

IS THERE A REFORMED WAY TO GET THE BENEFITS OF THE ATONEMENT TO “THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD?”

R. TODD MANGUM*

Evangelicals are familiar with the common taxonomy of positions regarding the eternal destiny of those people who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and the saving benefits he gained for humankind through his death and resurrection: (1) exclusivism (restrictivism); (2) inclusivism; and (3) pluralism.¹ I know of no evangelical pluralists,² so my attention in this article will focus on the dialogue presently taking place between evangelical exclusivists and evangelical inclusivists.

We may discern certain patterns of factors that seem to influence where on the spectrum of “wider-hope inclusivism” to “restrictivist exclusivism” an evangelical thinker is likely to fall. One such contributing factor is the overall Calvinist vs. Arminian orientation of one’s soteriology. Simply put, the more classically Reformed (particular redemptionist) is one’s soteriology, the more exclusivist is one likely to be regarding the destiny of the unevangelized.³

* R. Todd Mangum is assistant professor of theology at Biblical Theological Seminary, 200 North Main Street, Hatfield, PA 19440.

¹ This typology was first suggested by Alan Race, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982); and Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). See also Dennis Ockholm and Timothy Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). In the Ockholm-Phillips breakdown, the “fourth view” is gained by dividing the restrictivist view into “softer” (McGrath) and “harder” (Geivett, Phillips) versions. Cf. also William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). I will not take up, in this paper, questions of the nature of the “eternal punishment” of the condemned, which the Crockett/Sigountos collection of essays does.

² There are, of course, those who were *once* evangelical who have now converted to pluralism. John Hick comes immediately to mind; but, by Hick’s own account, advocating pluralism meant, *eo ipso*, abandoning tenets central to evangelicalism (*God Has Many Names: Britain’s New Religious Pluralism* [London: MacMillan, 1980] 1–9). Occasionally, one runs across the suggestion that annihilationism or *postmortem* evangelism, which a few evangelicals do advocate, leads to a kind of universalism; or that inclusivism logically leads to pluralism or even process theology (e.g. Timothy R. Phillips, “Hell: A Christological Reflection,” in *Through No Fault of Their Own?* 47–59; Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995] 139–246; John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993] 113–66; A. B. Caneday, “‘Evangelical Inclusivism’ and the Exclusivity of the Gospel: A Review of John Sanders’s *No Other Name*,” *SBJT* 1 [Winter 1997] 24–39), but I am not convinced that these connections are entirely fair. At any rate, my point here is that there are, right now, no evangelical pluralists.

³ This correlation is observed also by Clark Pinnock (*A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] 17–80; “An Inclusivist View” and “Response to Alister McGrath” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* 112–23

There are some ready explanations for this overall pattern. An Arminian soteriology sees the *design* of the atonement as universal, meaning that there is a sense in which God would be stingy to deny the cross's payment being actually applied to an unbeliever's individual "account," given that he has payment in hand for the unbeliever's sins anyway.⁴ An Arminian soteriology also sees the preliminary work of the Spirit that draws a person to God ("prevenient grace") as being (virtually) universal in scope as well. The result is that human beings (at least since Christ's completion of a universal atonement) are already in a very favorable position with God, with the likelihood being that they will be eternally accepted by God unless they *reject* the abundant mercy he has displayed and continues to display towards them.⁵

A classically Reformed soteriology has a very different emphasis. It regards human beings, in general, as depraved—meaning that humans are, in their natural state, odious to God and incapable of removing that odiousness or even of responding to the divinely constructed means of removing it, unless God does something extraordinary to enable such an extraordinary response. Further, the *design* of the atonement, in a classically Reformed soteriology, is not universal, but particular; that is, it is designed to rescue, and rescue fully, a particular segment of humankind: the (from eternity past) pre-selected "sheep," God's elect, who are no more inherently deserving of God's grace than the damned, but who receive his graciousness out of his

and 187–91); John Sanders (*No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992] 15–34); and Ronald Nash (*Is Jesus the Only Savior?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 163–70).

⁴ See especially article II of "Articuli Arminiani sive Remonatantia" in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Volume III: *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 546. See also Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* 17–80.

⁵ Because of human "free will," such extraordinary rejection of God's abundant graces is possible and maybe even dishearteningly common, according to classic Arminian theology. Nevertheless, given the abundance of what God has accomplished on behalf of each and every human being, and given the abundance of his genuine efforts to reach human beings (individually and universally, using natural and supernatural means), such rejection is accurately described as "extraordinary." See the various essays that argue this point in *A Case for Arminianism: The Grace of God, the Will of Man* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989]. In describing the Arminian stance this way, I have in mind particularly John Wesley's "optimism of grace," which is often contrasted with an "Augustinian 'pessimism of grace'" (see Geoffrey Wainwright, *Geoffrey Wainwright on Wesley and Calvin* [Melbourne, Australia: Uniting Church Press, 1987] 28–29; Paul A. Mickey, *Essentials of Wesleyan Theology: A Contemporary Affirmation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980] 45–91, 125–38). Arminian theology traditionally has conceived of justification as being conditional and covenantal in nature, meaning that, though justification is grounded universally in the atonement of Christ, the terms of justification must be ratified individually by faith (see John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1995] 35–114; Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1997]). Still, the Wesleyan conception of the (potential, but nonetheless divinely desired) universal "coverage" in the atonement's design has led today to an intramural debate among contemporary Wesleyans regarding pluralism (cf. Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility* 135–53 and Jerry L. Walls, *The Problem of Pluralism: Recovering United Methodist Identity* [Wilmore, KY: Good News Books, 1986]).

desire to show mercy to those who have not merited it, condignly or contractually, actually or potentially, in any sense.⁶

This is merely a heuristic breakdown, so it is not hard to find, on either side, persons who do not fit one or more aspects of the ideas described.⁷ And, of course, there are a host of mediating positions that do not fit any “pure Reformed” or “pure Arminian” description.⁸ Nevertheless, heuristically speaking, there is an overall pattern that emerges fairly consistently: an Arminian soteriology tends to suggest that God will not reject those who have not explicitly rejected him, while Calvinist soteriology tends to suggest that God will not accept those who have not explicitly accepted him.

Let me go on record as affirming a classically Reformed soteriology, including a particular (rather than universal) design of the atonement. Given the assumptions, convictions, and presuppositions of such a model, it should come as no surprise that I remain unfazed by any number of stock inclusivist-Arminian arguments. To name but a few: (1) I regard the suggestion that God cannot condemn a larger number of human beings than he saves, lest he be a “monster,” as naïve, improper, and unhelpful, especially given its seemingly flat disregard for the point that Romans 9 insists upon: the Creator holds unique prerogatives over his creation, including the prerogative to show mercy to whom he will and to harden whom he will. God has made it very clear that he is not *obliged* to show mercy to any—much less most—of humanity. (2) Because I do not believe that the atonement supplied an indiscriminate benefit for all of humanity such as would entail God’s getting a “double-payment” for the sin of anyone whom he would condemn, I do not

⁶ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vols. XX–XXI (LCC; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960 [1559]) 239–986; *idem*, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice Against Pighius* (ed. A. N. S. Lane; trans. G. I. Davies; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996 [1543]); Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992 [1679]) 1.311–430, 569–685; 2.169–246, 501–724; John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1983 [1683]); Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2: *Anthropology*, and vol. 3: *Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 [1871]); Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932); Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941) 181–549; and John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (London: Banner of Truth, 1961).

⁷ The most conspicuous exception to this overall pattern is the Molinist version of Arminian restrictivism, which suggests that God, by use of his “middle knowledge,” has placed in remote portions of the world those people who would not have responded to the gospel anyway. For examples of this argument, see William Lane Craig, “Politically Incorrect Salvation,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Ockholm; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995) 72–97; and Douglas Geivett and Gary Phillips, “A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* 214–45.

⁸ Pinnock’s observation is correct: “Most Reformed believers in Europe, including [Alister] McGrath, have accepted what was enshrined in the *Agreement of Leuvenberg* (1973), which involved a drastic revision of Calvin’s thought. It tossed out double predestination and spoke of God’s election of humankind in Jesus Christ, as Barth does. In a nutshell, McGrath is Reformed like Hendrikus Berkhof or Vincent Brummer but not paleo-Reformed like James I. Packer or R. C. Sproul” (“Response to Alister E. McGrath,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* 191). What Pinnock refers to, in this quotation, as “paleo-Reformed,” I call throughout this article “classically Reformed.”

feel the pressure to explain God's "justice" in condemning people who fail to gain explicit access to the means of the atonement he has provided exclusively for his own. (3) Because I believe that faith is a divine work in his elect, I do not feel the pressure to make this "instrumental cause" of salvation (i.e. saving faith) as minimal as possible. Put another way: because I believe saving faith is ultimately a work of God in (elect) human beings that he uses mystically and supernaturally to join his elect to Christ, not a work of depraved human beings that God simply rewards excessively, I generally expect for the saving faith manifest in the elect to be full-orbed and far-reaching in what it perceives in its search for God and potent in what it grasps in its embrace of God.

These are foundational biblical-theological inferences and interpretations that have long accounted for differences between classically Reformed soteriology and other models. I would still like to change the minds of my non-Reformed brethren on these points; and I will admit to being distracted by the strident rhetoric that sometimes accompanies objections to these points.

All that notwithstanding, I am satisfied that the better-nuanced presentations of the inclusivist viewpoint do not dispute that Jesus Christ (and the atonement he accomplished) provides the *exclusive means* of salvation for anyone who is saved.⁹ While I still disagree with the non-Reformed (sometimes anti-Reformed) soteriological underpinnings of their view, I believe that they have sufficiently clarified that their contention for inclusivism is not rooted in (what they themselves deem as) the false belief that humans can obtain a variety of valid means to God. Rather, their contention is that the single means of atonement may be so constructed by God as to make various avenues of participation in that means available to human beings, some based on more, some based on less, accurate *understandings* of what is the real (ontological) means of their having been brought into favorable relationship with God.¹⁰ Additionally, I have found that my interaction with Arminian/inclusivist viewpoints has highlighted portions of scriptural teaching that I might otherwise have overlooked or diminished. And, their per-

⁹ Douglas Geivett has detected perceptively a distinction between John Sanders and Clark Pinnock in regard to how "helpful" may be non-Christian religions in getting a person to "saving faith" in God; he calls Pinnock's position "Strong Inclusivism," and Sanders's "Weak Inclusivism" ("Some Misgivings about Evangelical Inclusivism," *SBJT* 2 [Summer 1998] 26–31). It is true that Sanders's affirmation of the uniquely salvific accomplishment of Christ's atonement is perhaps stronger and clearer (see e.g. *No Other Name* 11–34), but Pinnock, in my judgment, has been sufficiently clear on this point, too. He says in his response to Alister McGrath's "particularist view," for example: "*Particularism* is not the term I would use to describe McGrath's view (or Geivett/Phillips's, either) because it is so general—it can be applied to every chapter in this book except Hick's, since we all (except for him) believe that salvation comes from the redemptive particularity that is in Christ" (Pinnock, "Response to Alister McGrath" 188). For a fuller explication of how Pinnock sees the atoning work of Christ being the exclusive ontological means of salvation (though not necessarily the exclusive epistemological means), see *A Wideness in God's Mercy* 49–80.

¹⁰ "Briefly, inclusivists affirm the particularity and finality of salvation only in Christ but deny that knowledge of his work is necessary for salvation. That is to say, they hold that the work of Jesus is ontologically necessary for salvation (no one would be saved without it) but not epistemologically necessary (one need not be aware of the work in order to benefit from it)" (John Sanders, *No Other Name* 215).

spectives on scriptural teaching—while still different from my own—have nevertheless stimulated different tracks of thought that have nuanced my own thoroughly Reformed soteriological perspective.

Such is the background of this article. In raising the question, “Is there a Reformed way to get the benefits of the atonement to ‘those who have never heard?’” I hope to do two things: (1) nuance a classically Reformed soteriological stance in a way that embraces a fuller and more accurate accounting of scriptural teaching; and (2) “rescue” some of the best inclusivist insights that have, up to now, been “trapped” within an inherently un-Reformed soteriological model, so that they may be safely incorporated into a classically Reformed soteriology.

In the end, I will contend that full assurance of salvation in the present dispensation is reserved for those who, by divine enablement, fully embrace Jesus Christ (cognitively, affectively, and volitionally), having come to an understanding of the saving relationship with God made accessible to them through the atoning cross-work of Jesus Christ, and who have been fully assimilated into the covenantal community of God’s people. Because full assurance of salvation is reserved for such persons, missions efforts should continue with the full support of the covenantal community in order to bring the gospel to those who have never heard its unique message. Nonetheless, I will also contend that Scripture does not preclude our speculation nor completely discourage our hope for the salvation of some who have never been confronted with the explicit claims of the gospel. God may, through extraordinary means, albeit fully on the basis of the atoning cross-work of Christ, gain the salvation of some who are denied full assurance (epistemologically) of their salvation.¹¹ Specifically, I will argue that God may reach some of these: (1) through general revelation (accompanied with an extraordinary ability to discern its truths, which only the Holy Spirit could provide); and/or (2) through extraordinary expansion of the covenantal community’s parameters.

I. HOW ADEQUATE OR INADEQUATE IS GENERAL REVELATION?

Largely because of implications drawn from Romans 1–3, most Reformed theologians have concluded that general revelation alone cannot bring a person to a saving knowledge of Christ, or into a salvific relationship with God. The reasoning that has sustained this longstanding consensus is pretty solid, in my judgment, and deserves more careful consideration from Arminian-inclusivists.

Reformed thinkers do not deny that general revelation, *per se*, is abundant in the accurate and poignant information it makes available about

¹¹ At root, I am assuming a distinction between (actual ontological) salvation and “assurance of” salvation. I also mean to take the axiom of Anglican divine Richard Hooker (as quoted by N. T. Wright) one more step: “One is not justified by faith by believing in justification by faith. . . . It follows quite clearly that a great many people [may be] justified by faith who don’t know they are justified by faith” (N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997] 159).

God. General revelation “should” be a powerful communicative force that “should” draw people to God effectively. Reformed theologians have no reservations about this. The problem is not God’s failure to communicate clearly or to reveal himself sufficiently. The problem is the human response—or, more precisely, the depraved human *inability* to respond.¹²

Depraved human beings respond to the “charm” of general revelation like a “deaf cobra” (Ps 58:3–5); the knowledge that they might gain from this revelation resonates to them as mere “foolishness” (1 Cor 2:14). Thus, one might say that the problem with general revelation is not in the transmitter—it is broadcasting clearly at full power. The problem is in the receptor. One can be standing at the base of a radio station’s broadcast antenna that is transmitting clearly at 10,000 watts, but if the battery in one’s transistor radio is dead, the signal will not be picked up. So it is with depraved human beings and general revelation.

This is why talk of the poor “innocent” human beings whom God does not give a “fair chance” unless he gives them a “real opportunity” to accept or reject Christ is unhelpful.¹³ It would be perfectly justifiable for God, if he so chooses, to judge human beings as damnable for their depraved *nature* alone; the incorrigible, rebellious instincts of the human species makes them *ipso facto* deserving of divine wrath. The farmer who stumbles across a nest of rattlesnake eggs does not need to ponder whether this individual rattlesnake fetus has committed deeds—or will commit deeds—worthy of destruction. Knowing full well the nature of rattlesnakes and what will be the inevitable result if he does not intervene, the farmer is well justified in destroying each and every rattlesnake egg. The nature of the rattlesnake—even outside consideration of what opportunity was or was not had to commit deeds like or unlike a typical rattlesnake—is reason enough to justify their destruction. Numerous scriptural themes testify that God is justified in regarding—and judging—depraved human beings in like manner.¹⁴

¹² “Yet let this difference be remembered, that the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient.” John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993 [1539]) 71. John Murray summarizes well the Reformed perspective: “It would then be intimated that the design of God in giving so open and manifest a disclosure of his eternal power and divinity in his visible handiwork is that all men might be without excuse. If men do not glorify and worship him as God they have no excuse for their impiety, and that the *impiety* might be without excuse is the design of the manifested glory. Objection to this view fails to take account of the benignity and sufficiency of the revelation which renders men inexcusable. The giving of revelation *sufficient* to constrain men to worship and glorify the Creator and given with the design that they would be without excuse, if they failed to glorify him, cannot be unworthy of God” (*The Epistle to the Romans* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965] 1.40).

¹³ We will not expand here upon the question of how people in remote portions of the world got there in the first place. We simply observe that, if biblical history is correct, the migration to a pocket of the world beyond contact with outside civilization originally would have had to involve a conscientious rebellion against Yahweh by the ancestors of persons in that “unreached” pocket now (Genesis 11). That being the case, these rebellious ancestors’ progeny being beyond the reach of—let us be candid—truly vast missions efforts to get to them could be a manifestation of the very sort of judgment God has warned human beings about in his Word (Exod 20:4–5).

¹⁴ This seems to be the exact point of Romans 1–3. Cf. Eph 2:1–3; Psalm 58.

But God is so merciful, even in his justice (Hab 3:2), that he is willing to prorogue his judgment, in a sense. Human beings will be judged, so God has determined, in accordance with the revelation they have had, not with what they have not had. Even still, given depravity, we need not speculate about whether human beings in remote parts of the world might be more naturally responsive to God than are the unbelievers nearby that we know. The general spiritual status of human beings around the world in our day is likely similar to what God observed in Noah’s day, when “the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5).

Inclusivist arguments commonly go too far, in my judgment, in their sentimental appeals on behalf of depraved human beings. We know that the God of the Bible is capable of raining down his wrath on whole segments of depraved humanity. Several times in the prototypical judgments of the OT, his exterminating justice was executed on “everything that breathes.” Men, women, children, even infants in arms, were victims of divinely mandated judgments during the time of Noah, during the time of Joshua, during the time of Jeremiah. Jesus warned that the future judgment would be like these. Inclusivist arguments that seek to ameliorate this point—*argumenta ad misericordiam*, at best—can come dangerously close to “loving the wicked” in a way that the God of the Bible expressly prohibits.¹⁵ To my inclusivist brethren, I would urge renewed, serious attention to Jesus’ warning: loving him and following him may require “hating” father, mother, sisters, and brothers (Luke 14:26).

That having been said, I do believe that there is a Reformed way of raising the question with which inclusivists have been so concerned. Instead of asking, “Would it be truly fair of God to damn human beings for rejecting a gospel they have never heard?” or even, “Might some human beings take advantage of the prevenient grace indiscriminately distributed world-wide within general revelation?” we might ask the question this way: “If God has his elect in remote portions of the world, could he use general revelation to reach them?”¹⁶ Put this way, it seems to me that a Reformed thinker’s answer would have to be more ambivalent.¹⁷

¹⁵ Deut 7:16; 13:6–8; 2 Chr 19:2; 1 John 2:15; Ezek 9:3–5. I know that this is an unpopular point, but the common aphorism, “God hates the sin, but loves the sinner,” does not hold up to biblical scrutiny. Ps 5:5 says God “hates all who do iniquity”; cf. Ps 11:5–7: “The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one who loves violence his soul hates. Upon the wicked he will rain snares; fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup. For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteousness.” At the risk of raising an even more politically incorrect point, believers’ hating “those who hate you, O God” is biblically *affirmed* as a *virtue* (Ps 15:4; 26:5; 31:6; 139:19–24). I do appreciate the emphasis on the love and grace of God presented by my evangelical inclusivist brethren. However, evangelicals should realize that myopic focus on “God is love” to the exclusion of “God is righteous” and “God is holy” (which Scripture insists upon no less emphatically) cannot help but distort the scriptural portrayal of God. I am chagrined at evangelicals’ failure to grasp this point, in general, and with inclusivist shortcomings on this point, in particular.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, Reformed theologians (including Calvin and Murray, quoted above; and including the Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 60) have often moved to the conclusion (too quickly, in my view) that, though the light of general revelation communicates accurate information about

Further, the ambivalence is not without explicit scriptural warrant. Paul's quotation of Psalm 19 in the closing portion of his argument in Romans 10 has intriguing implications. Reformed interpreters have too often closed their consideration of the argument of Romans 10 at verses 13–15.¹⁸ Granted, the rhetorical nature of these questions seems, at first, to close off consideration of God's reaching his elect through any means other than a human agent-borne presentation of the gospel message. But it is Paul himself who reopens the question in verse 18, when he says, "But have they never heard?"—

God that is sufficient to render human beings inexcusable, it is insufficient to serve as viable salvific revelation even if humans responded and acquiesced completely to it. This inference Romans 1 does not support and, I suggest, is an inference that actually runs counter to the direction of the Romans 1 argument. Everyone agrees that the people castigated in Romans 1 are found culpable because of their rejecting the revelation provided them by God. If the content of revelation described in Romans 1 were inherently insufficient for initiating a salvific relationship with God, the passage would be portraying God as condemning people for failing to cross a bridge that would have collapsed had they tried to use it anyway. This dubious idea, commonly but not always held by Reformed theologians, ends up suggesting that general revelation is really designed by God to damn—which, at best, is an inference not addressed by Romans 1 and, at worst, turns the passage on its head. I suggest that this is a point in need of nuance in Reformed theology, and surfaces a tension apparently embedded in (Scottish) Reformed epistemology, in general; see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) 241–80.

¹⁷ And, in fact, they have been, as Sanders helpfully observes (*No Other Name, passim*), despite the general pattern of Reformed thinking observed in the previous note. I also could wish for Sanders's survey to delineate more clearly the consistent distinctive emphases in Reformed considerations of inclusivist notions that would not result in so broad brush a treatment that leaves the unfortunate misimpression that representatives in both Reformed and Arminian traditions have occasionally embraced the same inclusivist view that Sanders advocates.

¹⁸ Geivett and Phillips literally stop at verse 15 in their employment of Romans 10 for their argument advocating exclusivism ("A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach" 234–36). Nash notes Sanders's argument from Rom 10:18, but, undeterred, says, "Admittedly, these words are a poetical allusion to the power of general revelation. . . . However . . . If the inclusivist view [of this passage] were true, it would bring Paul's entire argument in that chapter to an abrupt halt. Even the most superficial reading of the context makes it clear that Paul is talking about the indispensability of special revelation for salvation and the urgency of human preachers to carry the gospel to the world. Romans 10 is exalting special, not general, revelation" (*Is Jesus the Only Savior?* 121; the line of argument here is similar to that presented by John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* 2.61–64). These arguments come dangerously close to "proof by emphatic assertion." I frankly cannot blame my inclusivist brethren for being unconvinced by such glib and circular exegetical analysis. Intriguingly, the passage fares better under John Calvin's analysis, though he does not follow through with what implications his exegetical conclusions might suggest:

I then take this quotation according to the proper and genuine meaning of the Prophet; so that the argument will be something of this kind,—God has already from the beginning manifested his divinity to the Gentiles, though not by the preaching of men, yet by the testimony of his creatures; for though the gospel was silent among them, yet the whole workmanship of heaven and earth did speak and make known its author by its preaching. It hence appears, that the Lord, even during the time in which he confined the favour of his covenant to Israel, did not yet so withdraw from the Gentiles the knowledge of himself, but that he ever kept alive some sparks of it among them. He indeed manifested himself then more particularly to his chosen people, so that the Jews might be justly compared to domestic hearers, whom he familiarly taught as it were by his own mouth; yet as he spoke to the Gentiles at a distance by the voice of the heavens, he showed by this prelude that he designed to make himself known at length to them also (*Epistle to the Romans* [trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993; reprint of 1539 ed.] 403).

deliberately undermining, in part, his earlier rhetorical question, “How shall they hear without a preacher?” They may hear, apparently (and extraordinarily), through the constant testimony of general revelation (v. 18).¹⁹

I would immediately point out that Rom 10:18 occurs right in the middle of the three chapters in the Bible that are most adamant in their vindication of the sovereignty of God. Paul’s argument here is not some sappy appeal for human beings’ basic goodness or eagerness to embrace God if given the slightest chance. Quite the contrary. Paul’s argument is that God is gracious to whom he will be gracious and that he is capable of reaching people and establishing a relationship with people who have been exposed to a lot less special revelation than the more obvious “covenant community.” Paul’s exhortation to people who have been liberally exposed to special revelation and who are well-familiar with accurate information about how to have a relationship with God is: “Do not be conceited, but fear. . . . Behold the kindness and severity of God. Continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off” (Rom 11:20–23).

God surprised his Jewish “chosen people” by how resourcefully he was able to gain a relationship with “Gentile dogs.”²⁰ Paul’s intention—the intention of the Holy Spirit who inspired these words of Paul, we must assume—is to give us pause as well. That is why Paul’s deliberate undermining of his earlier rhetorical questions is not just flagrant self-contradiction. His whole point is that we, the elect, the covenant community, dare not think our full knowledge of the gospel message gives us “a lock” on what God can and cannot do in establishing relationships with people or disengaging from relationships with people to whom he has already been lavishly gracious. It is not that God will renege on any promises he has made; but we “stand” only by his grace, which we dare not take for granted. And, inclusivists are right on this point: God may be more gracious toward those outside the visible covenant community than what he has fully disclosed. Romans 10:18 sanctions speculation, at least, as to whether a “wider hope” may be warranted.

Of course, people in remote sections of the world will not respond to the revelation to which they are exposed unless the Holy Spirit works in their mind and heart in an extraordinary way. But is this not true in any case? All Reformed thinkers recognize that, unless the Holy Spirit overrides, supercedes, and transforms the depraved human will, no one will respond. The real question is whether God needs special revelation to do this work. Given the sufficiency of “information” in general revelation, it is not implausible to think that, given a miraculous work in the mind and heart of a person in a remote section of the world, that person could respond to the information they have.

¹⁹ Millard Erickson has also drawn the very implications from Rom 10:18 that I am suggesting here (“Hope for Those Who Haven’t Heard? Yes, but . . .,” *EMQ* 11 [April 1975] 124–25).

²⁰ From the beginning of the incarnation, we can see God’s orchestrating this surprise. While the Messiah was born outside the notice of most of the Jewish world, Persian astrologers got a special divine invitation (via “magic star”!) to come see the Christ Child (Matt 2:1–12). In their case, God allowed them to find him where they were looking. Cf. Jesus’ point in Luke 4:25–27.

Certainly, Rom 10:14–15 presents the way God ordinarily reaches his elect. But Rom 10:18 raises questions about whether God may occasionally work in an extraordinary way among “unreached” people. What if a person never hears the gospel, but, by a special movement of the Holy Spirit (unbeknown to him, of course) in his mind, heart, and will, is given cause over the course of his life to grow more and more uneasy with the pagan suppositions and assumptions of the false religion that dominates the culture into which he was born? What if he, perhaps privately, perhaps gropingly, with the limited and fallible knowledge that he has, begins to seek and worship the God behind his unease, discomfort, and questions? Is it possible that he may find, upon death, that the God he has sought and worshipped, however clumsily and inadequately, was none other than Yahweh, who, by the power of an atonement provided in a trinitarian plan of reconciliation about which he was completely oblivious during his lifetime, has established a relationship with him, a relationship that will now continue into eternity as that of child to Father? Is this possible? “Perhaps. We don’t know,” is the correct biblical answer.

II. CAN THE PARAMETERS OF THE COVENANT COMMUNITY BE EXTRAORDINARILY EXPANDED?

Inclusivists have made much of the “exception clause” that Reformed theology normally invokes to defend assurance of salvation for “covenant children” who die in infancy.²¹ Inclusivists have repeatedly raised the question, “If infants can be saved apart from explicit faith in Christ, then why not others—particularly among those whose knowledge of accurate information about Jesus Christ is as infantile as babies born to Christian parents?”²²

Inclusivists typically frame this question in such a way that it sounds like they believe they have found a place where exclusivists balk at the implications of their own theological stance.²³ But that is not really the case—at least not in the Reformed version of salvation for “covenant children.” In Reformed theology, inclusion within the covenant community of infants born to covenant parents is part of an overall understanding of justification being offered covenantally to believers and their seed.²⁴ Of course, the covenantal embrace of the “seed” is more provisional/probationary; the covenant child is not “automatically included” because of his parents’ faith. The child must embrace the Christocentric covenant himself as he is able, which motivation is given him by the Spirit’s empowerment (which the Spirit usually provides in gracious accommodation to his parents’ covenantal faithfulness).

²¹ See *The Westminster Confession*, “Chapter X: Of Effectual Calling,” section III.

²² Sanders devotes an entire appendix to this point (“Infant Salvation and Damnation,” in *No Other Name* 287–305). See also Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy* 166–68.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Vern Sheridan Poythress, “Indifferentism and Rigorism in the Church: With Implications for Baptizing Small Children,” *WTJ* 59 (1997) 13–29.

While this understanding is not completely uncontroversial, it clearly does not represent an arbitrary dodge of what would otherwise be the implications of the (Reformed) exclusivist position.²⁵ In a Reformed understanding of what salvation is—a covenantal relationship between human beings and the triune God—there is nothing inherently inconsistent about defining what are the parameters of the “covenant community.” Reformed theologians have, in fact, pretty consistently agreed that the grace of God given to the community of faith is one that reaches to their families, at least to some degree.

That point clarified, we can proceed to the question that I think inclusivists can now legitimately raise: Can the boundaries of grace given to not-yet-explicitly-believing-persons within the “covenant community” be extended beyond the borders of believers’ children? This question should give Reformed persons pause.

The plagues of Egypt were given to demonstrate a quite exclusivist point regarding the OT covenant community: “There shall be a great cry in all the land of Egypt, such as there has not been before and such as shall never be again. But against any of the sons of Israel a dog shall not even bark, whether against man or animal, that you may understand how the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel” (Exod 11:6–7; cf. Exod 8:22–23; 9:4, 6, 24–26; 10:22–23). Nonetheless, when the Israelites actually made their exodus, “a good mixture of foreigners” (רַב לְרַב) also went with them (Exod 12:38), apparently assimilated to some degree into the margins of the covenant community of Israel.²⁶ Given the overall tendency of the Israelites to be stiff-necked and rebel against God, it is hard to tell whether this assimilation was, in the end, a good thing or a bad thing. This “mixed multitude” could have a negative influence on the community as a whole during challenging times (Num 11:4). On the other hand, Moses, leader of the covenant community at the time, married one of the “foreigners,” a Cushite woman, which Yahweh defended over against the objections of Aaron and Miriam (Numbers 12).

In any case, this “mixed bag of foreigners” did “walk under the cloud” and “pass through the sea” with the rest of the covenant community (cf. 1 Cor 10:1–4). In their case, the boundaries of the covenant community’s parameters were extended extraordinarily at its margins in such a way that

²⁵ I must reluctantly concede, however, that, to be consistent, the assurance that 1 Cor 7:14 offers to “covenant children” yields simultaneously an unpleasant agnosticism regarding non-covenant children (i.e. who die in infancy). I am comforted that the Bible acknowledges that, before a certain age, children do not know “to refuse evil and choose good” (Isa 7:14–15; cf. Jonah 4:11), but some of that comfort is undermined for me, if I am honest, by Paul’s clarification, “otherwise your children are unclean” (ἐπεὶ ἄρα τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν ἀκάθαρτά ἐστιν)—*vis-à-vis* what children are who are under the care of a believing parent: *viz.* “sanctified” (ἡγίασται) and “holy” (ἅγια).

²⁶ “They must have been non-Israelites, and would comprise, 1st, *Egyptians*, with whom the Israelites may to a small extent have intermarried (Lev. Xxiv. 10), 2nd, *Semites* of various tribes from the desert frontiers, and, 3rd, *other foreigners* who, as prisoners, had been united with the Israelites in building labour (see on i.9). They are mentioned in Num. xi. 4, and alluded to in Dt. xxix. 11, Jos. viii. 35” (A. H. McNeile, *The Book of Exodus* [London, Methuen & Co., 1931] 75).

the grace of God “spilled over,” in a sense, to some of those who would otherwise have simply been destroyed with the rest of their people.

This extraordinary extension of the parameters of the covenant community is repeated in Joshua 2, after Rahab harbors the Israelite spies. That Rahab, a Moabite, was saved from the destruction of Jericho is extraordinary enough, though her rescue is not so surprising given the faith in Yahweh she demonstrated by protecting the spies. But the “spillover” of divine covenantal grace does not stop with her. The grace she pleads for is that which shall extend to her entire “father’s household, . . . my father and my mother and my brother and my sisters, with all who belong to them” (Josh 2:12–13); and, of course, God (through Joshua) accommodates this request (Josh 6:22–25).

This is a pattern that is repeated in other places in the OT: with the Gibeonites of Joshua 9,²⁷ with Ruth (through Naomi and Boaz); with the Queen of Sheba (through Solomon, 1 Kings 10); with Naaman the Syrian (through Elisha, 2 Kings 5), and to a lesser degree with Achish (through David, 1 Samuel 27–29); with Nebuchadnezzar and Darius (through Daniel; Daniel 4, 6); with Cyrus (through Daniel and Ezra; Daniel 10; Ezra 1); with Xerxes (through Esther); and with Artaxerxes (through Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah). In each of these cases, an “overflow” of the grace of God is extended to pagan people because of their contact and kindness toward people in the covenant community. Not all of these people were “fully absorbed” into the covenant community,²⁸ but each of these cases does suggest a “permeability” at the margins of the covenant community’s parameters that gives cause for optimism regarding their eternal destinies.

With this pattern as background, Jesus’ conclusion of the parable of the “unrighteous steward” (Luke 16:1–13) is all the more intriguing. In Jesus’ story, a manager of a wealthy man’s property knows he is about to be fired. He quickly “cooks the books,” “introduc[ing] a high deflationary trend in his master’s bills.”²⁹ This “favor” towards his master’s debtors in place, the “unrighteous steward” can rest assured that, when he is fired, he will have a place to go; having “greased the palms” of people in stable positions, he can be expelled from one good job only to move into another one, having “made room for himself” by this “favor.” This shrewdness Jesus commends.

²⁷ Initially, the Gibeonites are said to be “cursed, and you shall never cease being slaves” (Josh 9:23), which, of course, sounds bad. Their actual slave service, however, is as “hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God,” so that they became “hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD, to this day, in the place which He would choose” (Josh 9:23, 27). Obviously, this kind of service could actually represent a position of privilege, though it may not have been originally recognized as such. Furthermore, Gibeon was eventually occupied by the Benjaminites (Josh 21:17), a tribe that was virtually wiped out during the time of Judges (Judges 20–21). The first king of Israel, Saul, a Benjaminite, may have been of (partly) Gibeonite origin (cf. 1 Chr 9:35–44)! Clearly, the “spill-over” of grace to the Gibeonites was great indeed, as can be seen especially in historical hindsight.

²⁸ Of these, only Ruth actually “converts” to Judaism that we know of; but, even in her case, her initial “absorption” into the grace of God was through marriage to a member of the covenant community. The same would apply to the Queen of Sheba, if she eventually did, in fact, marry Solomon.

²⁹ Darrell Bock, *Luke* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994) 263.

For centuries, interpreters have puzzled over Jesus’ use of such an “unrighteous steward” as an example for his own followers to heed.³⁰ Most end up concluding that Jesus’ point is simply that the value of material goods pales in comparison to the value of more eternal rewards. There is no question that this is a point intended by Jesus. Still, I question whether that is Jesus’ *only* point. Luke 16:9 presents Jesus’ initial “moral of the story” (thus indicating, perhaps, that this is his main point?): “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous money (τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας) so that, when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” For Jesus to bring the idea of “eternal dwellings” (τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς) into the equation would be extraneous to the point of distraction unless he intends for us (his hearers) to contemplate whether “cutting deals” in favor of people in the covenant community—people who will one day have a place in the “eternal dwellings”—could one day “pay off” for people who would otherwise have no such place.

How consistent is this idea with other themes of biblical teaching? Careful scrutiny reveals that our taking Jesus’ point in the way just intimated is not so foreign to biblical impulses as we might initially imagine. In Matt 25:31–46, Jesus tells us about people being judged in accordance with how they treated his people. Why? Because “to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me,” a principle that works both positively and negatively (Matt 25:40, 45). The intriguing thing about the Matthew 25 judgment is that the people being judged do not know “the King” *per se*; at least their actions, whether approved or disapproved, were not motivated by a consciousness of service (or disservice) to the King. Even when the standard of judgment is revealed, they question, “When did we do that?”—a pretty striking indication that the specific actions cited for commendation were done out of a more implicit, rather than explicit, “faith”³¹ (with the reverse being the case for those deeds cited for condemnation).

The greater point that emerges from a comparison of Luke 16 and Matthew 25 is that Jesus really does associate himself fully with his people. Evangelicals have long recognized this truth when it comes to the persecution of Christians (e.g. Jesus said to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, “Why are you persecuting me?”; Acts 9:4–5). Why could not the same principle work in the favor of those who perform deeds of kindness towards Christians?

No one needs to convince evangelicals that the church is “the body of Christ” (Eph 1:22–23); that point is virtually a truism among evangelical Christians. But what if it is truer than we have before dared imagine? What if to know us, Jesus’ people, is, in a very real sense, to know Jesus? “You are the only Bible some people will ever read. You are the only Jesus that some

³⁰ “This story is probably the most difficult parable in Luke. Its point is clear enough—be generous and responsible with your resources—but how it makes the point is much discussed” (ibid. 262).

³¹ See D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 520. I will not catalogue here the numerous other commentaries on Matthew. I will say that Catholic interpreters seem generally to have grasped the points I am defending in this section more readily than Protestant ones.

people will ever see.” What if these clichés are not just sappy Sunday School lesson closers? What if they are really true?

We know that believers take part in the judgments (1 Cor 6:2; Rev 2:26–27; 3:21; 20:4). What if our role in these judgments is greater than we have imagined? Is it possible that believers will have the opportunity to “vouch for” some of those who did not explicitly join the covenant community while on earth, but who are received into the covenant community in eternity by covenant members with whom they showed affiliation by their kindnesses toward them? If such is the case, that would actually fit the pattern of how God has operated in the past remarkably well. Such an extraordinary expansion of the parameters of the covenant community’s margins would be consistent with the kind of extensions of his grace that God has approved before. So, it would not be too surprising for God to be pleased at the judgment to bestow his grace indirectly to those “who were not his people” through those of his people to whom he, in this life, displayed his grace directly. Such an extension would not be something unplanned by God; as Matt 25:34 makes clear, receptors of such “indirect grace” would be inheriting “the kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world.” Such an extension of grace might very well surprise many of God’s people.

III. SUMMARY: SEVEN THESES

(1) No one is saved apart from the grace of God that is made available to those who are “by nature children of wrath” only by the substitutionary atonement of Christ, applied only and particularly to God’s elect by grace through a supernatural, drawing work of the Holy Spirit.

(2) God can be surprisingly proficient at getting his saving grace to his elect. He can use general revelation as a powerful instrument in the process. How exclusively may he use this instrument to draw an individual child of his to himself, we do not know.

(3) God has been known to be generous with his grace by making the margins of the covenant community somewhat permeable, and the lines of those margins somewhat wide or blurry.

(4) Jesus Christ is currently “embodied” in his people, those who can be explicitly identified as believing members of the covenant community. These members will take part in, and may play a significant role in, the judgment of humanity (“the world”).

(5) Jesus has made clear that at least one criterion in the judgment will be how people treated “him,” that is, in relation to how they treated members of “his body.”

(6) The final judgment is prorated, to some degree. People are judged in accordance with the revelation they had, not in accordance with revelation they did not have (Romans 2). Though it is clear that this proration of judgment may alleviate the *degree* of punishment in some cases (see Matt 5:22–24; Luke 12:47–48), it remains unclear whether punishment may be avoided entirely because of God’s taking into account at the judgment someone’s having received a disproportionately low level of revelation.

(7) Will the combination of any or all of the above principles work out at the judgment to the favor of those who have either never heard explicitly an explanation of the gospel or who have only implicitly commended themselves to Jesus by virtue of their support of Jesus’ people? We do not know.

IV. CONCLUSION: WHY EVEN SPECULATE ABOUT SUCH QUESTIONS?

At the conclusion of this paper, I find myself in the unenviable position of being in disagreement with both exclusivists and inclusivists on one of the few points that they themselves agree upon, that is, I disagree with the premise, on either side, that “enough information does exist for the construction of a biblically satisfying and theologically sound answer” as to what destiny can be expected for the bulk of people who remain unevangelized.³² I believe the Bible encourages agnosticism on the part of believers as to what the fate of the unevangelized will be.

Still, I confess to being jarred somewhat by Pinnock’s taunt:

Lesslie Newbigin, for example, likes to emphasize that God will do what is right in judgment, and we do not need to worry ourselves about it. He points to texts like Luke 13:30 which say that judgment is going to catch us by surprise and contradict all normal expectations. . . . There is truth in what he says. But such an attitude can also be a cop-out to avoid answering a fair and urgent question in a responsible way. What kind of theologian refuses to speak about the possibility of salvation of the majority of the human race? Is such a person reticent on other controversial matters? Maybe he or she should find easier work.³³

And so, I would hope to offer those who are genuinely agnostic on the question of the destiny of the unevangelized a means of speaking more intelligently to the question, even if still inconclusively. I do not share the wide hope that Pinnock, Sanders, and other evangelical inclusivists offer; I wish I could, but I simply do not see in Scripture the basis that they do for it. On the other hand, I do not see the need to pronounce a firm assurance of damnation on the unevangelized either, to which exclusivists too often seem driven. While I think we are given some hope for the extraordinary rescue of some “who have never heard” in (only) exceptional cases, I do think we have reason to hope for at least some exceptional cases.

I find it hard to describe myself as either “optimistically agnostic” or “pessimistically agnostic” in the way these phrases have normally been used.³⁴ I am simply agnostic, hopeful that a small minority of the unevangelized may be drawn to God in exceptional ways by his Spirit. If it turns out that God draws more than I expect through extraordinary means, even through

³² Sanders, *No Other Name* 17; cf. Ramesh Richard, *Population of Heaven* 145. Sanders and Richard agree that the Bible gives us enough information to give a fairly confident prognosis of what the destiny of most of the unevangelized will be, but, of course, despite the confidence they each possess, their respective prognoses are diametrically opposed!

³³ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy* 152.

³⁴ Phillips’s and Ockholm’s identification of McGrath and Geivett/Phillips, respectively, in *Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World*.

such means as I have speculated about in this paper, I will be genuinely, albeit pleasantly, surprised.

We do know that we who have come to a saving knowledge of Christ, and who enjoy a confident filial relationship with God as a result of Christ's substitutionary atoning work on our behalf, are unworthy beneficiaries of God's incomprehensible love, grace, and mercy. Anyone with whom we share the gospel message, likewise, can come to enjoy such confidence if they respond to the calling of the Spirit. This we know.

We do not know about those who are never exposed to an explicit presentation of the gospel message. God has given us some room to speculate here. We do not know what he will do, though we are given some grounds to draw both some pessimistic and some optimistic expectations. He calls for us simply to trust him; and he is not asking too much of us, whichever way he decides. Any sensitive reader of Scripture will find himself surprised, at times, by both the kindness and the severity of God. I confess to being startled occasionally, still today, by how dramatically both themes are presented in Scripture. I also confess to subscribing to the Reformed faith, in part, because I am convinced that Reformed theology, on the whole, has been more accurate, more straightforward, and more honest with some of the more severe aspects of God's character with which Scripture presents us. Still, the inclusivists are right to draw our attention to how resourceful God can be at reaching people in unexpected ways and in unexpected places.

John Sanders discloses that one motivating factor for publicizing the rationale for his position was his desire to give a well-reasoned answer to a question put to him by a pastor early on in the development of his inclusivist views: "Why have you put a question mark where God has placed a period?"³⁵ I still wish that inclusivists would ponder this question more deeply. On the other hand, I exhort my fellow Reformed thinkers, especially, to listen more carefully to the scriptural case put forward by my inclusivist brethren. When it comes to the eternal destiny of the unevangelized, I fear that evangelicals have too often been guilty of putting an exclamation point where God has put a question mark.

³⁵ Sanders, *No Other Name* 23.