

3 decades ago, as a young adult, I attended worship at the church of my most beloved aunt and uncle. (I'd gone to this church a number of times as a child when my family would visit, but I'd never attended their church as a teen or young adult.) This particular Sunday was a communion Sunday, and until that Sunday, I did not know I'd be excluded from table fellowship in that church. Having grown up in a UMC, I had not known that some Protestant denominations do not practice 'open communion'. (I'd just thought I could not partake in a Roman Catholic church.)

To be excluded was strange and disturbing; to be deemed not "Christian" enough to come to the Lord's Table. I never attended worship with my aunt and uncle again, though I did deliver my uncle's eulogy at that same church a few years ago. I should say that some UMC's -- a distinct minority -- do limit access to the table. But for pastoral and evangelical reasons, UM pastors seldom turn anyone away from communion. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, believed that Communion held the potential to be a 'converting ordinance'; that someone who wasn't Christian might be stirred to faith by God's love as they received the sacrament of communion.

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This is the 5th Sunday in a 6-week series on the theme "Ask God Anything." The question we wish God would answer today is, "How far does Your grace extend?" This question was the theme in a number of emails I received for this series: "Is Jesus the only way to salvation?" "Is Christ really unique or is salvation possible in other faiths, or for good people of no faith?" "What happens to those who die without having heard the gospel?" Let me ask this: at any point in your life (including now), have you pondered this question?

But here's a tricky thing. It's difficult to address this question without walking into the dangerous territory of rendering judgment on others. And we know that Jesus strongly warned his followers to not judge others; telling us to leave matters of judgment and salvation to God alone.

With that caution in mind, I want to approach this question by sharing how, over the ages, Christian theologians have argued over three views of salvation that we find in scripture: three different views about the extent of God's saving grace in

Jesus. These views include the exclusive, the universal, and the inclusive view. (I recommend writing down the scripture passages I refer to since I won't be able to unpack them thoroughly.)

In the EXCLUSIVE view, only those who profess Jesus as Lord and Savior in this lifetime receive salvation. Those who do not, are excluded. John 3:16 sounds exclusive and Ephesians 1:11-23 seems to support this view. These passages, and others, are the ones I'd use to make exclusivist claims. I'd probably throw in Romans 10:9-13 and John 14:6 for good measure. But then again, John 3:21 seems to suggest that 'those who do what is true' will also come to the light of salvation. And in Matthew 7:21, Jesus states, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Mark 9:41 strongly implies that non-Christians who tend to the most basic needs of a Christ follower will also receive "the reward".

The UNIVERSALIST argues that there's no way to be certain of where God's grace stops. In fact, a universalist would argue that it's dangerous and unscriptural to assert that Jesus is the only way to salvation. Such claims, a Christian universalist would say, contradict John 3:17; that the whole world is subject to God's salvific work. So, any imperialistic claim on the part of one religion to possess the truth for all is dangerously arrogant. If we are offended when extremist Muslims call for the slaughter of infidels, a universalist argues that exclusive Christian claims are similarly offensive.

Two medieval Catholic theologians, Peter Abelard and Nicholas of Cusa believed the idea that Christ is the **only way to** eternal life -- the **only way by** which God works divine justice -- ignores the scriptural witness to God's incredible, prodigious, and unconditional grace. More recently, two Quakers have argued this position in the book, *If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*. Their primary text is Acts 10, but they include a significant list of OT and NT scripture references to develop their view. (Of course they have to exclude some texts that exclusivists point to...)

The INCLUSIVE position says that Jesus Christ is the unique savior of the world — not one of many saviors — but that his saving power is not limited to the Christian religion, nor to the Church, nor

even to the limited span of human life. Jesus' lordship is more expansive than all of that!

The inclusive view would cite passages used by both the exclusivist and universalist, but would also point to Paul's affirmation in Philippians 2:9-11 that God has exalted Jesus so that, ultimately, "every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth will bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." Philippians does make it clear that Paul believed that there is no salvation *outside* of Christ; but that Paul also saw that salvation in Christ could be wider than we know. Paul says that God has put the matter into the hands of Christ who, as we see in the gospels, widened the embrace of God far beyond the covenant people of Israel; and extended God's grace to those the religious leaders would not include.

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It seems to me that the inclusive position avoids an undue arrogance that we, on this side of life, can grasp *everything* there is to know about the synergy of salvation. In Jesus, we can affirm that the human situation is changed irreversibly. We can claim that – we can hold that conviction -- without condemning others to hell. Both the universalist and the inclusivist say that this is the problem with the exclusive position: it's too concerned with who's in and who's out; and then we begin to treat those we deem as 'outside' as 'less than' when Jesus did no such thing. But my discomfort with the universalist position is that it presumes that even those who have no interest in God will be assimilated against their will, like the cyborg in Star Trek. ("Resistance is futile.")

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In the Gospels, Jesus taught that the last day would be a day of surprises, of reversals, of astonishment. In his most developed parable on God's judgment, the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, both the 'lost' and the 'saved' are caught totally off guard. And in that parable Jesus says nothing about what we believe in our heads or confess with our lips! In Matthew 25, God's judgment is based solely on compassionate deeds exhibited towards those in need.

This is not to say that there is no judgment; it simply means that the Judge we say we trust will not be bound or limited by our standards of justice.ⁱ (That causes me great relief! 'Cause based on my own criteria; I would not pass muster!)

For this reason, I think that the very nature of faith "requires a kind of letting go — a relinquishment of any pretense of control and an admission of radical ignorance"ⁱⁱ about the mystery of salvation and grace. This doesn't mean we don't think about faith. It does mean we are humble and circumspect in our theological reflection and proclamation.

The issue in Christianity; the question for you and for me, is not "who gets into heaven and who doesn't?" The issue is this: if you say that Jesus is the Christ, are you following him as your Lord?

C.S. Lewis addresses this question in his book *Mere Christianity*: "Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and [who have] been able to believe in Him?" Lewis then answers his own question: "But the truth is, God has not told us His arrangements for [these] people. We do know that *no one can be saved* except through Christ; [but] we do not know that *only* those who know Him can be saved through Him. In the meantime, if you are worried about the people outside, the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself."ⁱⁱⁱ

Being a Christian is not about damning anyone else to hell, nor figuring out who should and should not be served at the Communion Table. In Romans 2:12 Paul writes, "My friends... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." I don't know about you, but for me, working out my own salvation is more than enough to last a lifetime, and it is why I am both humbled and honored that as I work out my salvation, I can share both bread and cup at the table of God's unfathomable grace. Because I've been given a place at this table that I could never earn. Amen.

ⁱ Newbigin, Leslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) p. 177

ⁱⁱ Mairs, Nancy. "Afterlife" *The Christian Century*. (October 10, 2001) p. 9

ⁱⁱⁱ Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. (New York: Collier Books, 1952) p. 65