

IS IGNORANCE ETERNAL BLISS?

ROBERT N. WILKIN

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Irving, Texas

I. INTRODUCTION

What is the fate of those who have never heard the gospel?

As a new Christian, I was taught that God gave everyone natural revelation, and if they responded to it, God would bring them more light, and ultimately the good news of Jesus Christ. That is the whole point behind missions.

However, in the last decade or so, more and more Christian leaders are saying that ignorance is indeed an excuse. Many are saying that if a person has never heard of Jesus, they will get into the kingdom if they fall on God's mercy even if they never come to faith in Christ in this life.

II. MANY EVANGELICAL LEADERS ARE SAYING IGNORANCE IS INDEED AN EXCUSE

A. H. Strong says, "a humble and penitent reliance upon God, as a Savior from sin and a guide of conduct, is *an implicit faith* in Christ."¹ This is a recurring theme among some Evangelicals. One who humbly relies on God *implicitly believes* in Jesus Christ, even though he never heard of Him or His good news.

John Sanders is associate professor of philosophy and religion at Huntington College in Huntington, Indiana. He wrote a book entitled, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*. In it he suggests,

God is presently at work in the lives of all people through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, attempting to bring them to repentant faith. Those who are believers now will awaken in the

¹ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1907), 843, emphasis added.

next life to discover who it is that saved them and begin to experience the fullness of life in the Lord Jesus Christ.²

When he speaks of repentant faith, he clearly in context does not mean *faith explicitly in Jesus Christ*, but rather *faith in God*. That explains why after death many will only then discover who it is that saved them.

In the mid-eighties James Hunter conducted a survey of teachers and students at nine evangelical liberal arts colleges and seven evangelical seminaries. *One-third* of those interviewed indicated that “the only hope for heaven is through personal faith in Jesus Christ, *except for those who have not had an opportunity to hear of Jesus Christ.*”³ In other words, fifteen years ago as many as one-third of Evangelicals training for the ministry believed ignorance is an excuse.

Possibly his survey was not conducted at truly conservative schools. However, whatever the correct percentage was then, it has surely risen since then. In the past 10 years there have been many books on this subject advocating that those who’ve never heard can be saved apart from explicit faith in Jesus Christ.

Many more examples could be given. But the point is clear. Many evangelical leaders today believe that the unevangelized can be eternally saved apart from explicit faith in Jesus.

III. THE IMPLICIT FAITH VIEW

We might think that people would say the unevangelized can be eternally saved by their works. However, Evangelicals who argue for justification apart from explicit faith in Jesus are careful to say that faith is always required, but faith *in Jesus* is not always required. Pinnock states,

According to the Bible, people are saved by faith, not by the content of their theology. Since God has not left anyone with-

² John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 283, emphasis added.

³ James Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), 35, cited by Daniel Strange in *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelized: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2001), 21, emphasis added.

out witness, people are judged on the basis of the light they have received and how they have responded to that light. *Faith in God is what saves, not possessing certain minimum information.*⁴

It is rather popular today to denounce theology and doctrine. So when one says a person is “not [saved] by the content of their theology,” many will accept that. Notice the fruit that comes of this. This means that there is no “certain minimum information” which one must believe. Of course, the popular view of faith today has little bearing on information. Rather, faith seems to be an experience or encounter with God.

Those who believe in implicit faith suggest faith might occur as a result of a dream, a vision, or even an internal feeling. As long as the person experiences God in some way, he has faith and is saved.

Pinnock continues:

Scripture and reason both imply that no one can be held responsible for truth of which they were inculpably ignorant; they are judged on the basis of the truth they know. *A person is saved by faith, even if the content of belief is deficient (and whose is not?).*⁵

And again:

It is not so much a question whether the unevangelized know Jesus as whether Jesus knows them (Mt 7:23). One does not have to be conscious of the work of Christ done on one’s behalf in order to benefit from that work. *The issue God cares about is the direction of the heart, not the content of theology.*⁶

As was previously mentioned, A.H. Strong held this view. Here is a fuller articulation of his position:

...whoever among the heathen are saved, must in like manner be saved by casting themselves as helpless sinners upon God’s plan of mercy, dimly shadowed forth in nature and providence. But such faith, even among the patriarchs and heathen, *is implicitly a faith in Christ*, and would become explicit and

⁴ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 157-58, emphasis added.

⁵ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁶ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

conscious trust and submission, whenever Christ were made known to them.⁷

According to this view, the person who falls on God's mercy, knowing nothing of Jesus, "implicitly [has] faith in Christ" and this faith "would become explicit and conscious trust and submission, whenever Christ were made known to them." Implicit faith in Jesus, according to Strong, is evidently a general trust in and submission to God which would blossom into explicit trust in and submission to Jesus if the person with implicit faith ever heard the good news.⁸

David Clark comments:

Some evangelicals have solved this dilemma [that universalism is clearly unbiblical] by denying point 3, which asserts that the only way to know Jesus Christ is to come into contact with special revelation. They believe that information sufficient for salvation can be found outside special revelation. This position could be called the implicit-faith view.

Several evangelicals have taken this kind of view. Augustus H. Strong...advocated this position, as have Millard Erickson and Clark Pinnock. James I. Packer thinks it possible. C. S. Lewis maintains that, "the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do not know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him."⁹

The Roman Catholic Church officially adopts the view that the unevangelized can gain eternal salvation. They say it is by sincerely seeking God and striving to obey God's will as He makes it known to them in their consciences. Note this statement from Vatican II:

⁷ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 842, emphasis added.

⁸ It is interesting that when missionaries arrive with the message of Jesus, this is not what we find. A very small percentage of Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus, or the other religions trust in and submit to Jesus when the good news is proclaimed to them. Either this means very few of them are actually falling on the mercy of God or that the view is incorrect. I'm inclined to believe both are the case.

⁹ *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, eds. Crockett and Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 41, 42-43.

They also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God, and moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.¹⁰

Liberals (non-Evangelicals) also suggest something akin to implicit faith. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Professor Emeritus of History of Religions at Harvard, says, “Faith can never be expressed in words.”¹¹ Heim says, “In Smith’s case...faith is an existential, generic human attitude locked deep in human subjectivity which, again, is beyond and separate from any forms used to express it. To give it any content would be to make it particular, when he claims its nature is universally human...Faith is contentless...”¹²

IV. THE BIBLE SPECIFICALLY SAYS IGNORANCE IS NOT ETERNAL BLISS

As with most issues, there are some texts which speak clearly to this issue. The Bible specifically says that ignorance is no excuse. While many have never heard the name of Jesus, let alone His gospel, that doesn’t mean they can be saved by some inner encounter with God.

A. THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Jesus Christ and His promise of eternal life to all who simply believe in Him is explicitly stated in the Gospel of John as the object of saving faith (e.g., John 1:12-13; 2:23; 3:14-18, 36; 4:39, 42; 5:24; 6:35-40, 47; 11:25-27). John’s Gospel states that all who believe in Jesus Christ have everlasting life, and that only such people have it. John’s purpose for his Gospel was to tell unbelievers what they must do to have eternal life (John 20:31). Surely, then, John would tell us if there was a way to be born again apart from explicit faith in Jesus Christ. Yet he actually slams that door shut.

¹⁰ *Vatican II*, “The Church,” Chap. 16. This view goes back to some of the church fathers. See, for example, Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165), *First Apology*, Chapters 10, 14. See also the writings of Clement of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus.

¹¹ Cited without documentation by S. Mark Heim in *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 54.

¹² *Ibid.*, 70.

John's Gospel says that those who do not believe in Jesus are condemned. For example, "He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). There is no wiggle room in John's Gospel for people to be born again by anything other than explicit faith in Jesus Christ.

B. ROMANS 10:1-15

The Jewish people had "a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (10:2). Knowledge of Jesus Christ and eternal life through faith in Him, Paul says, is indeed essential. No one is born again without knowing that Jesus guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him (10:4, 9-15¹³).

In v. 14 Paul makes it clear that people cannot believe without a preacher. And in Romans 1-4 and Galatians 2-3 Paul makes it clear that there is no justification apart from explicit faith in Jesus Christ. Preachers of the good news of Jesus Christ must be sent for people to hear and believe the good news and thereby be justified.

C. GOD-FEARERS IN ACTS

Cornelius told Peter that an angel had told him to call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who would tell him the words by which he and all his household would be saved. *Cornelius and his household were not saved until they heard and believed the good news of Jesus Christ* (Acts 10:43-44). The idea that Cornelius was already saved prior to being evangelized is directly contradicted by his own testimony.

Cornelius is but one example of a God-fearing Gentile in Acts. Darrell Bock points out that in its various uses in the Book of Acts (10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26) all God-fearers nonetheless needed to hear and believe the message of Jesus in order to gain eternal life and escape eternal condemnation. After commenting on Cornelius in Acts 10, he writes:

The use of God-fearers in Acts 13 is crucial. Here Paul addresses the Gentiles in his audience as God-fearers. Does this mean that they are in God's blessings? The answer is, No, at least, not yet. In the speech Paul presents Jesus and warns his

¹³ For a discussion of Rom 10:9-10, see John Hart, "Why Confess Christ? The Use and Abuse of Romans 10:9-10," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 1999): 3-35. I agree with him that Rom 10:9-10 concerns both justification (righteous by faith alone) and deliverance from God's wrath here and now (saved by confession plus faith).

God-fearing audience not to reject the message. To scoff at the message is to perish (Acts 13:40-41). The God-fearer for Luke is interested in the divine, but the God-fearer is not in the kingdom until he or she responds to the message.¹⁴

D. OVER 150 PASSAGES PROVE EXPLICIT FAITH IS REQUIRED

As Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer was so fond of pointing out, there are over 150 places in the NT where faith in Jesus Christ is stated as the sole condition of eternal life.

E. THE IMPLICIT FAITH VIEW PRODUCES PHARISAISM

Paul Knitter, a proponent of the implicit faith view, nonetheless does a good job of explaining two major objections to the implicit faith view:

First, there is in all followers of other religions an ineluctable tendency to *effect their own salvation*—that is, to try to force God’s hand, to establish their own worthiness. It amounts to this: other religions do not really accept salvation “by faith alone.”

A second tendency...is closely related to the first corrupting tendency: in trying to achieve their own salvation, all religions, in one way or another, end up attempting to *capture* God. They try to contain divinity in their doctrines or manipulate it with their “good works.” Some form of idolatry rears its head in all religions.¹⁵

V. MISSIONS: THE UNINTENDED VICTIM

If those who’ve never heard can be saved apart from faith in Christ, then when we tell them about Jesus, we eliminate that possibility.

Darrell Bock put it this way:

Someone could object that those who have never heard are in a different category. They are not responsible because they have had no opportunity to hear the gospel. Only when Jesus is preached is one responsible to believe. But if this is true, then at Mars Hill [Acts 17] Paul puts nonhearers at risk. In their ignorance they had a chance, but now that he has told

¹⁴ *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, 123.

¹⁵ Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 102-103, emphasis added.

them about Jesus they must respond or be destroyed. We are driven to the absurd conclusion that Paul should never have mentioned Jesus, because as “nonhearers” they had a chance! But clearly, the apostle believed it was essential to mention Jesus to those who had never heard. The idea that some would enter the kingdom through ignorance is unacceptable to Paul.¹⁶

Would you be less likely to choose the separation, losses, and hardships of the mission field if you believed that people could be born again without hearing the gospel? Might you be tempted to stay home if you thought that by your actions many people would be eternally condemned who otherwise might be saved? I would think so.

Pinnock seems to be unaware of the force of this argument when he writes:

The Bible teaches that many varieties of unevangelized persons will attain salvation. This will happen according to the faith principle. In the case of morally responsible persons confronted with the gospel of Christ in this life, they would surely turn to Him in explicit faith. If they did not do so, it would prove that they had not been favorably disposed to God prior to that time, since Jesus is the culmination of divine revelation. Pre-Christian faith is valid up until that moment when Christ is preached, but not afterwards. When Christ is known, the obligation comes into force to believe on him. The unevangelized are expected to receive the Good News when it reaches them. God's offer becomes an objective obligation at that time, *and refusal to accept that offer would be fatal. No hope can be offered to those declining God's offer to them in Christ.*¹⁷

Evangelistic—as opposed to purely humanitarian—missions have been and are motivated by *spiritual* as well as *physical* need. If you remove the spiritual need, you remove a major motivation to go and evangelize.

Sanders has an answer to the objection that the implicit faith view undercuts missions. He says that while people can escape eternal condemnation apart from explicit faith in Jesus, they cannot find full and meaningful lives here and now without it:

¹⁶ *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, 122.

¹⁷ Pinnock, 168, emphasis added.

The Bible indicates that God wants to bring the fullness of eternal life into the lives of all people *now*. Even if some of the unevangelized are already believers or all will encounter Christ at the moment of death or after [other views he rejects but discusses], it is God's desire that people experience the joy, love, and hope that come from knowing Jesus and that they not put this experience off to some future time. To have a relationship with the risen Lord is much more satisfying spiritually than simply experiencing God's universal grace. God desires mature sons and daughters, the sort of maturity that comes only from a relationship with Christ.¹⁸

Frankly, that is a good point. That is another reason to do missions. However, one wonders if the underlying assumption that people who believe in God in some saving sense will necessarily believe in Jesus when they hear of Him. If not, then are we not endangering the eternal destiny of people?

In addition, even though it is true that one must become a Christian and an active disciple to have fullness of life, is that motivation enough to compel as many people to go to the mission field as would otherwise? Personally, I don't think so.

Of course, Sanders' major premise is wrong. People cannot be eternally saved apart from faith in Christ. Hence Sanders misses the greatest reason to evangelize.

VI. GOD'S GOODNESS IN QUESTION

Nearly all who hold the implicit faith view think that the goodness of God is at stake. If God condemns people to eternal torment in hell who never even had a chance to believe, then His goodness is in question. Here is how Pinnock puts it:

If God really loves the whole world and desires everyone to be saved, it follows logically that everyone must have access to salvation. There would have to be an opportunity for all people to participate in the salvation of God. If Christ died for all, while yet sinners, the opportunity must be given for all to register a decision about what was done for them (Ro 5:8). They cannot lack the opportunity merely because someone failed to bring the Gospel of Christ to them. God's universal salvific

¹⁸ Sanders, 284.

will implies the equally universal accessibility of salvation for all people.¹⁹

Yet people who die never having heard the gospel did have a chance. Jesus said, “If I be lifted up, I will draw all unto Me.” The incarnation (John 1:9), and the Cross (John 12:42), and natural revelation (Romans 1) are three ways in which God is drawing men unto Him. The Holy Spirit is convicting the world of sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:9-11).

In my opinion Scripture teaches that all who respond to the light they have will receive more light. The account of Cornelius coming to faith in Jesus Christ shows that (Acts 10–11). So do Paul’s remarks on Mars Hill in Acts 17:27. God brings the explicit good news of Jesus Christ to all who respond to the light they have by seeking God. Romans 3:11b, “there is none who seeks after God,” looks at people when left to their own initiative. Clearly since God takes the initiative, we are free to seek Him in response (Acts 17:27).

The goodness of God is not in question in the issue of the fate of the unevangelized. He is good even though some never hear the good news of Jesus Christ and are eternally condemned. He brings the good news of Jesus Christ to all who diligently seek Him (Heb 11:6).

VII. OT PEOPLE WERE NOT JUSTIFIED BY IMPLICIT FAITH

I’ve thought for years that Dispensationalism, which I believe in as a system, has dropped the ball on the issue of what OT people had to do to have eternal life.

Notice how Pinnock picks up on this point:

Dispensationalists have rightly opposed the notion that believers in other epochs needed to believe in the coming Savior in order to be saved. These people trusted in God, even though the content of their theology differed from our own.²⁰

I disagree with Pinnock and with Dispensationalists who say that something less than faith in the coming Messiah was required.

¹⁹ Pinnock, 157.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

This same suggestion is made by Karl Rahner, as Ruokanen says,

Rahner refers to the analogy of the Old Testament: although the Old Covenant had not yet attained the perfection of God's revelation and grace, it served as the legitimate religion of that time, willed by God. The same principle can be analogously transferred to the non-Christian religions of today... In the case of non-Christians, it is essential that they are open to God, seekers of the truth; this openness already demonstrates existence in a state of grace.²¹

I agree with what Bob Bryant and Sid Dyer have written.²² Old Testament people were born again in the same way we are: by faith alone in Christ alone.

Many people wonder what practical difference it makes how OT people were justified. After all, we live now, not then. That the implicit faith view cites this aspect of Dispensationalism in its favor shows why this is so important.

Logically what we must do to have eternal life cannot change. If the saving message changes, then so does the gospel.

Dispensationalism has long said that men in every age are justified by faith in God, but as revelation progressed what they needed to believe about God changed as well.

Well, if people before the time of Christ could be born again by some general faith in God, then logically so can anyone today who has not yet heard the name of Jesus.

No one was ever born again by some general faith in God. The condition has always been faith that the Messiah gives eternal life to all who simply believe in Him.

The only dispensational change is that after Jesus' baptism people had to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah who gives eternal life to all who simply believe in Him. But the message is the same.²³

²¹ Miikka Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions According to the Second Vatican Council* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1992), 30.

²² Bob Bryant, "How Were People Saved Before Jesus Came?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2003): 63-70. Sidney D. Dyer, "The Salvation of Believing Israelites Prior to the Incarnation of Christ," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2001): 43-55.

²³ Space doesn't permit detailed proof. See Bryant's article on pp. 63-70 of this issue and Dyer's article for careful argumentation. However, Paul's use of

VIII. WHAT ABOUT ACTS 10:35?

This verse is often cited by those believing in implicit faith. According to Matthew Henry:

God never did, nor ever will, reject or refuse an honest gentile, who, though he has not the privileges or advantages that the Jews have, yet, like Cornelius, fears God, and worships him, and works righteousness; that is, is just and charitable towards all men, who lives up to the light he has, both in a sincere devotion and in regular conversation.²⁴

Pinnock understands the passage as Henry does, even favorably quoting the above passage.²⁵ But he admits that the explicit faith view has a “plausible way” to understand the passage. He says:

Another more plausible way to limit the text is the view that any soul like Cornelius who is genuinely seeking God will be evangelized through a special messenger before he dies. In other words, God will take steps to ensure that any person truly seeking him will hear the gospel before death and have an opportunity to be saved. This theory holds that persons who respond to the light they have will receive further light from God. There is something to be said for this theory. For one thing, the Cornelius account does illustrate that point. Cornelius was seeking God, and Peter was led to his side. Besides, things like this do happen in our own experience. Further, the theory can be commended for seeing the problem of accessibility and for answering it. It is a move in the right direction and (depending on the means used by God) it might even approach our own theory. If, for example, the divine messenger could be a vision or an inner voice, not necessarily a human messenger, then it could be part of my own theory.²⁶

Gen 15:6 in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 shows that Abraham believed in the coming Messiah for eternal life. If not, Paul’s whole argument about Abraham being the father of all who believe in Jesus for eternal life collapses like a house of cards.

²⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), 6:133.

²⁵ Pinnock, 165-66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 166. Also, see my article, “Can Unbelievers Seek God and Work Righteousness? Acts 10:35,” *Grace in Focus* (Nov-Dec 2002): 1, 3, 4.

Unfortunately, Pinnock then adds, “But usually the theory calls for a human messenger, and that is the problem.”²⁷ He then goes on for pages to show why he considers this view incorrect.

Pinnock does not see the need for a human messenger, or even Jesus Himself as in the case of Saul. For him a vision or inner voice is enough. What this vision or inner voice says is not clear, for Pinnock ends this discussion by saying, “Pre-Christian faith is valid up until that moment when Christ is preached, but not afterwards. When Christ is known, the obligation comes into force to believe on Him.”²⁸ Evidently the inner voice tells the person to fall on God’s mercy or something to that effect.

IX. CONCLUSION

The Lord Jesus guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him. And He guarantees that those who do not believe in Him will be eternally condemned.

If we adopt an implicit faith view, there will be other ramifications either in our beliefs, or in the beliefs of those we influence.

I realize that there are solid Free Grace people who hold the implicit faith view. My hope, however, is that they would search the Scriptures to see if explicit faith in Jesus Christ is required, not just for those who are evangelized, but for all.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 168.