

Destiny of the Unevangelized – Postmortem Conversion
Fairfield Christian Reformed Church
March 29, 2020



All the Positions

- Restrictivist → A person is saved by expressing explicit faith in Jesus following the explicit proclamation of the Gospel
 - Augustine, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, RC Sproul, David Platt
- Universal Opportunity → Flowing from His foreknowledge, God will do everything necessary to bring the Gospel to all people who will respond affirmatively.
 - Jacob Arminius, John Newman, Norman Geisler, Robert Lightner, William Lane Craig
- Postmortem Evangelism → The Gospel is proclaimed to the dead, giving each unbeliever one final chance to accept Christ
 - Hippolytus, Clement, Origen, Ambrose, Athanasius, Wolfhart Pannenberg, P.T. Forsyth
- Inclusivist → Jesus provides the way of salvation for all who respond with faith in God based on the extent of revelation given, even if they are unaware of Jesus.
 - Justin Martyr, Ulrich Zwingli, John Wesley, Billy Graham, CS Lewis, N.T. Wright

Summary of Agreement among the Positions

God has a genuine, deeply rooted love for humanity, His premier creation, and He desires all would be saved. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only way for anyone to be saved. Jesus was crucified for you. He died and was buried. The good news is this innocent Jesus who died for you was resurrected the third day! This resurrection confirmed His identity as Son of God and Messiah. If you believe the Father raised Jesus from the dead, repent of your sins, and call on the name of Jesus as Lord, you are saved, your sins are forgiven, your heart is transformed, and the Spirit indwells you.

Case Study

Imagine that you are called by God to bring the gospel to an unreached people group on the far side of the globe. After months of language instruction, preparation, and prayer, you head to the mission field... Eventually, a small church is born where once there was no sign of the gospel.

One day, Jamil, one of the first converts, asks to talk to you in private... He asks a question that has been plaguing him for some time... Six months before you came to his land, his father died. His father was a good man, respected and loved by everyone in the village. However, he died without hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ... “Is there any chance I might see my father again in heaven? ...Is there a chance my father will somehow come to know the God that has finally been revealed to the village? Or will he be eternally condemned simply because he was born at the wrong time and place?” What would you say to Jamil?¹

¹ Boyd, Gregory and Paul Eddy, “Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology.” Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009.

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Summary of View

There is only one way of salvation available for all people in the world today and that is through Christ. When Jesus spoke of himself as the door of the sheep, he clearly stated that only through him can anyone be saved (John 10:9). He reiterates this again several chapters later, saying “I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my father also” (John 14:6-7a). Jesus is clear in these passages: there is only one way of salvation and it requires an explicit knowledge of him.

There are elements of both the Restrictivist and Universal Opportunity arguments that we affirm, namely that faith in Christ specifically requires an explicit confession, and that God would be unjust to condemn anyone to eternal punishment for rejecting the Gospel if they had never heard it and that human messengers are not always needed. The primary point of contention with both prior views (as well as the next one) is the belief that the response of faith must be made prior to the point of death, which is never explicitly stated in Scripture. Instead, the final decision must be made prior to the eschatological Day of Judgment, something that also is never explicitly stated in Scripture but is implied.

The evidence for this comes from the descriptions of what Christ did after his death but before his resurrection, namely he descended to Hell to preach the Gospel to those who were dead so they too would be raised to life. As a result of this preaching, there is not just confession of Christ on the earth, but also under the earth (Phil. 2:9-11). And in speaking of the unforgivable sin, Jesus says speaking blasphemy against the Holy Spirit dooms a person in this age and in the next (Matt. 12:32). This would seem to imply that aside from that sin, those in the next age are not all decidedly doomed. All who were unreached during this life are given the opportunity to confess explicit faith in Christ, and all who were reached and rejected or missed their chance will be given one final chance after death prior to the Day of Judgment to confess explicit faith in Christ.

Key Passages

- 1 Pet. 3:18-20
 - o Jesus’ one death brings the dead to spiritual life after physical death in the spiritual realm
- 1 Pet. 4:6
 - o For this reason, the Gospel was also preached to those who are dead so they could live
- Eph. 4:8-9
 - o He descended to the lower parts of the earth
- John 5:25-28
 - o The dead will hear the voice of Jesus and live
- Phil. 2:9-11
 - o There is confession of Christ on the earth and under the earth

Discussion Question

- What is your reaction to this view?
- Jesus’ words about Lazarus and the rich man suggests that at death your opportunity to repent has gone. Doesn’t this view void Jesus’ point in Luke 16?
- This was popular among the early Church fathers, and is implied by the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. Shouldn’t we return to the early Church’s understanding?
- Heb. 9:27 says all are destined to die once then face judgment. Doesn’t this affirm that death is the final chance for all people to express faith in Christ?
- How would this view approach missions?