

# Faith Pulpit

## Salvation Only in Christ

### Introduction

Is there salvation any way apart from Christ? Does the Bible anywhere indicate that if people are sincere in their worship, they will be saved, regardless of whom or what they worship? A similar question is, “Does God work redemptively in other religions to bring men to Christ?”

The Word of God indicates that the answer to the above questions is an unequivocal “no.” Historically, those who have argued for an affirmative answer to these questions have been classified as theological liberals who espoused some form of universalism or religious pluralism. Yet in recent years some who claim to be evangelicals have begun to offer qualified affirmations of these questions. Harold A. Netland characterizes their position of inclusivism as follows:

Inclusivism, like exclusivism, maintains that the central claims of Christian faith are true, but it adopts a much more positive view of other religions than does exclusivism. Although inclusivists hold that God has revealed himself definitively in Jesus Christ and that Jesus is somehow central to God’s provision of salvation for humankind, they are willing to allow that God’s salvation is available through non-Christian religions. Jesus is still held to be, in some sense, unique, normative, and definitive; but God is said to be revealing himself and providing salvation through other religious traditions as well (Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991, 10).

Some are even going so far as to argue that those who have not been saved in this life will have an opportunity to be saved after death. The view that all or some of the unevangelized will have an opportunity to be saved after death is an old view. Larry Dixon describes this affirmation of the post-mortem salvation view, stating that it dates to Origen, “the church’s first universalist” (Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News*, Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1992, 112).

Donald Bloesch states the following classic form of the universalist view: “We do not wish to build fences around God’s grace . . . and we do not preclude the possibility that some in hell might finally be translated to heaven” (Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978, II:226, cited in Dixon, 107). Bloesch ties his view to a theory of annihilation when he says, “We cannot know on the basis of what is revealed in Scripture . . . whether God will . . . transform into his likeness even the most rebellious of his enemies or . . . destroy those forms of life that are out of harmony with his new creation” (Bloesch, II:227, cited in Dixon, 107).

This subject carries important ramifications for the work of world evangelization. A brief article cannot discuss all the ramifications of this debate, nor even name the main proponents of the various views. My purpose here is to briefly outline some of the biblical statements that make clear the scriptural teaching that people can only be saved by faith in Christ and His finished work. In the current discussion this position is known as exclusivism.

A comprehensive defense of Christian exclusivism would need to include at least two elements: first, demonstration, based upon careful and rigorous exegesis of all relevant biblical texts, that it is indeed demanded by the biblical data; and, second, a careful response to the various criticisms leveled against exclusivism. There is today a great need for a rigorous, systematic study of the biblical data as they relate to the question of the relation of [the] Christian faith to other faiths (Netland, xi).

I cannot examine all the biblical texts, for they are many, and such an endeavor would result in a book-length treatment. Instead, I intend to survey several biblical texts that particularly represent Scripture’s teaching and are relevant to the discussion.

With regard to Netland’s second recommendation for a comprehensive defense of Christian exclusivism, I refer the reader to Daniel B. Clendenin’s book *Many Gods Many Lands* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995, 89–115). Clendenin does an admirable job of answering the various criticisms leveled against exclusivism put forth by pluralists.

## **Exclusivism in the Old Testament**

### **From the very beginning, God demanded to be worshiped in the way He prescribed (Gen. 4:1–8).**

When Cain attempted to worship the true God in an illicit way, he was rejected by God. All he had to do to gain God’s acceptance was to worship Him properly (Genesis 4:7). Hebrews 11:4 teaches that Abel obeyed God by faith and was thus declared righteous. Scripture clearly contrasts the sacrifices of the brothers. God accepted the sacrifice He had prescribed and rejected the man-centered attempt at worship.

**God demands to be worshiped exclusively.** “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the

earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:3–5). Note that God forbids having any other gods “before me” or “to my faces” (Hebrew text). In other words, man is to worship no other god in God’s presence. In the light of God’s omnipresence described in Psalm 139:7–12, this commandment constitutes a categorical prohibition of the worship of any other god.

Throughout the Old Testament, God condemned idolatry and all the depraved practices which attended it (Leviticus 18, 20; 1 Chronicles 16:6–36; Psalm 96:1–5; 97; 115:1–8; Isaiah 40:18–20; 44:8–20).

**God differentiates Himself from all other gods as the providential and exclusive Savior.** (See 1 Chronicles 16:7–36; Psalm 115:1–15; Psalm 96). Isaiah 42:1–9 is the first of the four “Servant Songs” in Isaiah that predict the coming of Jesus Christ. This passage, like so many other Old Testament passages, speaks of God’s salvation for the world (vv. 1, 4, 6, 7). This passage also speaks of the issue of God’s exclusiveness as God and Savior (vv. 5, 8, 9). God has revealed His glory to men, and that glory is His alone. In this context God vows that He will share His glory with no one, specifically with no idol. He says: “I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images” (v. 8). God clearly affirms His exclusiveness.

Another O.T. passage that reveals God’s exclusivity is Isaiah 45:5–17. This passage foretells the rise of Cyrus in God’s providence and indicates that God has a specific purpose for His dealings with Cyrus and Israel. That purpose, stated six times in this chapter, is that the world may know that He alone is God (vv. 5, 6, 14, 18, 21, 22). God again distinguishes Himself from idols in two ways—as the Creator (v. 18) and the only One Who foretells the future (v. 21). Special revelation identifies God and distinguishes Him from dumb idols. The last great affirmation of this chapter is “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else” (v. 22). There is salvation in no other god. Clearly, both Isaiah 42 and 45 link God’s exclusivity to the doctrines of salvation.

## **Exclusivism in the New Testament**

**Jesus set the standard in the New Testament.** His statement to Satan at His temptation is telling. Only God is to be worshiped (Mt. 4:10). Whereas the Old Testament passages declare God’s uniqueness in contrast to idols, this passage sets God above created beings. Men are not to worship an idol of their own manufacture, nor are they to worship any other created being. Christ went on to develop this truth throughout His ministry. He alone is the way to God. He made this truth plain in John 3:16–21. Apart from faith in Him, people are condemned to eternal judgment. Christ’s statement in His High Priestly prayer identifies God as the only true God, and Christ Himself as the only way to the Father (John 17:1–3). This statement, along with Christ’s other statement in John 17:18, forms the foundation for His giving of the Great Commission in John 20:21–23. Our Lord clearly described the

alternative eternal destinies in one statement of the Great Commission (Mark. 16:15, 16) and intimated them in another (John 20:21–23).

**The preaching of the apostles was also exclusive.** Peter affirmed his faith in Christ as the only Savior (John 6:66–69). No one else can save. He also preached Christ as the exclusive way of salvation (Acts 4:12). Paul’s first sermon proclaimed Christ as the only way of forgiveness and justification (Acts 13:38, 39). Christ is the Savior, and even obedience to the law of Moses cannot save. Paul and Barnabas proclaimed that men must turn from the “vanities” of idolatry to the living God (Acts 14:15). They saw nothing of saving value in idolatry. It was to be forsaken. James taught that those who are saved should “abstain from pollutions of idols” (Acts 15:20). Clearly God was exclusive, and idols were forbidden in his thinking. Paul preached on Mars’ Hill concerning this issue (Acts 17:29–31). God is not like idols (v. 29), He commands men to repent of idolatry (v. 30), and He has appointed Christ as Savior and Judge (v. 31).

**Paul also affirmed Christ as the only Savior in 1 Timothy 2:5, 6** and revealed his conviction concerning this issue later in the epistle (6:15, 16). God will show Christ to be the “blessed and only sovereign” (v. 15). As we reflect on early church history we must recognize that, if early Christians had been willing to serve Christ as a member of the Roman pantheon of gods, they likely would never have been persecuted. A. T. Robertson relates that the Roman emperor Domitian “demanded that he be addressed as ‘Dominus et Deus noster.’” In reference to the I Timothy text, Robertson continues, “Emperor worship may be behind the use of monos (alone) here” (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1931, IV:595). It was the early Christians’ insistence, verbalized here by Paul, that Christ alone is Savior and worthy of worship, that brought persecution. In other words, the exclusiveness of Christ was the point of contention for these first-century believers, and a doctrine that resulted in their persecution.

## Conclusion

From Scripture, I conclude that there is only one way to Heaven, and that is through the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. I conclude that apart from Christ all people are lost. Finally, I conclude that the Great Commission constitutes our marching orders today because the lost must hear the Gospel of Christ before they can be saved. (See Matthew 28:18–20, Mark 16:15–18, Luke 24:46–49, John 20:21–23, and Acts 1:8.)

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