

Morgan, Christopher W., and Robert A. Peterson, eds. *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008. Kindle E-book.

In *Faith Comes By Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson compile a number of essays from evangelical scholars aimed at rebutting soteriological inclusivism. Intervarsity Press published this anthology in 2008 (ISBN# 0830825908). Each having earned a PhD, Morgan and Peterson serve as professors of theology in California Baptist University and Covenant Theological Seminary respectively. Theologically, the contributors generally come from reformed or baptistic backgrounds. Many of the book's endorsements come from professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Beeson Divinity School, such as D. A. Carson and Timothy George.

The central topic of the book is the scope and sufficient means of salvation in Christian theology. In particular, the authors respond to inclusivism. Due to the diversity, confusion, and controversy surrounding the issue, the editors begin by reviewing the history of the question, the pertinent terms, and key nuances in the debate. Specifically, people have traditionally been categorized into three groups: exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists. Each camp is wrestling with questions like, "Is knowledge of Jesus necessary for salvation?" and "What role does general revelation and world religions play in bringing about salvation?" After Peterson introduces the major works and definitions surrounding the debate, Morgan explains why many theologians are uncomfortable with the narrow field of classifications. For example, some inclusivists accept general revelation as salvific, but not other religions. Some inclusivists allow for both. Even among exclusivists (sometimes call "particularists" or "restrictivists"), history reveals a variety of positions; the most common type of exclusivism among evangelicals is probably "gospel exclusivism", asserting that people must have explicit faith in the gospel in

order to be saved. Of course, more liberal thinkers hold to universalism or pluralism. Finally, some people are “agnostic” on the matter (Morgan and Peterson 2008, 231–33).¹

Chapters 3–7 are theological critiques to inclusivism (from a *exclusivistic* perspective). Due to the limitations of space, we can only recount the authors’ main objectives and points. Daniel Strange (PhD, University of Bristol) argues against the notion that general revelation is sufficient for salvation. This is a main thread is inclusivistic thinking. After a lengthy survey of various versions of this idea, Strange reframes the concept of general revelation, concluding that general revelation was never intended to be separate from special revelation; indeed, it is the prior “scaffolding” by which the latter is understood (Morgan and Peterson 2008, 804). God’s works are ambiguous, needing interpretation. However, sin makes this impossible; accordingly, “Special revelation is needed because special grace is needed” (784–88). William Edgar, Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, tackles the question of theodicy, is it fair that God would condemn those who have never heard the gospel? Acknowledging the ultimate mystery behind evil in the world, Edgar nevertheless says that inclusivism does not take seriously the sin with humans, instead conveying an optimistic belief of human progress. In truth, he says, it is not “fair” that anyone would be saved. We are all guilty of sin. When it comes to the unevangelized, his essential response grows out of a straightforward clarification: “condemnation is not based on hearing the *gospel* and refusing it, but on knowing God and refusing him” (1144–1145).

Eckhard Schnabel, New Testament professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, examines whether other religions are salvific. Probably his most unique contribution is his observation that Paul rejects ancient Greek’s “relative monotheism” (my term). Namely, this is

¹ Citations follow the format used by Kindle E-books, which notate “location” rather than page number, in keeping with the common method of many contemporary E-books. (Intervarsity Press, 2008).

the phenomenon where one god could have many names in different cities with various external forms (Morgan and Peterson 2008, 1253–1272). This parallels contemporary debates about world religions, such as when people say that other religions simply have imperfect representations and teachings about essentially the same God of Christianity. Yet, throughout Scripture, including Acts 17, Paul does not make equivalent the world religions, calling pre-Christian belief “times of ignorance” (1421–26). Schnabel likewise points to Paul insistence on preaching a crucified Christ (i.e. 1 Cor 1–2), in the face of persecution and mockery, when, according to inclusivism, some sort of syncretistic contextualization would otherwise be possible (1475–82). Walter Kaiser, an Old Testament scholar, considers supposed instances of “holy pagans”, “believing Gentiles” who had saving faith apart from explicit knowledge of Christ (1506–7). He concludes many cases are ambiguous while other people had put their faith, in some manner, in Christ through trusting God’s promise to Abraham, in particular the “Seed” to come.

Stephen Wellum, Theology Professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, offers an answer to the question, “Must people believe the gospel in order to be saved?” (Morgan and Peterson 2008, 1758). He essentially picks up where Kaiser left off, placing saving faith in the context of believing God covenant and promises (2175–2205, 2090–93). Wellum focus on the importance of the *object* of faith, “Saving faith in the OT was directed to ‘God,’ but it was never an undefined God. Rather, it was the God who enters into covenant relation with his people, the one who binds himself to his promises, and the one who demands that they take him at his Word” (2269–70). Ultimately, God’s central promise is Jesus Christ, whom it is essential to honor in order to honor the Father (Wellum cites John 5:23; see 2271–72). This emphasis on Christ intends to counter the “pneumatological approach” of Pinnock, Tiessen, and Yong, whom

he feels wrongly put a wedge between the Son and the Spirit. He rejects Pinnock's "Christological criteria" for saving faith, which "is not noetic but *ethical*, that is, the Spirit at work producing *the way of Jesus in the world*" (1906). To be sure, Wellum explains "the Spirit's presence is [not] always a saving transforming presence (e.g., Balaam, Saul)" (2059–60).

In Chapter 8, Robert Peterson compares the exegetical approaches of each position. In summation, Peterson reiterates a couple of points made by Wellum. Inclusivism's exegesis largely depends on arguments from silence and logical possibility, dodging the overt thrust of the text and context. "In the end, we must remember that logical possibilities are not necessarily *biblical* possibilities" (Morgan and Peterson 2008, 2289–90).

In chapters 9–10, Andreas Köstenberger and J. Nelson Jennings put forth a positive argument for exclusivism. Köstenberger offers a biblical theology of the gospel, showing the centrality of the gospel in the New Testament, the gospel identification with Jesus, and the necessity of faith in the gospel for salvation. Köstenberger asserts that inclusivism cannot be sustained in light of this pervasive motif. Jennings explains that the particularity of Christ as the means for salvation befits God's zeal to redeem the world through a particular people. He resets the conversation, explaining that God's passion for the nation in fact shows how *inclusive* God is. In chapter 11, the editors close by recounting summary answers to some of the most asked questions involved in the exclusivism-inclusivism debate.

Faith Comes By Hearing includes a range of helpful essays for anyone concerned with soteriology, Christology, world religion, and biblical hermeneutics. The contributors comprehensively and fairly present the main types of inclusivism. Moreover, the book exegetically and theologically responds to the problems that follow the doctrine. The editors have ensured a balanced reply by including various critiques of inclusivism, positive affirmations

for exclusivism, and exegetical commentary on the most prevalent passages. Throughout the book, the writers attempt to explain how these questions impact evangelism, missions, interreligious dialogue, and, more broadly, theology.

Particularly valuable is the book's constant attention to nuance. For example, Daniel Strange rightly notes that the problem lies not in general revelation, but in the eyes [i.e. heart] of every human being. Therefore, whether or not general revelation can save is not the best question. General revelation is insufficient for salvation under these conditions, namely man's total depravity; thus, inclusivists are right in its theoretical potential. However, such "potential" can only exist in different circumstances, that is, when people have hearts and eyes to see. To speak of *ability* [to believe and be saved] implies a set of conditions. I may possess a diamond, but if I do not recognize its value, then it is insufficient to bring me value. I may need something else, perhaps a word from my wife or friend who is an expert in precious stones. At one level, the diamond is objectively capable of making me wealthy; but under the conditions mentioned, it is impotent. By analogy, a shovel is sufficient to dig a hole in the sand, but it is not able to penetrate a steel floor. The shovel, like general revelation, is the same. What is different is the ground, and analogously, the human heart.

The writers keep the reader attentive to what the Bible *actually does say*. We have already noted how arguments for inclusivism hang on possibilities and silence more than direct biblical data. The repeated emphasis on the gospel further restricts speculation. By highlighting the centrality of the gospel in Scripture, the authors ensure that Christology and soteriology are prioritized in the discussion. The connection of the gospel with the Abrahamic covenant (Gal 3:8) directly bears on the whole of Biblical theology, missions and thus the topic of world religions. Accordingly, exegetes cannot settle for conjecture when the entirety of Scripture

evidently aims to make clear the answers to this debate. Edgar's point that no one is condemned for rejecting the gospel (but instead for refusing God) spurs another simple observation: the very need for the gospel implies that they have already rejected God. Given this rejection, why the optimism that they will accept Christ? Why do they even deserve the chance? This drastically alters the conversation when people accuse exclusivists (and ultimately God) of being "unfair". It forces all participants to squarely focus on the plain fact that *all* people have rejected God when given their first chance. Two things then become clear. First, every person justly deserves condemnation. Every second of continued existence is sheer grace. God is under *absolutely no obligation* to save anyone. Second, what inclusivists really demand is that every person get a *second* chance. The fruit of this turn is that exclusivists change the issue from a matter of "rights" or fairness to that of grace.

In addition, Köstenberger and Jennings' essays underscore the importance of biblical theology and context when answered even more narrow questions like exclusivism-inclusivism. The debate is not a matter of systematizing a sparse selection of proof-texts. Jennings could have improved his essay by more clearly situating it in view of the glory of God, not merely on "God's zeal for His world". God is exclusive for His glory's sake, inclusive for the nation's sake. In zeal, his passion is narrow—the honor due his name; in compassion, his mission is broad—all the peoples. When God's passion is his own glory, theology must reorient, not around the universal worth of humanity, but rather around the wise ways that God does all things for the praise of His name. This does not isolate God from mankind. To put my own spin on something

Christopher Wright has said, because there is one Savior, one Lord, one name by which people can be saved, Jesus is all the more relevant.²

Many contributors raise the question of how Old Testament saints were saved; unfortunately, this reader felt the answers were still inadequate. Positively, an emphasis was given to faith. In some form or fashion, those in the Old Testament believed God's promises (cp. Heb 11). While it is correct to say that people are saved on the basis of what special revelation has been given to them, more importantly, Kaiser is right when he says, "Critical to the whole argument is the *object of belief*" (Morgan and Peterson 2008, 1747). Yet, Kaiser for instance insufficiently defends his thesis that these believers were all trusting in the promised "Seed". Might it be better to say they trusted in the God *of* the Promised Seed? This is an important distinction. Ultimately, biblical, *saving* faith is the pledging of one's allegiance to God. We honor whatever or whomever we trust. So it was that "No distrust made [Abraham] waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was 'counted to him as righteousness'" (Rom 4:20–22, ESV). At stake are more than points in a theological debate. God seeks glory in our trusting him unto salvation.

The book's discussion leads to a few concluding thoughts. The editors are congenial when they say that inclusivists can still be evangelicals (Morgan and Peterson 2008, 3206–3225). This anthology exemplifies the tone that evangelical Christians should demonstrate when engaging in theological discuss and interreligious debate. The issues are treated with great seriousness. The exegesis strives for clarity. Humility demands we not only admit what we don't

² In *The Mission of God*, Christopher Wright writes profoundly of the impact and importance of Israel's monotheism. Namely, because there is one God, it is all the more relevant that all the nations know Him. See Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2006), 75–104.

know, but confess what can be known. Nevertheless, at what point do hermeneutics in practice undermine one's supposed "high view of Scripture"? Given its vast theological implications, how does the inclusivism-exclusivism debate strain the definition of "evangelical"? Who is included and who is excluded?