the arguments rather than the emotions that they may invoke.

⁵ I would be remiss not to point out what I believe to be a fallacious narrative surrounding the insufficiency of general revelation. Traditional Christians might consider this matter settled and virtually undisputed: “the insufficiency of general revelation has been the consensus view for two thousand years and there is therefore no reason to discuss it further.” Contemporary Christian scholarship, to the contrary, has seen increased pushback upon this narrative. One scholar vehemently rejects the narrative that the sufficiency of general revelation is a modern fabrication as if it were historically unheard of. He mentions well-known theologians such as Justin Martyr, John Wesley, A.H. Strong, C.S. Lewis, William Shedd, and Bernard Ramn as exploring universal access to salvation. Apparently, it has never been officially taught in either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism that those who do not have access to special revelation are automatically condemned. Sanders, “Inclusivism,” 22. Hence, the sufficiency of

referenced as *exclusivism*, states that general revelation is insufficient for salvation: according to Scripture, no person today or in the future can be saved without special revelation.⁶ The affirmative stance, which will be referenced as *inclusivism*, argues that general revelation is sufficient for salvation: a person today can be saved even if they do not possess knowledge of special revelation.⁷ Inclusivism does not suggest that general revelation can accomplish the *grounds* for salvation. Rather, it states that general revelation offers sufficient *knowledge* for a person to become the beneficiary of Christ's atoning sacrifice.⁸ Christ remains the grounds for salvation. It is only because of Christ that one can be saved. General revelation does not provide its own substitutionary atonement. However, for those who do not have access to special revelation (unevangelized), they can respond to general revelation in faith and subsequently receive the full salvific forgiveness of Christ. Inclusivists must explain how this is possible.⁹

general revelation, while it remains a minority view, has obtained a respectable presence in theological scholarship and thus deserves our attention. I, although standing on the opposite aisle, am sympathetic to some of the philosophical arguments supporting the sufficiency of general revelation, making me well-equipped to deal charitably with the arguments.

⁶The necessity of both "special revelation" and "belief in Christ" is rightly stated and used somewhat interchangeably in this paper. Seeing as though "the Bible is the only source of both God's revelation as Redeemer and His plan of salvation," the Bible can be viewed as *normative* for salvation. Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology: In One Volume* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2011) 53.

⁷ There are other views proposed to deal with the question of the eternal destiny of the unevangelized. But these two terms will be used to bifurcate the two mutually exclusive views for clarity's sake.

⁸ On inclusivism, "a distinction is made between the *ontological* and *epistemological* grounds of salvation. For the former, Christ and his work is the only ground of salvation. But for the latter, it is possible for someone to benefit from Christ's work without knowing it." Stephen J. Wellum, *Systematic Theology: From Canon to Concept*, (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024) 1:201. By contrast, exclusivism, while potentially acknowledging these two logical aspects, views them as inseparable. What actually saves a person (ontological grounding) is essentially what one must know (epistemological grounding).

⁹ More specifically, "inclusivists must explain how God's *saving* grace is given in natural revelation and how saving faith results from it." Wellum, *Systematic Theology*, 1:202. Typically, this view stems from the overall concept that God desires for all to be saved (John 12:32; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9).

First, initial criticisms of inclusivism will be explained; then refutations of the main arguments in favor of inclusivism will be given; and lastly, a positive case will be made for exclusivism. If this can be accomplished, then exclusivism should be considered more plausible than the opposition.

Where Inclusivism Falls Short

Biblically speaking, inclusivism ought to be rejected because Scripture never affirms it and its defense requires strange or unlikely reinterpretations of Scripture. This criticism is intended as both a truth claim regarding the contents of Scripture and a methodological disagreement regarding the nature of Scripture. Methodologically, Scripture must guide the systematic beliefs regarding general revelation and salvation. Although philosophical insights are valuable, philosophy cannot be the driving force behind our view, given the nature of the question. I contend that no biblical passage explicitly teaches that, under the new covenant, there is an avenue to salvation apart from the special knowledge of Jesus Christ. I will defend this position further during the main arguments. If inclusivism cannot plausibly be found in Scripture, then it ought to be discarded.

In response to these criticisms, inclusivists may concede that Scripture never outright teaches their view, but not to worry, for certain passages may be inferred as support for inclusivism. Regardless of this refutable methodological maneuver to base its biblical support in inference rather than explicit teaching, these inferences involve hermeneutical gymnastics in order to make them “fit” the passage. Even concepts such as faith and grace are reinterpreted. Potentially more detrimental, exclusivists have the privilege of pinpointing several biblical passages that appear to explicitly teach their view, many of which seem plain and obvious

teachings. The opposition is therefore required to assert less obvious, and sometimes even strange, interpretations.¹⁰

Four Arguments for Inclusivism

An appeal to “*Holy Pagans*” is the first inclusivist argument. To show that salvation can occur outside the Jewish faith according to Scripture, inclusivists quote examples of “Holy Pagans,” or non-Jewish figures who did receive salvation, such as Job, Melchizedek, (possibly) Naaman, and the Ninevites in the Old Testament; and the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-28), Roman centurion (Matt 8:5-13), and Cornelius (Acts 10) in the New Testament. However, this argument hardly argues in their favor, for they seek to demonstrate that salvation can occur apart from special revelation, but each of these examples *does* involve special revelation from God.¹¹ The fact is that there are no biblical persons who were saved and yet did not receive some sort of special revelation. John Sanders, a scholar who argues for inclusivism, concedes this point but adds that this is not surprising: “the Bible does not contain any pure examples of believers

¹⁰ A third reason to reject inclusivism is worth mentioning. Namely, it leads to epistemological uncertainty of God’s Word related to salvation. By epistemological uncertainty, I mean to affirm that Scripture presents our epistemic measure of understanding regarding salvation. What we can know about salvation comes from God’s Word. Belief in Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit represents *what* we know about salvation, but *how* we know about salvation comes from the teachings of Scripture. Relying on sources of knowledge outside the explicit teachings of Scripture calls into question what we can know from Scripture altogether. If Scripture does not affirm that salvation occurs outside of special revelation, and yet we accept that it does regardless, then we undermine the epistemological basis upon which our belief in salvation is constituted. What we know from Scripture, according to what God emphasizes in His Word, is that profession of faith in Jesus Christ is the way to be saved. Surely our beliefs regarding salvation are far too important to be predicated on philosophical theories or human inferences. Ronald Nash shares this sentiment as he explains the “extremely high theological price tag” for its proponents, adding that “While their premises are highly speculative, their conclusions are hardly theologically harmless.” Ronald Nash, “Restrictivism,” in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 139.

¹¹ Erickson concludes regarding Melchizedek and Cornelius: “The problem is that we do not know enough about Melchizedek to know the basis for his relationship with Jehovah... Even less impressive is the case of Cornelius... [where the passage] seems to indicate that Cornelius did not experience salvation until Peter presented the gospel to him.” Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 127.

without any contact with special revelation for the simple reason that the Bible tells only of those people who came into contact with God's special activity in human history."¹² Both sides can agree that salvation apart from special revelation is not explicitly taught in Scripture.

Inclusivists add a second argument: *Christ's atoning death can be applied to persons who do not have a conscious knowledge of Christ, as reflected by premessianic believers.*

Persons who lived before Christ were saved, not by their own deeds but by the future death and resurrection of Christ, which they did not fully understand. Exclusivists may respond that premessianic believers were still believing in Christ by trusting in God's plan to bring the coming Messiah. The vast majority of Jews prior to Christ, however, had no idea that the Messiah would suffer and die for their sins, nor did this Messiah serve as the basis of their faith.¹³ Nevertheless, the second argument fails to distinguish salvation under the old covenant from salvation under the new covenant. Now that Christ has come to earth, died on the cross for sin, and inaugurated the Church, Christ is the mediator of salvation (Heb 9:15). I would agree that *Christ's atoning death has been applied to premessianic believers*, but that is not to say that salvation occurs this way under the new covenant.¹⁴

As a third line of argumentation, Sanders advances the biblical principle that *inclusion precedes exclusion, grace precedes wrath, and acceptance precedes rejection*.¹⁵ Inclusivists

¹² Sanders, "Inclusivism," 40.

¹³ Sanders, "Inclusivism," 38.

¹⁴ There is an avenue for inclusivists to counter. Namely, inclusivists have proposed that the new covenant is predicated upon the spread of the gospel and is therefore implemented geographically, not universally. Rather than one cataclysmic event of Christ inaugurating the new covenant, different people groups fall under the new covenant progressively based upon their access to the gospel. Once a people group is evangelized, they are then included under the new covenant. One wonders how inclusivists can reconcile this view with the book of Hebrews, let alone the entire New Testament.

¹⁵ Sanders, "Inclusivism," 30.

remind that God's grace is universal and applies to those who only have access to general revelation.¹⁶ Consider the parable of the wedding banquet, whereby the king sends invitations to all the people, whether good or bad, after those who were originally invited ignored the invitation (Matt 22:1-14). According to Christ, even the worst kinds of sinners in Jewish culture can be saved by His forgiveness (Matt 21:28-32). As a result of Christ's substitutionary atonement, reconciliation is offered to all people (Rom 6:10; Heb 10:12; 1 Pet 3:18). Inclusivists conclude from these passages that only those who neglect universal grace incur judgment: "God has already accepted all people prior to any response on our part, but not all accept his acceptance... Only those who decline to accept God's grace are rejected."¹⁷

This principle is ostensibly true, but Sanders takes it too far, as his use of the principle comes dangerously close (said charitably) to the conclusion that people are under God's saving grace by default. Ignorance must be bliss. But this fundamentally contradicts another biblical principle: *salvation by grace is a gift that must be received*. All humans are by nature deserving condemnation (Eph 2:3), but by faith in Christ we accept this gift and are saved (Rom 10:9). Nash shares my concern: "Sanders's words appear to set forth a new kind of universalism—a universalism for the unevangelized. It is a kind of universalism that admits only one possibility of perdition—namely, that which follows the rejection of the New Testament gospel."¹⁸ When

¹⁶ Inclusivists also mention that displays of judgment, wrath, or punishment are for the purpose of leading people toward repentance. For instance, God delayed His punishment against the Canaanites for their extreme wickedness to afford them time to repent.

¹⁷ Sanders, "Inclusivism," 33.

¹⁸ Ronald Nash, "Response to Sanders," in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 68.

properly applied, the principle does not require that those without special revelation are naturally under God's saving grace.

For the fourth argument for inclusivism, another principle is offered called *the faith principle*. It reaffirms that salvation comes through faith in God, which entails believing that He exists and seeking Him earnestly (Heb 11:6). Sanders identifies truth, trust, and effective action as the three elements of saving faith.¹⁹ God provides truth through general revelation, and faith requires a response of trust followed by actively living out that trust. This argument suggests that exclusivism mistakenly elevates the necessity of specific knowledge for a saving relationship to occur. Sanders asks the rhetorical question, "is it really knowledge that saves us, or is it God?" He continues, "God is the one who saves, and he does this despite people's varying theological understandings. People are acceptable to God if they respond in faith, however limited their knowledge is. God judges people on the basis of the light they have and how they respond to that light."²⁰

Admittedly, this statement sounds persuasive, but upon closer examination, it involves a reinterpretation of the biblical meaning of faith. This principle of faith exemplifies a maneuver to dilute the meaning of faith so as to broaden the scope of those who are saved according to its minimalist conception, even though there are no examples of this in Scripture.²¹ But what this

¹⁹ Sanders, "Inclusivism," 36.

²⁰ Sanders, "Inclusivism," 36-37. One could also state the faith principle in the form of a distinction between "Christians" and "believers." Persons who only have access to general revelation might not be Christians, but they are believers. Under the category of "saved" would be those who express faith in Christ explicitly—the Christians—and those who have belief in God on account of general revelation—the believers. Proponents of this concept would likely say that the main objective is for believers to become Christians; nevertheless, they are saved regardless. This version, similar to the faith principle, is susceptible to the same objections.

²¹ Even beyond the lack of biblical support for this meaning of faith, the principle opens the door for religious pluralism to manifest. If what is required for saving faith becomes so generic, then people of other religious affiliations would be included as well.

principle fundamentally misunderstands is that a response to the truth of general revelation is not how Scripture defines saving faith. Rather, it is predicated upon *intimately trusting in the unique one who offers salvation, acknowledging what one is being saved from, knowing how salvation has been accomplished, and understanding what promises await*. General revelation cannot sufficiently cover any of these four components.²² Moreover, if a person is limited strictly to a knowledge of general revelation, there is no reason to think that they *would* respond in genuine faith (Rom 1:18-23; 3:10-18).²³ When taken in context, the reference to Hebrews 11:6 as the primary verse supporting the *faith principle* refers to faith under the old covenant (“the ancients”), not the church today. Again, under the new covenant, there is no New Testament concept that a saving faith occurs apart from a conscious knowledge of Christ.

After exploring four main arguments supporting inclusivism—an appeal to “*Holy Pagans*”, *premessianic believers*, the *inclusion precedes exclusion principle*, and the *faith principle*—none of them make inclusivism plausible according to the standard of Scripture.²⁴ In

²² This does not eliminate the need for general revelation. Norman Geisler stresses, “That the Bible is superior in content to natural revelation does not mean natural revelation is not perfectly adequate for its God-given task.” Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 55. Barth potentially goes too far by rejecting general revelation as a category according to the understanding that all revelation is necessarily Christological. “Revelation is always God in action, God speaking, bringing something entirely new to man, something of which he could have no previous knowledge, and which becomes a real revelation only for him who accepts the object of revelation by a God-given faith. Jesus Christ is the revelation of God, and only he who knows Jesus Christ knows anything about revelation at all.” L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2020), 39.

²³ A.H. Strong outlines the drastically depraved state, both in terms of knowledge and moral condition, of persons without special revelation when he says, “The knowledge of moral and religious truth possessed by nations and ages in which special revelation is unknown is grossly and increasingly imperfect. Man’s actual condition in ante-Christian times, and in modern heathen lands, is that of extreme moral depravity.” Augustus H. Strong, *Strong’s Systematic Theology*, ed. Thomas Horn (Crane, MO: Defender Publishing, 2018), 1:134. Then again, Geisler reminds that “Rejecting revealed truth is not unique to unbelievers in their response to God’s *general* revelation; neither do believers always live according to the truth of God’s *special* revelation.” Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 56. This presents the reminder that having the truth of Christ does not necessarily exclude the suppression of that truth.

²⁴ Another argument has been proposed by inclusivists; one that is less viable than the other four (hence, why it is excluded from the key arguments), called the “pneumatological proposal.” “This proposal centers on the personal relations within the Trinity... Contrary to pro-Nicene Trinitarianism, this proposal inverts the Son-Spirit ‘ordering’ (*taxis*) in the divine missions. Instead of the Father *and the Son* sending the Spirit so that the Spirit’s work

fact, each of these arguments contains biblical truth, but inclusivists make unwarranted leaps in applying the arguments to their view. While initially, these arguments may sound appealing, the more one examines them, the less attractive they become.²⁵

Three Arguments for Exclusivism

(1) Scripture overwhelmingly points to exclusivism, (2) thematic continuity between Israel and the Church makes more sense on exclusivism, and (3) a *saving* relationship requires the illumination of the gospel.²⁶ Several biblical passages teach that explicit faith in Christ is the only way to receive the free gift of salvation (Matt 1:21; 28:18-20; 11:25-27; Luke 24:46-47; John 1:12; 3:16-18,36; 14:6; 17:1-3; Acts 4:12; 10:43; Rom 3:22-26; 5:17-19; 10:9; 1 Tim 2:5; Heb 9:27-28). This is demonstrated in the preaching of the early Church. At the Jerusalem council, the apostles met to discuss the inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 15). The debate

is inseparable from theirs *and* the Spirit is the one who *applies* Christ's work, this proposal reverses the *taxis* by making the Son's work a subset of the Spirit's work... It allows the inclusivists to explain how the Spirit is *universally* at work apart from bringing people to faith in Christ. Prior to and geographically larger than the Son's mission, the Spirit is universally and graciously at work in the world. Since the Spirit is everywhere. God's good gifts are graciously given, even to people who have never heard of Christ. By the Spirit, God reaches out to sinners in 'nature,' working in them to bring them to a *saving, generic faith* in God, and after death they discover that they were saved all along 'by grace through faith' in Christ." Wellum, *Systematic Theology*, 1:202-203. As previously alluded to, any proposed view that requires alterations to other doctrines should raise serious concerns, especially one as central as the Trinity.

²⁵ Nash, "Response to Sanders," 69.

²⁶ Although Nash and I argue for the same thesis, he makes a crucial methodological error, which Sanders refutes. Since the sufficiency view is not the dominant perspective, Nash believes its proponents hold the burden of proof. He believes that his view of the insufficiency of general revelation functions as the default view, and so there is no need to make a positive case for it. He analogizes the state of the debate with the arguments in favor of doctrines such as the Trinity: "once Christians rejected unitarianism, modalism, and the host of other alternatives... the doctrine of the Trinity began to take shape." Nash, "Restrictivism," 109. Historically, I think this misrepresents the trinitarian debates. Questionable views occasioned councils and formal doctrinal statements, but the rejection of certain views was not the sole foundation for constructing doctrine. Rather, theologians made positive cases from Scripture and the tools of philosophy for such doctrines as the Trinity. I agree that arguing against the sufficiency view helps to build a positive case for the insufficiency view, especially since they are mutually exclusive, but that does not negate the need to provide positive reasons. Respectfully, taking a mere critical posture against opposing views while assuming the validity of one's own position is logically fallacious. So I will avoid this fallacy by presenting positive arguments for my thesis in addition to my rebuke of the sufficiency view.

surrounded whether Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. Peter stated that God had accepted the Gentiles *when had they heard and believed the message of the gospel* (Acts 15:7). They preached salvation by grace through Jesus Christ (Acts 15:11). During Paul's missionary journey to evangelize both Jews and Greeks in Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth, *he argued from the Scriptures that Christ had risen from the dead* (Acts 17:2-3,11,17,31; 18:4-5,19). Paul described the early *kerygma* of the Church as Jesus's death for sins, burial, resurrection ("according to the Scriptures"), and resurrection appearances—this was the uncompromising foundation of the faith (1 Cor 15:1-11). He also urged that without the resurrection, there is no faith (1 Cor 15:14). The New Testament informs that salvation is received through faith in the resurrected Savior, in whom there is forgiveness of sins and an inheritance of eternal life.

Inclusivists have offered reinterpretations of these passages by arguing that they ought to be understood in a *restrictive sense*. That is, the text is restricted to an audience of those who have already come in contact with the gospel. Strictly speaking, positive faith in Jesus Christ does bring someone into His salvation. However, the text leaves open those who are unaware of the gospel. But is it possible to use this method over the entirety of the supporting passages? For instance, John 3:18 obviously seems to be speaking to the necessary belief in Christ to escape condemnation. If even one of the passages mentioned above teaches exclusivism, then the reinterpretation method fails. The challenge for inclusivists is to explain *each* of these passages in such a way that does not appeal to strange or outlandish interpretations. As it turns out,

Scripture overwhelmingly emphasizes that explicit faith in Jesus Christ is necessary: general revelation is insufficient.²⁷

Another argument for exclusivism ventures into two biblical themes: sacrifice for sin and the people of God. Briefly: from Noah to Abraham to Isaac to Jacob and throughout the entirety of the Old Testament, God's plan to deal with sin was to choose for Himself a people who would be reconciled, receive forgiveness and blessings, be made holy, and spread His name to the nations. God sent prophets, priests, judges, and kings to accomplish this in the nation of Israel, but man repeatedly chose rebellion against God's appointed. So God prophesied that He would send the Messiah to bring salvation to Israel—the people of God. This is the context in which Jesus Christ is brought into the picture in the New Testament. The continuous idea from the Old to the New Testament is that God is constructing a faithful people to be set apart from the world. Under the old covenant, faith in YHWH and obedience to the law served as the path to enter into the people of God. Christ, contrary to Jewish expectations, did not come just for Israel but to create a new people, a spiritual body filled with people of all nations. Under the new covenant, repentance and faith in Christ are how one enters into the body of Christ. God's will for the Church is that she would spread His name into the world, like Israel in the old covenant, and stand as a light to draw people out of the world. Furthermore, as sacrifices made before Christ were inadequate to deal with the entirety of sin, so Christ stands as the ultimate and necessary sacrifice for atonement (Heb 9-10). The idea that some people can enter into the body of Christ outside of a conscious knowledge of Christ is antithetical to what God has

²⁷ At best, both sides could agree that in the cases of Pharaoh (Gen 41:37-39), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2:47; 3:26), and the sailors from Jonah's ship (Jon 1:3-16), "when special revelation came, it awakened the realization of the general revelation's authenticity." Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 127. As Stephen J. Wellum puts it, general revelation "serves as the backdrop to special revelation." Wellum, *Systematic Theology*, 1:192. But that is far from affirming inclusivism.

accomplished in Christ, as well as the thematic continuity of what God is doing with and for His people.

Inclusivists could potentially object to this argument by claiming that a better understanding of the continuous theme of God's people is to say that *inclusion* is the prevailing notion. Exclusion is done away with: disingenuous Jews are no longer part of God's people, and the faithful Gentiles are now members of God's people. While inclusion is a true biblical theme, it holds no weight against the argument. For the opportunity for Gentiles to receive salvation exemplifies that God's truest desire is for genuine faith, not mere obedience to external practices (e.g., circumcision). This is seen throughout Christ's ministry. How someone is saved is not based on Jewish heritage or by practicing Jewish customs. Back to the rebuke of the *faith principle*, the New Testament does not therefore minimize the meaning of faith to include generic gentilic belief; to the contrary, it teaches that there is no stumbling block for anyone, including the Gentiles, to believe in Christ and receive His salvific works. The New Testament is inclusive in the sense that all people, not only Jews, can be saved; and it is exclusive in the sense of how salvation is accomplished and received.

The final argument for exclusivism carefully distinguishes a relationship from a *saving* relationship. Relationships exist between two persons when they each possess some knowledge about one another, seek to grow in that knowledge, and maintain some sense of reciprocity. According to these criteria, it is certainly possible to have a relationship with God without special revelation. A person can know that God exists and some of His basic attributes, seek to learn more about Him through creation and participate in a relational exchange. By relational exchange, I mean that God reaches out to man, and man may subsequently respond. It is not difficult to imagine an unevangelized person petitioning the Creator of the universe, or a person

of another religion reaching out to God (even though they do not know this God is the triune God). The point here is that there can be some response on the part of man, meeting the minimum requirement for a relationship.²⁸ A relationship with God can arguably occur under general revelation. But for a *saving* relationship to exist between a person and God, an additional criterion is required. From the exclusivist's perspective, professing faith in Christ would be a necessary criterion. However, to avoid circular reasoning, I will not include it. The criterion, instead, can be stated as *humbly coming to God in repentance and loving faith*.²⁹ Given the scope of knowledge from general revelation alone, this criterion cannot be met.³⁰

Seven propositions are accessible from general revelation: people can know that God exists; God is the creator of the universe; God is loving, powerful, and intelligent; God is personal; God has moral properties; human beings have violated the moral law; and because of this, human beings are guilty.³¹ Due to sin, humans cannot reach out to God humbly in loving

²⁸ This seems to be what Strong means when he claims, "With this depravity is found a general conviction of helplessness, and on the part of some nobler natures, a longing after, and hope of, aid from above." Strong, *Strong's Systematic Theology* 1:134. Longing and hoping, to put this statement back into perspective, are not by nature demonstrations of genuine loving-faith. Personally, I could long and hope for bonus at work, does that mean that I have thusly demonstrated love and faith towards my boss? I think not. Strong's claim affirms that some aspect of reciprocity is possible under general revelation.

²⁹ Gerald O'Collins hints at the reasoning behind this criterion when he reflects upon revelation and the motivation for love. "By themselves rational motives are not enough to explain the choice and intensity of love. On the one hand, authentic love is never irrational and groundless... Certain characteristics of the other(s) help to motivate and 'explain' our love. Nevertheless, on the other hand, you cannot plan love in a purely rational way. The motives *alone* can never clearly justify one's supremely free act of opening oneself up in love toward another. In the end love is a profoundly and mysteriously free gift of oneself." Gerald O'Collins, S.J., *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993) 121.

³⁰ Wellum argues rather simply, "On its own, [general revelation] communicates a true, inescapable knowledge of God in terms of God's nature, attributes, and glory, but not a saving knowledge of God since it carries no redemptive promise and divine action to save." Wellum, *Systematic Theology*, 1:192.

³¹ Nash's list varies slightly: he adds that *God is displeased with humans*. Nash, "Response to Sanders," 67. Strong characterizes it this way: "The New Testament intimates the existence of a witness to God's goodness among the heathen, while at the same time it declares that the full knowledge of forgiveness and salvation is brought only by Christ... Reason teaches man that, as a sinner, he merits condemnation; but he cannot, from reason alone, know that God will have mercy upon him and provide salvation... Conscience knows no pardon, and no Savior." Strong, *Strong's Systematic Theology* 1:136-137.

faith based on these seven propositions.³² Doing so requires the illumination of the gospel. It is only through the understanding of the condescension of Christ, the greatest display of love the world has ever seen, and the inner working of the Holy Spirit upon the heart of sinful man, that human beings could hope to respond in love. Inclusivists choose to quote Romans 1:18-20 to supplement their biblical support for general revelation, but Paul appears to teach the opposite. He concedes that knowledge of God is universal, but people suppress this truth according to their evil deeds and fail to glorify God (Rom 1:18-32).³³ All people need Christ in order to overcome their sin, turn to God, and genuinely love Him.³⁴

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued for exclusivism, which teaches that general revelation provides insufficient knowledge for a person under the new covenant to receive salvation; thereby, special revelation is necessary. First, I explained criticisms of inclusivism; I then rebutted four arguments used to support inclusivism; and lastly, I defended three arguments in favor of exclusivism. Summarily, after evaluating these elements, exclusivism, contrary to inclusivism, offers a view of revelation and salvation that is biblical, conventional, and persuasive.

³² “Man’s intellectual and moral nature requires, in order to preserve it from constant deterioration, and to ensure its moral growth and progress, an authoritative and helpful revelation of religious truth, of a higher and completer sort than any to which, in its present state of sin, it can attain by the use of unaided powers... Even the truth to which we arrive by our natural powers needs divine confirmation and authority when it addresses minds and wills perverted by sin. To break this power of sin, and to furnish encouragement to moral effort, we need a special revelation of the merciful and helpful aspect of the divine nature.” Strong, *Strong’s Systematic Theology* 1:133.

³³ As Stephen J. Wellum aptly confirms, “Romans 1 gives us no confidence that humans respond positively to natural revelation apart from God’s saving grace *and* special revelation. The logic of Romans 1 is to drive us to the work of Christ and explicit faith in that work.” Wellum, *Systematic Theology*, 1:211.

³⁴ Insofar as an objection to the argument is concerned, those who are unconvinced are welcome to dispute the proposed criterion or, contingent on accepting the criterion, the possibility of applying the criterion under general revelation.

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