BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

DEAN FLEMMING

INTRODUCTION

A context of religious pluralism is nothing new to the church. The apostolic community proclaimed the finality of Jesus Christ within a Greco-Roman world of "many gods and many lords" (1 Cor. 8:5). Christians in the Two-Thirds world have had to grapple with the reality of religious pluralism for centuries. In Asia, for example, where Christianity is in most cases a minority religion—and a relative latecomer at that—the issue cannot be ignored. In the West, however, it is only in the relatively recent past that Christians have come to recognize religious pluralism as a major challenge to the church." At least two major developments have "forced the issue" for Western Christians. The first is the phenomenon of "globalization." Advancements in communications, international travel, and, in particular, radical demographic changes, have obliged Christians in the West to confront the reality of the world religions on a personal level. Westerners are increasingly likely to have a Muslim or Hindu colleague, classmate or next door neighbor. At the same time, the center of gravity for Christianity has shifted dramatically from the North and West to the South and East, so that it is no longer possible to determine what constitutes the so-called "Christian world."

A second development arising from modernity in the West is that increasingly the ideology of pluralism has become virtually sacrosanct. In a "tolerant" age, religion becomes something private and compartmentalized, and each individual is free to choose whatever god he or she finds to be most convenient. In the marketplace of beliefs and religious claims, the customer is king. This pluralistic mentality has dominated much of the recent scholarly discussion of the relationship between Christianity and the world religions and has tended to set the agenda for approaching the issue. Any claims for Christian uniqueness are considered to be carryovers.

Dean Flemming is a Professor of New Testament at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in Manila, Philippines.
of "triumphalism" or "imperialism." Since all religious truth is held to be relative and culturally-conditioned, no one religion can claim to be more valid than any other.²

Evangelical Christians have been relatively slow to grapple with the theological issues raised by the reality of religious pluralism. Many have seemed content to follow the traditional understandings that regard other religions simply as "demonic delusions" or merely as "human efforts to find the truth," and it is automatically assumed that all of their adherents are destined for eternal perdition. Others have concentrated on developing strategies for evangelizing people of other faiths without doing the difficult thinking that provides a coherent biblical and theological framework for those efforts. Yet, can we be content simply to disagree with the answers that others give to these issues without attempting to offer a clear biblical theological analysis as an alternative³?

It is encouraging that evangelical thinkers have begun to reflect more seriously on the challenge of religious pluralism, evidenced by the appearance of a number of recent studies on the subject.⁴ Much of the discussion has focused on the perennial question of the fate of the unevangelized. Evangelicals have tended to separate into the traditional "restrictivist" and more open "inclusivist" camps. Each uses Scripture to back its claims. Wesleyans have commonly—although by no means universally—been sympathetic to an "inclusivist" position that would allow for the possibility of salvation among the unevangelized and a more open attitude toward the role of other religions in God's dealings with humankind.⁵ Wesley himself (particularly the mature Wesley) is often cited, no doubt accurately, as a forerunner of this view.⁶ Yet we must ask whether the position of Wesley and the new evangelical "inclusivists" is consistent with the overall teaching of Scripture, particularly in light of recent defenses of the restrictivist position.⁷ In order to answer that question it is necessary to place the specific issue of the destiny of the unevangelized within the broader context of the Bible's attitude toward other religions. One of the clear needs in the current debate is a solid exegetical and biblical theological framework to guide our approach to these issues. While other factors should provide input into the task of formulating an appropriate response to religious pluralism, the perspective of Scripture is surely foundational.⁸ This study will attempt to survey the biblical foundations for an appropriate Wesleyan response to the challenge of religious pluralism.

THE BIBLE AND RELIGIONS
A. Old Testament

Any attempt to find a solution to the problem posed by religious pluralism must take into account the total biblical theological witness, rather than focus simply on the teachings of isolated texts. In the Old Testament we find a clear tension between the universal and the particular in God's dealings with humankind. Genesis 1-11 begin with a universal perspective, which sees God as the Creator who desires that all people enter into a relationship of holy love with him. After the fall, he continues to deal with all people in both judgment and redemption and establishes a covenant with Noah that embraces the whole of humanity.

Then the perspective narrows. The Babel story in Genesis 11 makes it clear that the entire human family has refused to worship its Creator. In response to universal rebellion and idolatry, God chooses a single individual, Abraham, and through him initiates a
covenant relationship with his own people Israel. The so-called "scandal of particularity" has begun. Yet, in spite of the fact that this is the dominant emphasis from this point on in the Old Testament history of salvation, God uses the particular in order to accomplish his universal purposes. God chooses a people, not for their own sake, but so that through them, "all peoples on earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). 12

In pre-exilic times, Israel continually struggles with the tendency toward idolatry and pluralism in the face of other religions in the surrounding cultures. 13 The recurring failures and declines in both the period of the judges and the monarchy are due in great measure to the attraction of other deities in a pluralistic environment. In contrast, a theme of exclusivism of worship emerges which is characteristic of the Old Testament's radical monotheism. For example, Yahweh brings judgment on the gods of Egypt (Num. 33:4). The people are warned not to follow the detestable religious practices of the Canaanites which the Lord hates (Deut. 12:31). The Psalmist affirms that "all the gods of the nations are idols" (Psa. 96:5). The prophets repeatedly mock the worship of false gods made with human hands (e.g. Isa. 40:19-20; 44:9ff.; Jer. 10:1-16; 51:17-18; cf. 1 Kings 18:27ff.). Idolaters are portrayed as blinded and deceived (Isa. 44:18, 20; cf. 2 Cor. 4:4). In general we find a negative evaluation of human religions and worship. This is a natural corollary of the dominant emphasis in the Old Testament on God's sovereign choice of Israel and the exclusive allegiance to Yahweh demanded by the covenant relationship.

Yet, there is another side to the picture, one in which God's self-revelation is not limited to the community of Israel. 14 Here and there throughout the story of God's dealings with his own special people, we find "God-fearing" Gentiles who have responded to God independently of his covenant with Israel. One notable case is the somewhat mysterious figure of the Canaanite priest Melchizedek, who is called "a priest of God Most High" (El Elyon) and blesses Abraham in the name of "God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19-20). Walter Brueggemann points out that the title El Elyon is not a name for the God of Israel, but rather the high god of the Canaanite pantheon. It is only in Abraham's response in v.22 that the "God Most High" worshipped by the Canaanite Melchizedek is identified as "Yahweh, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth." Abraham reveals the true identity of the Creator God that Melchizedek has been worshiping all along (cf. Acts 17:22ff.). He is Yahweh, the God of Israel. 15 This implies that Melchizedek prior to his encounter with Abraham (and perhaps others in Canaan like him) who worship El are worshiping the true God, albeit with a limited understanding of him. 16 We should not forget that Abraham himself is called by God out of a pagan Semitic culture. 17

We can mention other Gentile "God-fearers" as well. God reveals himself to outsiders like Abimelech, king of Gerar, and Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, in the form of a dream (Gen. 20:3; Daniel 4). The Midianite priest Jethro becomes Moses' father-in-law and offers sacrifices to the God of Moses. After the Exodus, he encounters Moses at Horeb and, using God's covenant name, praises Yahweh for his deliverance (Ex. 18:10-11). The language of Jethro's confession ("Now I know..." cf. 1 Kings 17:24), as well as his overall portrayal in the passage, do not suggest a conversion from paganism, but rather a deepening of understanding on the part of a previous worshipper of Yahweh. 18 When the people of Israel prepare to enter Canaan, the curious figure of Balaam appears on the
scene. Although he is a pagan Mesopotamian diviner, Yahweh communicates to him (Num. 22:18-20) and uses him to speak his word of blessing to Israel (23:3ff). Job lives in the land of Uz, perhaps during the time of the patriarchs, yet apparently having no contact with them. Nevertheless, Yahweh speaks to him directly and calls him "my servant" and "a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). When the Syrian officer Naaman asks Elisha for permission to worship in the temple of Rimmon, the Aramean storm god, as part of his official duties, he receives the surprising reply, "Go in peace" (2 Kings 5:18-19).

A thread of biblical "inclusiveness" can likewise be detected in the Old Testament. Jonah, God's reluctant missionary, must learn the hard way that the people of Nineveh in Assyria are more obedient to Yahweh than his own people and his own prophet. Although they apparently do not know his covenant name and thus do not consciously relate to Yahweh in the same way as Jonah does, their repentance and faith in God (cf. lsaiah 3:5; 7-9) are graciously accepted by the one true Lord. Amos affirms that Yahweh holds all nations, including Israel, under his judgment (1:3-2:16). In an intriguing passage, he shatters Israel's pride in its unique status by indicating that Yahweh has been active in the history of other nations as well: "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?" declares the Lord. "Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7). The eschatological promise of Isaiah finds Egypt and Assyria worshipping together along with Israel as the "people" and "handiwork" of Yahweh and as a "blessing on the earth" (Isa. 19:23-25). Malachi challenges the corrupt worship of Israel with the ironic statement, "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts" (Mal. 1:11 RSV), suggesting that the sacrifices of pagan worshippers may be more acceptable to Yahweh than those of his disobedient chosen people.

Finally, the Old Testament Wisdom literature is not specifically tied to God's particular revelation to the patriarchs and the prophets. It is based rather on a Creator theology that stresses the involvement of God's Wisdom in all of creation (Prov. 3:19-20; 8:22-31). Furthermore, as Goldingay and Wright observe, the Hebrew Wisdom writings evidence "particularly clear parallels with others from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt," implying that "pagan thought has its own insight." The Wisdom literature recognizes that the created world and the insights, culture and religion of God's human creation reflect something of God's truth, even if it must be purged of its idolatrous aspects.

The Old Testament thus reflects a tension in its attitude toward human religions. On one hand they express the rebellion and idolatry of fallen humanity. On the other they can be viewed positively as sources of insight and as preparations for faith in the true God. This latter perspective, which, although not dominant, is clearly present in the Old Testament, reflects the operation of God's prevenient grace. The Old Testament writers see God's grace at work outside of his special dealings with Israel, drawing people and nations to himself. It is noteworthy that the Old Testament never tries to directly answer the question, "Is there salvation for those outside of Israel?" However, it is apparent that there are individuals who are "outsiders," yet who have an authentic relationship with the true God. This does not mean that the Old Testament in any way allows for salvation
coming to people through other religions or apart from the grace of the God of Israel. The faith of the outsider is not seen merely as an unconscious worship of the true God. These are not "anonymous Israelites," to use the current parlance. God's activity and self-revelation in the cultural and religious context outside of Israel is intended as a preparation for his historic revelation as Yahweh. The religions may offer a starting point, but they do not provide a finishing point. Nevertheless, the operation of God's grace in the Old Testament is clearly not limited to the community of Israel. In a similar sense, the church must recognize God's gracious activity beyond its boundaries in the cultures and religions of all people. This does not, however, deter the evangelistic responsibility to bring the saving revelation of God in Christ to people of other faiths.

B. New Testament

In the New Testament, we find a similar tension between the particular and the universal. God's plan of salvation narrows in its particularity until it focuses on one individual, Jesus Christ. God chose to reveal himself in a final sense at a moment in history in a particular cultural context, through the One who Christians affirm "suffered under Pontius Pilate." Yet, once again, it is through the particular that God accomplishes his universal saving purpose. The New Testament offer of salvation is universal and inclusive in its breadth. Paul describes Christ as the second Adam who represents a new humanity: "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22; cf. Rom. 5:15f.). It is God's intention to reconcile all of creation under the headship of Christ (Eph. 1:9-10). The interplay between the "all" and the "one" is clearly evidenced in 1 Tim. 2:4-6, which declares that God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men" (emphasis added). This tension between the universal and the particular must be maintained for an adequate biblical theology of religions.

1. New Testament Exclusivism. The first-century church functioned in a cultural milieu that was fraught with a wide choice of gods and lords—from the Roman emperor to the traditional Greek and Egyptian deities, to the worship of rocks, plants, and animals. Furthermore, the religious climate was generally characterized by an attitude of syncretistic toleration which permitted participation in various religions and made few exclusive claims. It is against this pluralistic backdrop that the New Testament writers stress unequivocally the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In the oft-quoted words of Peter, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12; cf. John 14:6). Speaking to a context of religious plurality in Corinth, Paul affirms the Old Testament perspective that the so-called gods of the pagan world are in fact non-existent beings, since "there is but one God, the Father..." and "but one Lord, Jesus Christ..." (1 Cor. 8:5-6). He goes on to warn the believers in Corinth not to participate in idol feasts, since the objects of pagan worship are in reality not the non-existent idols themselves, but rather, demons (1 Cor. 10:18ff.). This implies that there is a demonic element in non-Christian religious worship. In Colossians, he counters the competing claims of other intermediaries by stressing the exclusive supremacy of Christ, in whom all of God's fullness dwells (1:19; 2:9-10). Paul reminds the Ephesians that as pagans they were formerly "dead in transgressions and sins," they "followed the ways of
this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:1-2) and were “without hope and without God in the world” (2:12). This corresponds to Luke’s record of Paul’s testimony that the purpose of his Gentile mission was “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:17f). The accommodation of the church in Pergamum (a center of religious pluralism in Asia Minor) to pagan teachings and practices is compared to Israel’s being led astray by Balaam into idolatry and immorality (Rev. 2:14f). The New Testament nowhere contradicts the Old Testament understanding of human religions as idolatrous, distorted by sin, under satanic influence and unable to save.

To the extent that Christians in the West today share a pluralistic context in many ways analogous to that faced by the first-century Christians, the response of the New Testament writers to that environment can be applied in an increasingly direct way. What then are the implications of such “exclusiveism” for our understanding of religious pluralism? First, in response to those who want to minimize the distinctiveness of the Christian witness in relation to other religions, it must be affirmed that the “scandal of particularity” lies at the very heart of the gospel. We hear frequent attempts to reinterpret the “exclusive” texts, often through some rather suspect exegesis. We are told that such statements are not meant to be taken at face value because they belong to the language of confession. Paul K. Knitter argues, for instance, that Peter’s statement about “no other name” in Acts 4:12 is intended “not to rule out the possibility of other saviors, but to proclaim that this Lord Jesus was still alive and that it was he, not they, who was working such wonders in the community.” Not only does this miss the plain meaning of Peter’s statement, but the overwhelming and consistent message of the biblical witness would not seem to allow any possibility whatever that there could be “other saviors.” On the contrary, the New Testament writers affirm in unison that apart from Jesus Christ there is no hope of present or future salvation (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4-5; Heb. 10:9-10). A Wesleyan soteriology would heartily affirm this understanding.

Secondly, however, having affirmed that salvation is by “no other name,” we must guard against an overly restrictive understanding of biblical exclusiveness. Evangelical theology of religions and missions in the past half century has borne the stamp of the notion of radical “discontinuity” between non-Christian religions and Christian revelation, as exemplified by Dutch missiologist Hendrik Kraemer. Kraemer argued that all religions, including Christianity, reflect human striving for self-justification and are thus characterized by a fundamental misdirection and error. Hence the attempt to find common ground between religion and revelation is misguided, since “there are no bridges from human religious consciousness to...Christ.” Kraemer’s uncompromising defense of the uniqueness of Christ still speaks to a pluralistic world. Yet, can we remain content to look at the question of the role of other religions simply in the categories of discontinuity, or is there a form of continuity between them and faith in Christ? Are all of man’s religious instincts merely human striving, and therefore misdirected? Is the revelation of God’s grace in Jesus Christ limited to those who explicitly hear the gospel? We must turn to the New Testament again to try to answer these questions.

10:5f), we do not find much evidence of his attitude toward other religions in the Synoptic Gospels. In general the gospels give us a picture of redemption in which the historically particular revelation of God in Christ is in continuity with his self-revelation to Israel. Nevertheless, Jesus was able to commend the “great faith” of the Roman centurion (10:8) and the Syro-Phoenician woman who were outside of the stream of God’s special revelation to the Jews. Jesus immediately followed his endorsement of the faith of the centurion with an allusion to the inclusion of both Jew and Gentile in the messianic banquet in the kingdom of heaven (8:11). Likewise, Matthew devotes considerable attention to the Magi who came from the East to worship the Christ child (2:1-12). It is likely that they were pagan astrologers whose religious culture prepared them in some way for a journey to Judea. They came with limited understanding, seeking to worship a king, not a savior. Yet Matthew records without embarrassment that God graciously revealed himself to pagan outsiders initially through their own religious “idols,” i.e., the stars, in order to draw them to his Son. It seems clear from the example of the magi and Jesus’ willingness to commend the faith of the Gentiles and build on it that “God works out his plans for the non-Christian in fulfilment of a quest that is already there.”

b. The Prologue of John. In the prologue to John’s gospel we find reference to a general self-revelation of God in the world outside of the flow of special revelation. John speaks of Christ, the Logos, as the one who has been the light of men from the time of creation (1:4). Further, he is “the true light that gives light to every man” (1:9), which probably means that the light which came into the world in its fullness in the incarnation also extends some measure of divine illumination to every person. This general enlightening work of Christ in the world, including presumably that in the religions of humankind, does not bestow on their adherents some type of saving knowledge of God, as is sometimes claimed. Nor can the Logos simply be abstracted into a “Christ principle” that is divorced from the historical Christ event. Nevertheless it does constitute an aspect of God’s gracious activity—what Wesleyans would call prevenient grace. In commenting on this passage, Floyd Cunningham notes that “there is a radiance from the Light sufficient to account for impulses in the religions and cultures of the world which seem to be in some accord with Revelation... Wherever there is congruity it comes by grace and is designed by God to serve as preparation for the Gospel.” When people of other religions come to faith in Christ they do not meet a stranger, for they have already received the illuminating work of prevenient grace. At the same time, the fact that even the incarnate light was not received by “his own” people (1:10f), who through the Old Testament revelation had received more illumination than followers of any other religion, reminds us that devotion to religion may lead people to reject the light of Christ. Thus religions are paradoxically both the arenas of divine enlightening and of darkness and rejection.

c. Paul’s Speeches in Acts. Luke’s record of Paul’s speeches in Lystra and Athens are important for any discussion of the relationship between Christ and other religions. In both cases Paul interacts with a context of religious pluralism. Before a rather unsophisticated Gentile crowd in Lystra, who adhered to the popular religion of the Greek pantheon (14:11f), Paul uses their awareness of a Creator God as a point of contact. He directs them to the God who created and sustains the universe (14:15, 17). Although in the past God overlooked the Gentile errors that resulted from ignorance (v. 16), he “has
not left himself without a witness" (v. 17a). This "witness" in creation should have led the Gentiles to turn from their worthless idols and worship the living God (v. 15). Paul does not say, however, that it is potentially salvific.

To a more sophisticated Gentile audience at the Areopagus, which included Stoics and Epicureans, Paul goes even further. On one hand, he is distressed by the idolatry and religious pluralism he discovers in Athens (17:16; 29). On the other hand, Paul takes a somewhat conciliatory and respectful stance toward their pagan religious life. He calls the Athenians "very religious" (desiadmoneutes v. 22), which is probably said in a neutral, not a disparaging sense. He finds a point of contact in the Athenians' worship of the "unknown god": "Now what you worship as unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (v. 23). This does not mean that this "unknown" god and the living God are one and the same, i.e., that the Athenians were "anonymous Christians."7

However, Paul does recognize that there is something genuine in the religious life of the pagans, thanks to the grace of God.8 Once again Paul takes up the theme of creation and God's universal providence as a form of self-revelation (vv. 24-26), with the purpose "that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him" (v. 27). In the process, he finds various points of contact with Greek philosophers that would have been familiar to his hearers, such as God's self-sufficiency, his providential care, and the notion he is the source of all life (v. 25). He even quotes with approval two Stoic poets who had insight into the nature of God (v. 28). Finally, Paul places all he has said about human religious searchings and God's general revelation in the context of the decisive revelation of the Christian gospel, to which they point (vv. 30-31). The Athenians' knowledge has stopped short of enabling them to find God. Although God has "overlooked" their ignorance in the past, "now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (v. 30), for he has appointed a day of judgment for all (v. 31).

It seems clear then that this passage does not see God's final and definitive act in Jesus Christ as discontinuous with his gracious action in creation, providence and even the religious searchings of human beings. Instead, the gospel is portrayed as the fulfillment of people's genuine seeking after God inspired by his prevenient, seeking grace. Paul does not hesitate to look for points of contact in the religion of the Athenians in order to establish common ground.9 Nevertheless, he does not allow for salvation through the Athenians' religiosity apart from Jesus Christ, as the conclusion to the speech confirms.10

Paul's missionary principles are instructive for our approach to people of other religions. He begins at a point of universality and commonality, i.e., creation and general revelation, and moves from there to the particular revelation of Jesus Christ. God has created all people in his image with the capacity to respond to him. While fully recognizing the destructive effect of the fall, the existence of general revelation means that religion may reflect humanity's sincere response to God and desire to know him. Prior to any particular religious belief or practice, all share a basic commonality as people made in the image of God who are, in religion as in all else, in some kind of relationship to the Creator.11 This shared creaturehood might be a starting point for enabling nonbelievers to see the fulfillment of their longings in Christ.12

Paul, Romans 1 and 2 are at the center of the debate concerning the significance of God's gracious activity outside of special revelation. The apostle Paul sees this grace oper-
ating in two arenas: creation and conscience. In Romans one, he speaks of an objective knowledge of God (to gnoston tou theou "what may be known" v. 19; gnorizes ton theon "although they knew God" v. 21) which comes to man through the divine self-revelation in creation. Using the language of Hellenistic religious philosophy that would be familiar to his Gentile readers, Paul affirms that God's "eternal power" and "divine nature" are clearly perceived by people apart from special revelation (v. 20). There is a genuine knowledge of God available to all humanity, without distinction.

In chapter two, in a notoriously difficult passage, Paul says that Gentiles who do not possess the law on occasion do the "things of the law," i.e., certain of the law's requirements. When they do, they evidence that what God's law requires (the "work" enion of the law) is written on their hearts. This inner knowledge of right and wrong is also evidenced by the witness of their consciences, which have the function of passing judgment on whether or not they follow God's moral law (2:14-15). The inward moral consciousness to which this passage refers is not some innate human faculty, but rather the result of prevenient grace. The Holy Spirit in his convicting presence is at work among all peoples, even adherents of other religions, even those to whom the name of Christ has not yet been proclaimed (John 16:8). In the words of John Sanders, "The unevangelized are indeed 'unreached' by human messengers with the word of Christ, but they are not unreached by the Holy Spirit's ministry of grace." Presumably, this happens not only directly through the individual conscience, but also in a collective sense, in cultures and religions (which are normally closely related). Where religions reflect moral truth or right action, grace is at work. The purpose of this activity of the Spirit is to lead men to Christ. In this sense, religion can function as a preparation for the gospel. This allows us "to recognize that whatever truth may be found in other religions is the result of the activity of prevenient grace in its revelatory function. The missionary can gratefully accept such truth and use it as a point of contact to demonstrate the fulfillment of those glimmers of truth by the fuller revelation in Christ."

Yet, is this knowledge of God through general revelation potentially saving knowledge? This is a question that Paul does not address. His point in Romans 1 is that this knowledge comes to humanity with the result "that they might be without excuse" (v. 20). All people are guilty of rebelling against the light that is available to them, and are thereby justly condemned: "Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him" (1:21). As a result of the fall, they have chosen to worship creation rather than the Creator (v. 25). They have exchanged God's glory for the image of mortal beings (v. 23). In general, the world religions do not predispose people to accept Christianity when confronted with it. Religiosity often becomes a means of escape from submitting to the Creator. At one and the same time, religion reflects man's searching after God and his rebellion against him. It is both path to God and stumblingblock to finding him.

But what of Paul's argument in 2:14-15 that when Gentiles "do by nature things required by the law" they are "a law for themselves," because they have the "work" of the law written on their hearts? It is sometimes suggested that here Paul implies the possibility that salvation could indeed come to unbelievers apart from the gospel if they receive knowledge of the law from their consciences and obey that knowledge. Admittedly, this goes beyond his present argument. What is clear is that Paul does not allow that unbelievers can be saved by
fulfilling the requirements of the law. That would go against the entire thrust of chapter 3 and numerous other statements by the apostle (e.g., Gal. 3:10ff). Nowhere in the chapter does Paul argue or even assume that individuals are capable of fulfilling the law, and thereby could be saved. Nor is he talking about a "hypothetical" offer of salvation for those who keep the law perfectly, since perfect obedience is not in view here.

Rather, the point that Paul seems to be making in chapter 2 is that the Jews cannot claim any special privilege simply because they possess the law, since all are accountable for their sins and come under God's judgment (v. 12)—Jews, because they disobey the Torah, and Gentiles, because they know enough of the law of God "by nature" to be held responsible when they sin. Whether Paul conceived of unevangelized Gentile "doers of the law" actually being saved, we cannot answer with confidence. As we have seen, Romans 2 does not speak to the issue, but neither does it rule out the possibility. When Paul acknowledges that eternal life awaits those who persevere in "good work" (2:7; cf. 2:10, 13) he is stating a universal principle whose application is not limited to Gentile Christians. Presumably, unevangelized Gentiles come under the same criteria of judgment and hope as Jews (2:7-8) since "God does not show favoritism" (2:11). Under this criterion, those who respond to God's revelation with an "obedience of faith" (1:5; 16:26) from the heart could presumably be saved. However, it must be reiterated that the "work" which leads to salvation is not a "works righteousness," but rather saving obedience in response to and as an evidence of God's grace in Christ. The entire thrust of the Apostle's argument in Romans and elsewhere affirms that it is faith in Jesus Christ which is the sole basis of man's acceptance by God. If it is possible for such devout Gentiles who stand outside of the stream of special revelation to be saved, it is because they respond to the Holy Spirit's convincing work and God's grace according to the light they have received, and thus avail themselves of the merits of Christ.

It seems clear then that in the New Testament, as well as the Old, there is a tension between exclusiveness and universality. Man's religions and cultures can be the arena of both sinful opposition to God and his gracious activity that prepares people for the final and saving revelation in the Christ event.

THE STATUS OF THE UNEVANGELIZED

The previous discussion raises the perennial and unavoidable question of the fate of the unevangelized. What of those people in other religions, before and after Christ, who have not had the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel? Are they necessarily excluded from salvation? Traditionally, many evangelicals have answered the question with a firm "yes." This position, which John Sanders terms "restrictivism," has often been set forth as a primary motivation for missions. For example, the statement from the Congress of World Mission held in Chicago in 1960 laments that "In the years since the war, more than one billion souls have passed into eternity and more than half of these went to the torment of hell fire without even hearing of Jesus Christ, who He was, or why He died on the cross of Calvary." The traditional evangelical view is often vigorously defended as the alternative to universalism. Recently, however, a number of evangelical thinkers have challenged this assessment and allowed that an unreached person may be saved if that individual repents and throws himself on the mercy of God through the
the atoning work of Christ, even if he is not aware of that work.  

When we look for an answer to this problem, the difficulty we face is that the Bible never addresses the question of the fate of the unevangelized directly. Scripture does not give explicit guidance one way or the other. Although we have seen people outside of Israel whose faith was accepted by God in the Old Testament, there are no clear examples of conversion apart from the preaching of the gospel in the New Testament. The Gentile "God fearer" Cornelius is often portrayed as the leading New Testament example of a "non-Christian believer." In a recent defense of this position, Sanders confidently affirms that "Cornelius was a 'saved' believer before Peter arrived, but he became a Christian and received the fuller blessings of life in Christ only after Peter came" (emphasis in original). It is less than clear, however, that Luke envisions such a distinction between "saved believer" and "Christian." It is true that Cornelius is described as a pious and generous man who regularly prays to God (Acts 10:2, 22). God communicates to him through an angel and hears his prayers (10:3-7). Upon meeting him, Peter announces that God does not show favoritism, "but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right (ergazomenos dikaiosynen) is acceptable (debo to him)" (10:34-35). Yet, Luke's point is that in spite of all this, Cornelius still needed to hear the gospel and respond in faith. The word "acceptable" cannot be taken to mean "justified" or "saved" in an evangelical sense. It was only upon hearing the message of Christ from Peter (10:36) that he received forgiveness (10:43), salvation (11:14) and life (11:18). Peter later explicitly links the Gentiles' reception of the Spirit to their hearing the gospel and believing and the cleansing of their hearts by faith (15:7-9). Luke apparently does not see Cornelius as a "saved believer" in a full sense prior to his hearing and receiving the gospel.

Nevertheless, may it not be implied that Cornelius the Jewish proselyte, and, by extension, people of other faiths who "fear God" and "do righteousness" are in a different category in God's sight than those who do not evidence such faith? Precisely what that position is we cannot know for certain. What is clear is that God communicated directly to Cornelius prior to his meeting with Peter and that God heard his prayers and was pleased with his acts of charity. Surely this implies some type of special relationship with God. God's prevenient grace had long been at work in the heart of Cornelius, drawing him to himself, and preparing him for acceptance of the gospel when he heard it. Likewise, the Holy Spirit is working today in the hearts of people of all religions who are outside the sphere of the proclamation of the gospel. This phenomenon has been repeatedly confirmed by the experience of missionaries. The mission of the church is to take the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ to those he is preparing to receive it. Whether or not there will be "Cornelius's" who have not had a "Peter encounter" and yet will find acceptance at the final judgment is in the hands of God.

Some see hope for the unreached in the analogy of the Old Testament saints, who were not saved by their works, but by God's grace made available through the atonement of Christ, yet without knowing his identity. Appealing to Romans 3:25, which speaks of God's forbearance of the sins of the Jews, E. D. Osburn asks, 'If the eternal God, who does not necessarily view time sequentially, has applied Christ's blood to people of faith in the OT who had no knowledge of Jesus, why can he not do likewise for the unreached person today who has no explicit knowledge of Christ but may believe in the
One who raised Jesus from the dead?" The analogy is of course not perfect, because the Jews of the Old Testament were recipients of special revelation and had the Messianic prophecies. However, we must guard against limiting the grace of God. Those under the old covenant had an implicit faith in Christ that was credited to them as righteousness (Rom. 4:3). Might it not be possible for people today to come to a similar kind of implicit faith in him?

God graciously reveals himself to people through his Spirit in creation, conscience, culture, and even religion. It is not inconceivable that certain individuals might, in response to that grace, honestly seek after a yet unnamed God (cf. Acts 17:23), even acting contrary to the sinful in their religion and culture. Through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, might they not cast themselves on his mercy in repentance and trust, and be saved through the merits of Christ, "who is the atoning sacrifice...for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2)? Might they not through the Spirit evidence some measure of holiness and genuine spirituality in response to the gracious revelation they receive? Can we exclude the possibility of salvation among those who are accepted by God on the basis of Christ's atonement, and yet have no explicit knowledge or assurance of that salvation?

Ultimately these are questions that God alone has the right to answer. While it is my sincerest hope and most earnest prayer that multitudes of pious seekers after God from other faiths and those who have had no opportunity to hear the gospel explicitly might stand among those who are redeemed by Christ's blood, such an assurance has not been clearly revealed to us. The Bible leaves us no choice but to be agnostics in some sense when it comes to these questions. Perhaps there is some encouragement in the picture of unnumbered multitudes from every nation, tribe, and people gathered before the throne of God (Rev. 7:9) and people coming from every direction of the compass to take their places at the kingdom feast (Lk. 13:29). Jesus makes the point on more than one occasion that there will be surprises as to who is in heaven and who is not (Matt. 7:21-23; 25:31-46; Lk. 13:22-30). One thing the Scriptures do make clear is that if people are in heaven apart from the preaching of the gospel, it will not be on the basis of their sincerity or their own goodness or their devotion to religious observance. It will be because the grace of God was active in their lives through the Holy Spirit, drawing them to Christ.

To admit the possibility of salvation apart from explicit knowledge of Jesus Christ is not to flirt with universalism. Neither does it diminish the urgency of the task of world evangelization. This common objection can be answered in at least two ways. First, neither Scripture nor experience give us an assurance about the existence of large numbers of "implicit" Christians. Due to the universal presence of sin in human hearts and the blinding power of Satan (2 Cor. 4:4), people generally choose to suppress the truth and exchange it for a lie (Rom. 1:18f.). There is no room for the optimism about the salvation of people in other religions that is characteristic of much post-Vatican II Roman Catholic thought. The religions of the world are not "ways of salvation," nor are they filled with "anonymous Christians." The vast majority of people will need to hear the "word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17) and participate in a community of faith in order to be saved. It is still urgent that the church fulfill its mandate to be a sending and proclaiming community if people are to have a reasonable opportunity to call on his name and believe (Rom. 10:14-15). The only way anyone can have assurance that he or she is
redeemed is by responding in repentance and faith to the preaching of the Word.

Second, the very objection betrays an overly-restrictive understanding of soteriology. Jesus’ commission to his followers (Matt. 23:16-20) is not simply to win converts, but to “make disciples” by baptizing and instructing them, i.e., to make Christlike citizens of the kingdom. Even if people would respond positively to God’s gracious revelation apart from preaching, they will remain “like the blind groping toward a dim light,” without knowing the true source or nature of that light, without participating in the Christian community, without the full experience of God’s grace, power and holiness. In this sense, the possibility of “implicit” Christians ought to be a motivation rather than a deterrent to missions, since people who have responded to God’s grace in a limited way are waiting for more light and a fuller experience of that grace. The biblical mandate is to lead people to salvation in the fullest sense, which entails a life of discipleship and holiness. This applies equally to those who have heard and those who have not.

CONCLUSION

This overview makes it apparent that the biblical attitude toward religions is not simplistic. Does the Bible view religion as the realm of demonic and idolatrous activity; or as man’s futile striving to find God; or as a preparation for the gospel; or as an arena of grace leading toward the experience of salvation? To be faithful to the scriptural witness we must answer affirmatively to each of these possibilities. An authentic biblical theology of religion must be multi-faceted enough to include all of them. There is a sense in which the world religions are aligned with the powers of the present age and therefore evidence aspects of the demonic and sinful. There is a biblical exclusivism which must tenaciously maintain that salvation is not to be found in even the best of other religions. The dogma of religious pluralism must be lovingly but firmly confronted. There is no other path to God except the one that goes through Jesus Christ. We do not have the option or the justification simply to leave people in their own religions and trust that God will judge them justly in the end. People deserve to know the way to life, both for the present and the future. The mission of the church is clear.

At the same time, however, if we believe that God’s prevenient grace is at work among peoples of other faiths, then we must be willing to recognize signs of grace wherever they are to be found: in their cultures, in their sacred writings, in their personal devotion and lifestyle, in their struggles for justice and righteousness. The biblical understanding of God’s universal self-revelation and ministry of grace leads to an attitude of hopeful expectancy concerning how the Holy Spirit is working among peoples of other faiths and leading them to Jesus Christ. This suggests a more open attitude toward non-Christian religions and their adherents than has sometimes been evidenced among evangelicals and upholds the historic tendency toward inclusivism among Wesleyans. At the same time, Wesleyans who accept an inclusivist stance toward the question of the unevangelized must be careful not to go beyond what careful exegesis of the Scripture will allow and turn possibilities into certainties. On a practical level, a biblically informed attitude toward non-Christian religions should lead us to pursue a greater understanding of them as well as personal relationships with peoples of other faiths. We need not reject dialogue in principle simply because it has been misused at times, but rather see it as an opportuni-
ty for mutual understanding and witness to those of other faiths. In the words of Canon Max Warren, “What a wonderful opportunity that religious pluralism offers to Christians and to everyone else to make a new discovery of Jesus Christ. How gratefully we should accept God’s providential challenge.”

NOTES

1. Canon Max Warren observes that “The Accident of Europe’s isolation in the Middle Ages, and then its successful expansion in the following centuries, obscured the realities of religious pluralism from most Christians of the West.” *I Believe in the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 153.

2. For example, as of 1991 there were approximately six million Muslims in the United States, which makes the Islamic faith larger than most Protestant denominations. Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 85.


7. The terms are used by J. Sanders, *No Other Name*. According to Sanders “restrictivists” hold that access to salvation is limited to those who hear the preaching of the gospel (4, 37), while “inclusivists” “affirm the particularity and finality of salvation only in Christ but deny that knowledge of this work is necessary for salvation” (215); cf. W. Gary Phillips, “Evangelicals and Pluralism: Current Options,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 64:3 (1992), 229-244; C. Pinnock, *Wideness, 14f. Among current evangelical thinkers, Sanders and Pinnock are undoubtedly the most articulate spokesmen for the “inclusivist” position. Evangelical inclusivism is to be distinguished from broader definitions of “inclusivism” which hold that Christ is “the norm that brings about salvation through all religions”;

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Religions," logically, religions 22.

Wesley's Practical Theology (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), esp. 32-34; cf. J. Sanders, No Other Name, 249-51; C. Pinnock, Wideness, 158.

10. See especially the collection of essays in Through No Fault of Their Own?, eds. W. V. Crockett and J. G. Sigountos, the majority of which follow a more restrictivist approach to the question of the fate of the unevangelized.

11. Wesleyans would generally view human experience, a rigorous analysis of the arguments (reason) and this insights of Christian tradition as important considerations.

12. Scripture quotations are from the New International Version, unless otherwise indicated.


17. For a discussion of this point, see K. Runia, "The Gospel and Religious Pluralism," unpublished paper delivered at the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission Consultation, Wheaton College, June, 1990, 18ff; reprinted in Evangelical Review of Theology 14 (October, 1990), 341-79. The use of the divine names in the Pentateuch is relevant here. Apparently God addressed Abraham and entered into covenant with him in terms of divine names that were part of contemporary Semitic culture, e.g., El. This does not mean, however, that Abraham's religion was syncretistic or that his faith remained at the level of popular cultural understandings of deity. God "accommodates" his self-revelation to familiar religious language and symbols in preparation for his transforming acts of redemption and revelation of his true name and character. C. J. H. Wright, "The Christian and Other Religions: the Biblical Evidence," Thematics 9 (January 1984), 6f.


22. C. J. H. Wright rightly cautions that it is hermeneutically invalid to use Old Testament texts which look forward to all nations ultimately worshipping Yahweh as support for the view that all religions are in present reality the worship of the one divine Being. "The Christian and Other Religions," 10. However, it does attest to the prophet's understanding of the universal lordship of Yahweh over all people.

23. Joyce C. Baldwin, Hagga, Zechariah, Malachi, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 228ff., renders the verb in the future ("my name will be great"), so NIV, and interprets the passage eschatologically, noting that it would otherwise mean that Malachi is the only biblical writer to sanction
pagan sacrifice. However, C.D. Isbell, Malachi (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980; 42, argues that the future tense is unwarranted, and takes it as a present (cf. RSV) reference to what is already happening throughout the world. C. J. H. Wright comments that even if the verse is taken in a present sense, it would be "a rhetorical, ironic comparison intended rather to shame Israel than to satirize paganism."


25. J.E. Goldingay and C.J.H. Wright, "Yahweh," 44. The authors cite the "Thirty Sayings" in Proverbs 22:24 as an example of "direct dependence" on pagan wisdom writings.


31. P. J. Krüger, No Other Name, 185. Cf. C. Pinnock's much more balanced treatment of this passage ("Acts 4:12—No Other Name under Heaven" in Through No Fault of Their Own, 107-15, in which he acknowledges that Luke "makes a strong and definitely exclusive claim about the messianic, holistic salvation Jesus has brought into the world" (115), but that the passage addresses neither the question of the eschatological fate of the unevangelized nor the status of other religions. Pinnock argues that "Peter is magnifying a mighty act of God bringing in the kingdom, not discussing comparative religions" (111). This may be true; however, it does not mean that the passage is irrelevant to the discussion.

32. The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World (London: Edinburgh House, 1938). Kraemer was, of course, deeply influenced by Karl Barth, who placed man's religiosity in stark contrast to God's unique revelation in Jesus Christ, and spoke, in a celebrated comment, of religion as "unbelief"; K. Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. 12, 299ff.


34. H. Kraemer, Christian Message, 132. In his later writings, Kraemer seems to show more openness to evidences of God's working in other religions, and qualifies that he does not consider other religions to be erroneous in their totality. Why Christianity of All Religions?, p.93.


37. K. G. Howkins, "Non-Christian Religions," 65; J. R. W. Scott, The Christian Mission in the Modern World (Downers Grove, IL:IVP, 1975), 68. Commentators are divided as to whether the light in this verse refers to the light of illumination (Morris, Tasker; cf. v.4), or the light of judgment (Barrett, Carson cf. 3:21). Perhaps the two understandings are not mutually exclusive, since the concept of the light is used in both senses in John. The light comes to humanity as both revelation and judgment. It seems preferable to take the phrase "coming into the world" with "the true light" to paraph. alethion) rather than "every man" (panta anthropos). For a discussion of the grammatical difficulties
of this verse, see L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 93f.

38. The weakness of a "Logos Christology," which has roots in the Greek Fathers (cf. Justin Martyr, *Apologia* 1, 461) and to which John, Sanders and Clark Pinnock have recently appealed to support the universal accessibility of salvation (No Other Name, 238ff.; *Widens*, 77f., 103ff.) is precisely at this point. The cosmic Logos that is "found" in other religions and philosophies is all too easily abstracted from the person of Jesus of Nazareth and thereby threatens to undercut the historical particularity of the saving event. John's whole argument in the prologue is intended to lead to the climax that the "Word became flesh" (1:14). The Word who was in the world from the beginning and who illumines all peoples is one and the same Word who became enfleshed in Jesus. See C. J. H. Wright, "The Christian and Other Religions," 12f.; cf. J. E. Bradley, "Logos Christology and Religious Pluralism: A New Evangelical Proposal" in *Proceedings of the Wheaton Theological Conference*, 190-215.


43. The phrase was popularized by Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), 115-34.

44. See J. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 244-47.


51. J. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 237.


59. This is in contrast to those who argue that Paul answers the question quite definitively either in a negative (e.g., D. J. Moo, "Romans 2: Saved Apart from the Gospel?" in *Through No Fault of Their Own*, 145) or a positive (e.g., J. Sanders, "Mercy," *220ff*) direction.


61. For a recent articulation of this position, see J. Sanders, *Mercy,* 220-24.


63. J. Sanders, *No Other Name*, chapter 2.


68. J. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 66.


71. S. W. Arasrajah, *Other Faiths*, 17ff.

72. E.g. the reflection of Norman Anderson, "I have never met a Muslim convert who regards the God he previously sought to worship as a wholly false God. Instead, he is filled with wonder and gratitude that he has now been brought to know that God as he really is, in Jesus Christ our Lord." *Christianity*, 173.


76. Wesley's understanding of the integral relationship between present salvation (some measure of holiness) and future salvation led him, especially in his later period, to maintain that God will judge the "heathens" according to their response to the gracious "light" they have received, assuming

77. See F. T. Cunningham, "Inter-Religious Dialogue," 10f.
78. See L. Newbigin, Gospel, 177.
82. See above, n. 42.
83. C. Pinnock goes too far in appealing to I Pet. 4:6 as basis for the unevangelized having 'second chance' after death, based on the assumption that God will not reject sinners without knowing what their response to grace would have been. "Toward an Evangelical Theology," 365.
84. W. V. Crockett, and J. G. Sigountes, "Are the 'Heathen' Really Lost?" in Through No Fault of Their Own, 260.
85. John D. Ellenberger cites several concrete examples of the Holy Spirit's preparatory activity prior to any contact with the gospel message, "Is Hell a Proper Motivation for Missions," in Through No Fault of Their Own, 223.
86. See the valid caution of W. G. Phillips at this point, 'Evangelicals and Religious Pluralism: Current Options,' in Proceedings, 189.