

Destiny of the Unevangelized – Universal Opportunity
Fairfield Christian Reformed Church
March 22, 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. New Testament writers are clear that the plan of salvation was narrowed following the resurrection of Christ. After his resurrection but prior to his ascension, Jesus said his resurrection and the call to repent must both be proclaimed to all the nations, beginning with Jerusalem (Luke 24:46-47), but he does not suggest this proclamation to be a required prerequisite to faith.

The Universal Opportunity position affirms nearly all of the Restrictivist position’s argument. The primary disagreement is the Restrictivist’s claim that faith in Christ must always follow an explicit proclamation by a human messenger. But God is never without a witness and we reject the idea that there are people who would otherwise respond affirmatively to the Gospel who are left unreached.

When human messengers are unable or unwilling to go preach to a person who would respond affirmatively, God will send angelic messengers, visions, dreams, etc. to proclaim enough of the Gospel to them. Rather than a disciple being sent to him, Cornelius received a message from an angel commanding him to send for a disciple to come to himself (Acts 10:1-8). Moreover, it seems to go against God’s character, as revealed in Scripture, for him to condemn anyone to eternal punishment for rejecting the Gospel if they had never heard it. Since God desires all people to be saved, and since he promises that those who seek will find—not might, but will—he is bound by his character and promises to do all he can do to save those who want to be saved, regardless of the ability or willingness of other human messengers.

Key Passages

- Rom. 10:17
 - o Faith comes from hearing
- Matt. 7:7-8
 - o Keep searching and you will find
- Heb. 11:6
 - o To please God, one must keep seeking
- Acts 8:26-40
 - o Ethiopian Eunuch

Discussion Question

- What is your reaction to this view?
- People who don’t hear the Gospel are still sinners just as we are. Does not hearing the Gospel free someone from the guilt of their sins?
- Is there too much speculation in this view to embrace it over the others?
- How would this view approach missions?