

A Dilemma for Exclusivism

Introduction/Abstract

There has been considerable debate in recent years about the theological doctrines of exclusivism (the position that people must explicitly accept Christ as their savior while they are alive in order to be saved) and inclusivism (the doctrine that some people may be saved without explicitly accepting Christ as their savior while they are alive). In this paper, I take up the issue again and provide some more arguments in support of inclusivism over exclusivism. I argue that exclusivism gives rise to a dilemma: in the case of people who have never heard of Christ, the exclusivist must choose between God's character traits of mercy and justice on the one hand, and exclusivism on the other. I consider several possible responses by exclusivists, but show that none of them are able to resolve the dilemma. I conclude that, while the exclusivist desire to pattern their argument on biblical passages is admirable, their attempt to adequately account for the biblical message regarding salvation is faulty.

The Dilemma for Exclusivism: An Analogy

The main biblical texts used by exclusivists (Nash, one of the main current defenders of exclusivism, refers to his position as "restrictivism") are:

Jesus answered, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given by mortal by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. (Romans 10:9-10)

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And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that, the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:27-28)¹

From these verses, exclusivists conclude that the necessary and sufficient conditions for salvation are explicit acceptance of Christ while one is alive. The question that gives rise to the dilemma for exclusivism is, as reflected in the title of a recent book on the issue, “What about those who have never heard about Christ?” While it may be claimed that there are very few people in this state in our world, it can still be established with little difficulty that there are still numbers of such people currently, and certainly there have been large numbers of people through history who have died without ever having heard Christ’s name.

Exclusivists must respond to the question with this argument: No one who has not explicitly accepted Christ while they are alive can be saved. No one who has never heard about Christ can have explicitly accepted Christ. Therefore, no one who has never heard about Christ can be saved. But I claim this places them in the horns of a dilemma, with exclusivism on one horn and God’s character traits of love, mercy and justice on the other.

I will illustrate this dilemma with an analogy. Suppose there is a city. In this city, a number of murders have been committed but not solved, so there are a number of murderers at large. Now suppose the city, for whatever reason (maybe it is to resolve certain cases, recover certain bodies, or something like that) decides to declare a “clemency weekend.” That is, on a certain weekend, any murderers who come forward and confess their crime (with sufficient accurate details to validate that they are the murderer), reveal the location of missing bodies, etc., will be granted a pardon.

¹ These verses are listed by Ronald Nash in “Restrictivism” in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*, John Sanders, Ed., (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 107.

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In order to publicize clemency weekend, the city will publish ads in the local newspaper, runs ads on television and radio, place banners around the city, etc. The ads will state that any murderer who comes to the local courthouse, establishes who they are and what they have done, and asks for pardon, will receive it. However, the offer will only in effect between 6:00 p.m. Friday evening and midnight Sunday evening. In addition, the announcements, while numerous during the weekend, will only be made during the weekend, starting at noon on Friday and ending at midnight Sunday.

Now suppose, at 12:01 a.m. on Sunday, two people show up at the courthouse. The first announces that he is a murderer, gives details of the crime, and claims that he was busy all weekend, and then his car wouldn't start, then he got lost on the way to the courthouse, so he just didn't get there on time. The clemency committee responds; "we're sorry but the offer was clear and the time frame was clearly communicated, so Clemency Weekend has passed you by. In addition, since you have now confessed your crime, you are under arrest for the murder and will be tried and sentenced." The second announces that she is a murder and gives sufficient details of the crime, but then adds; "I left town at 6:00 a.m. Friday and was in a remote area of the country with no means of communication. My plane landed here at 11:45 p.m., and as soon as I heard of the offer, I jumped in a taxi and had the driver drive as fast as he could, and here I am." The clemency committee responds as they did to the first murderer: "we're sorry but the offer was clear and the time frame was clearly communicated, so Clemency Weekend has passed you by. In addition, since you have now confessed your crime, you are under arrest for the murder and will be tried and sentenced." The murderer replies, "Yes, but I didn't hear (and couldn't have heard) about the offer, and as soon as I heard about it, I came here as fast as I possibly

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could have.” The clemency committee responds again, “Sorry, you missed the deadline. We didn’t have to grant anyone clemency, so we had and have no further obligation to you.”

The question this analogy raises is, does the clemency committee act justly and mercifully toward these two murderers? In the first case, it is possible to say yes. The murderer is in fact a murderer, and he didn’t deserve anything but punishment for his crime. Furthermore, the offer of pardon was clear, the murderer knew about it, and it was his responsibility to avail himself of the offer. His failure to do so was his own failure. This analysis is consistent with the normal exclusivist explanation of the fate of people who reject (or simply don’t accept) Christ’s offer of salvation.

However, it seems that there is a problem with respect to both justice and mercy on the part of the clemency committee in the second case. It is true that the person, like the first murderer, is in fact a murderer and in fact doesn’t deserve anything other than punishment. And it is true that Clemency Weekend was a limited-time-offer and that the clemency committee was being merciful even to offer it. In that sense, the response of the committee is not unjust. However, is it either just or merciful for them to fail to give this murderer a chance to avail herself of the offer? It was through no fault of hers that she didn’t know of the offer. She did everything she could, once she knew of it, to avail herself of it. While it was not necessary for the city to offer Clemency Weekend, and while murderer two is still a murderer, it seems that at least mercy, if not justice, would require them to extend the offer to her, and, indeed, to all people who were unable, through no fault of their own, to accept the offer.

I propose that this scenario parallels God’s offer of salvation. It does not claim (as exclusivists often charge non-exclusivists with claiming) that people are not guilty of sin, or that they save themselves. The issue is that if God offers salvation to people, and he is simply just,

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let alone loving and merciful, then he will give everyone a fair chance to accept or reject the offer. Not to give them a fair chance, as exclusivism asserts God does, is to act unmercifully and unjustly.

Exclusivist response 1

One possible response to this dilemma for exclusivists is to appeal to God's sovereignty and to claim that God's ways are not our ways, and that God's justice is not our justice; whatever God says or does is just simply because he has said or done it. While there is a biblical text that claims that God's ways are not our ways, this argument does not work, for two reasons.

First, the biblical text itself does not support the exclusivist claim. It comes from Isaiah 55, verses 8 and 9, which reads

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Taken out of context, it might seem to support the exclusivist claim that God's justice is different than our justice. However, consider the two preceding verses, 6 and 7:

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Note that these verses are about God's abundance in *pardoning* people, not *condemning* them. And they don't say anything about accepting Christ verbally or intellectually; they connect being pardoned on forsaking one's wicked ways and unrighteous thoughts, which are about behaviors and lifestyles, not specific words and thoughts. If they support any view about who is saved, they would support the view that people who have never heard of Christ, but who have changed from lives of wickedness to lives that honor God's ways, may be saved.

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The second reason that this argument doesn't work is that it makes it impossible for us to understand "justice." Our term "justice" comes from a Latin word that means "what is fair/equitable/right/due/proper." According to our term, "justice," condemning people who have never heard of Christ for their lack of accepting him is unjust. Now it may be that God's sense of justice is the opposite of our sense. But then it makes no sense to say God is just. We would have to say that God is unjust. But the biblical image of God is not that he is the opposite of what we consider just. To cite just one verse, in Leviticus 19, God gives this command: "You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor." The word "justice" here has precisely the same meaning as our term "justice" – fairness, equality, and impartiality. The exclusivist cannot affirm that God does or will do unjust things and call them just. God is just and commands us to be just. The dilemma, then, remains: either exclusivism is false, or God is unjust.

Exclusivist response 2

Another exclusivist response to the dilemma is to claim, based on Romans 1-3, that people know enough about God and God's character through general revelation so that they are deservedly condemned through general revelation, but they cannot be saved except by explicitly accepting Christ.² This response, however, has two problems.

First, it does not solve the dilemma – it just pushes it one step further. The new dilemma is posed by this question: Can a person be saved through general revelation or only condemned? To accept that people can be saved through general revelation is to abandon exclusivism for inclusivism. To claim, on the other hand, that people can be condemned through general revelation, but not saved, is again to deny God's mercy and justice. It seems unfair that people

² Nash, "Restrictivism" in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 110ff.

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have enough knowledge about God through general revelation to be condemned, but not to be saved.

Second, the claim that people can be condemned through general revelation, but not saved, makes an untenable distinction. If one can be condemned through general revelation, one must be able to be saved through it as well; if no one can be saved through general revelation, then no one can be condemned through it either. That is, how is one condemned through general revelation? It must be that one has a knowledge of God and his character that is clear enough for them to consciously reject. But if that is the case, why would it not be possible for them not to reject God? Or, having rejected him at some point (as we all do), why would it not be possible for them to repent, change their ways, and begin to faithfully follow what they know of God? If condemnation through rejection is possible, it must follow that salvation through acceptance and repentance is possible.

In fact, Paul supports this position in the same passage used by exclusivists. In Romans 2, he says,

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or *perhaps excuse* them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (Romans 2: 14-16, my italics)

So Paul seems to accept that some people may be saved through general revelation.

In addition, Sanders presents the story of Cornelius as a story of a person who has been saved without having explicitly accepted Christ.³ The relevant passage in this story is Peter's statement to Cornelius: "In truth, I understand that God doesn't show favoritism, but in every nation the person who fears Him and does righteousness is acceptable to Him." This seems to be

³ John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 254.

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a clear statement that people from other nations can fear God and live righteously and be acceptable to (i.e., saved by) God. Nash responds to this argument by claiming that Cornelius was “a believer in the same sense as every believing Jew prior to Christ” and that “believing Jews and Gentiles (like Cornelius) needed to know that the Son of God had come into the world.”⁴ Now, while it would be beneficial for people who feared God and lived righteous lives to hear about Christ, through whom they were saved, Nash doesn’t establish here that it is *necessary*. What about a person whose status was the same as Cornelius’, but who died one week before Peter talked to Cornelius, or after Peter had talked to Cornelius, but who didn’t know Peter or Cornelius? According to exclusivism, he or she would be damned. But again, this seems unjust. Furthermore, Peter doesn’t claim (as Nash implies) that only Jewish people who fear Yahweh are accepted by him – he claims that people in “every nation” who fear God and who live righteous lives are accepted by him. The implication of this claim must be that there are people in other nations who haven’t explicitly accepted Christ who meet these conditions.

Conclusion

While the exclusivist desire to be true to biblical teachings is admirable, their use of and interpretation of Scripture does not in the end support their doctrine. The passages cited in support of their position do not necessarily support it – some even lend support to inclusivism when read in their surrounding context. Furthermore, exclusivism is prey to the dilemma outlined here – if exclusivism is true, God is not merciful or just, and if God is merciful and just, exclusivism cannot be true.

⁴ Nash, “Restrictivism” in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 122.

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