

Salvation and the Exclusivity of the Christ
James Coke / 2006-03-06

Christian salvation doctrine is based on a significant body of New Testament scripture. This holds that a person is redeemed from sinfulness and eternally reconciled with God the Father if he or she does the following:

- 1) Confesses Jesus as God the Son, the Christ (Messiah) anticipated by the Hebrew prophets, and the personal savior who is the sole source of imputed righteousness.
- 2) Honestly repents of lawless (anti-Torah) behavior and commits to pursue obedience and holiness as exemplified by Jesus and prompted by the Holy Spirit. This should be evidenced both by a fruitful life (Galatians 5) and kingdom works (James 2).

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." [John 14:6]

But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART"--that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." [Romans 10:8-11]

Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life." "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do." [John 17:1-4]

Yet there are also many versus that suggest sin atonement and reconciliation with the Father may be a simple matter of honoring the Creator or Great Mystery as best he can be understood. Such scripture appears to make provision for those faithful people that have never heard the gospel of the Christ, those that cannot accept an all-powerful God becoming a lowly human, and those that cannot grasp Jesus as more than a specially anointed human prophet. Such persons are assumed by most Christian doctrinalists to lose their rights to inheritance in God's kingdom.

This document will suggest from the scriptures that God may offer salvation to all who come to him with an honest heart, regardless of whether they understand the role Jesus plays in enabling their salvation. As we will see, this takes nothing away from the ministry of the Christ, or from the importance of the Great Commission. This possibility does, however, provide hope that many non-Christians will be joining their Christian brethren in the world to come.

The mechanism of God's grace is different from the criteria required to appropriate it

Human sinfulness continually digs a great chasm that separates all of us from the perfect holiness of our Creator, and thus no one can stand in his presence. Only God, out of his own grace, is able to provide us with renewed access to himself.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. [Romans 3:22-24]

For this reason, God sent Jesus to bridge the chasm. His blood is the atoning mechanism that makes salvation possible. Our faith and the Father's grace can now cooperate to make us righteous. This is what Jesus meant when he told people that his was the only way to the Father.

"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." [John 3:17]

This *mechanism* of salvation, however, is not the same thing as the *criterion* that determines whether a person can take advantage of that mechanism. The basic criterion for crossing the bridge of grace is belief in the eternal gospel.

The eternal gospel clearly states the basic requirement for salvation

The essential salvation message is found in the Jewish Tanakh (Old Testament). It is based on living a God-centered life devoted to love of the Creator and other people.

"Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, {and} to keep the LORD's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good? [Deuteronomy 10:12-13]

Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood And has not sworn deceitfully. He shall receive a blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation. [Psalm 24:3-5]

The Jewish prophet Malachi gives God's unchanging evaluation criteria:

"Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear Me," says the LORD of hosts. "For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." [Malachi 3:5-6]

Jesus' forerunner was John the Baptist, whom Jesus and the Hebrew Jews accepted as a prophet. His baptism of water was a symbolic statement of sin forgiveness associated with obedience to the commands of the Torah, and faith in the hitherto unknown Messiah.

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [Mark 1:4]

Jesus also was a Torah-observant Jew who repeatedly reaffirmed this same basic salvation message during his ministry. He was clear that his purpose was to fulfill Jewish expectations for a Messiah who would redeem Israel before God.

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." [Matthew 4:17]

And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE". [Luke 10:25-28]

This was never meant to be a salvation message for the Jews alone; it was for every people group.

"Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, To minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, To be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath And holds fast My covenant; Even those I will bring to My holy mountain And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." [Isaiah 56:6-7]

We read in the Apostle John's Revelation of Jesus Christ that the final preaching of the gospel to this world will be done by angelic messenger. It will be the same salvation message given in the Tanakh.

And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; and he said with a loud voice, "Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters." [Revelation 14:6-7]

From beginning to end, God the Father ensures that this basic criterion for salvation is understood in some way by every person. It is simple and straightforward to understand and obey.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of [all] men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. [Romans 1:18-20]

Requiring a confession of Jesus as personal savior is appropriate for the person who understands the redeeming role of Messiah in fulfilling the eternal gospel. Making it a requirement for others who do not means the basic salvation criteria (revealed by God in some way to every person) is no longer complete, and the angel of the last day is missing an important part of the testimony. It means

that we are in a new dispensation that replaces that which was prior, something that directly contradicts Jesus' testimony about his own mission.

"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished." [Matthew 5:17-18]

Honoring one part of the Godhead honors all

Some of Jesus' other exclusive statements about himself are related to his oneness with the Father. Christians believe that God the Father and God the Son are two parts of one triune Godhead along with God the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." [John 8:58]

"Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves. [John 14:10-11]

Note the use of the first person as Jesus speaks for the Father.

"Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes..."How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling." [Matthew 23:34, 37]

Jesus is responsible for our salvation because he is the operative part of the triune Godhead in our world. The world was created through him and for him, was redeemed through his action on the cross, and will be perfectly judged by him. It is Jesus who will sit on the throne of the New Jerusalem and rule the nations of the earth. One can assume that whenever God shows up in our world in miraculous ways, Jesus is somehow involved. The cross was the Father's grace made manifest on earth through Jesus as the Godhead's prime operative. For this reason, it is not inappropriate that Jesus, like the other members of the Godhead, be separately honored for his work.

"For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him." [John 5:22-23]

All who hear the testimony of Jesus are right to worship him. In doing so, a person achieves something more than salvation before the Father. He also become part of the hand of God in the earth, and are granted a unique and eternal delegated authority to do kingdom work in his name, just as Jesus worked in the Father's name.

Honoring the Christ honors the Father, and honoring the Father honors the Christ. It is hard to imagine them being jealous of one another, or punishing people who confuse or consolidate their ministries. No one knows the fullness of the Christ. God just wants us to love the one who first created and loved us. Jesus always taught and demonstrated a focus on God the Father.

"Pray, then, in this way: `Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.'" [Matthew 6:9]

"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." [Matthew 5:16]

Jesus also never placed himself between humans and their Father-God. Our relationship continues to be direct with any part of the Godhead.

"In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father. [John 16:26-27]

For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" [Romans 8:14-15]

One may ask why Jesus would then condemn the religious leaders of his day who were serving the Father directly. His objection to the scribes and Pharisees was not rooted in their failure to recognize him as the prophesied Messiah, but rather that their hearts were set on legalism and self-interest, rather than on the God whom they were in office to serve.

It is wonderful to more completely understand Jesus and his ministry as Messiah. It gives a richer appreciation for how God fulfills his promises. But it is not necessary or appropriate to require that the Godhead be fully understood for a person to be counted as reconciled. For faiths such as Judaism the Father is so sacred and holy that it is impossible to conceive of him as a lowly human. To do so would be to dishonor his name as *El Elyon* and *El Shaddai*. Would God the Father really exclude from salvation someone that so earnestly fulfills the Tanakh's First Commandment and eternal requirement for salvation? God's finished work on the cross makes salvation possible for all who call upon his grace however they understand it.

The Father offers redemption by some means to all people

If God is indeed a loving Creator-Father, then he must give all his children a fair shot at choosing and receiving reconciliation with him. He must have provided salvation approaches based on the eternal gospel for people that have never heard of Jesus, for those whose communities have made a different faith decision on their behalf, and for yet others that cannot accept the exclusivity of the Christ.

We are made in the image of a holy and loving God, and therefore have wired into our conscience a basic understanding of right and wrong. Even the animals have a natural instinct for social order among their own. These promptings of conscience were codified into laws of living at the dawn of every human civilization both to standardize the social order, and to more readily recognize the sin that would cause the gods of those civilizations to show disfavor. The laws of living that were inspired by the true Creator were designed to be perfectly compatible with creation's laws of nature in the local places people lived. Later, followers of Jesus were also given the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth. Whether a follower of Jesus or not, we all receive a prompting from some internal source that alerts us to holy choices. If we are honoring God and his eternal gospel, then it will be evidenced by our choice to live in obedience to these promptings with an honest heart that seeks God's righteousness.

For there is no partiality with God. For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets [in the hearts] of men through Christ Jesus. [Romans 2:11-16]

For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. [Romans 3:22-25]

If there is one personality that sums all the attributes of our Creator-God more than any other, it is *Father*. A Father's children are always before his heart. God loves his created ones so much that he undertook to fulfill our required blood redemption for us. For those who have been given much understanding of this gift, there is greater accountability. For those with a righteous heart who struggle with theology and doctrine, the Father is merciful and fair.

...From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more. [Luke 12:48]

It is easy to get caught in the snare of complex theology. We have to remember that the first people to record the eternal Gospel in writing were of the Bronze Age. There is no reason to believe God is complicating his plan over time to match the sophistication of modern society. The human heart remains as it has ever been, and yearns for a simple and universally-applied standard.

God's names are the key to understanding what we need to know

Virtually all indigenous societies recognize the importance of names in describing a person's characteristics. This principle was followed by God in communicating with people before there were religious scriptures like the Hebrew Tanakh or Christian New Testament. He revealed his essential attributes through the many names he gave for himself.

God spoke further to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD; and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but {by} My name, LORD, I did not make Myself known to them. [Exodus 6:2-3]

In this verse God tells Moses that he appeared to Abraham and the early patriarchs of Israel by the anglicized name "God Almighty". In Hebrew, this is "El Shaddai" in which "El" is the Canaanite/Ugaritic name for the highest God and "Shaddai" means one who

supplies all that we need. This was a covenantal name covering both daily material needs and those of eternal spiritual salvation. The name “LORD” is the Hebrew tetragrammaton “YHWH”. It is God’s personal and most inclusive name, and the one he uses when revealing his power to manifest his will (eg., Exodus 6:7 and 7:5).

(Note that “LORD” appears multiple times in Genesis, both as a reference to God, and as a self-descriptive name. See Genesis 15:7 for an example. This inconsistency with the verse from Exodus above may be explained by the fact that multiple authors and versions of the Torah were reconciled in second temple times into the final version we have now.)

Abraham found favor in God’s sight because he “believed” (or had “faith”) in YHWH (or El Shaddai):

Then he [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and He [LORD] reckoned it to him [Abraham] as righteousness.
[Genesis 15:6]

The word “believed” here does not mean merely belief in the existence of God or a specific doctrine. Most indigenous people believed in the spirit world and knew a surprising amount about it. The faith described here is better translated “trust”. Abraham was commended because he trusted in God to supply everything needed to live abundantly in this life and the next. As long as Abraham evidenced this trust with obedient action, El Shaddai kept his end of the covenantal bargain. In this light, the testing of Abraham’s trust, through Sarah’s delayed birth and the subsequent offering of Isaac, is easier to understand.

The scriptures are telling us here that our righteousness before God is manifested through our trust in his attributes. Jesus’ Aramaic name was Yeshua, which means “salvation” or “YHWH who is salvation”.

“...then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed...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 4:10-12]

Jesus was a revelation of God’s salvation for those who will trust in that attribute...whether they understand the ministry of the Christ or not. Jesus’ defeat of death and return to life is a lesson for all regarding the power inherent in YHWH’s name, and YHWH’s desire that we all be spiritually healed and reconciled to him.

Salvation, Evangelism, the Holy Spirit, and Cornelius – A Brief Case Study

Jesus was clear with his disciples that they were to evangelize the world regarding the gospel of salvation they had received. Yet the disciples had little idea how to go about taking the message to a world unfamiliar with both the Hebrew Scriptures and the uniquely Jewish hope in a redeeming Messiah. The Apostle Peter’s visit with the gentile Cornelius and his household is documented in Acts 10 and 11. It illustrates the doctrinal struggles of early cross-cultural evangelism when it came to presenting the salvation message.

Like most Jews, Jesus’ followers did not believe that gentiles could be saved by God unless they became Jewish Proselytes and adhered to a variety of the Jewish laws. Jesus gave his disciples very little insight into how the Father planned to redeem gentiles. Peter’s vision of the sheet full of unclean animals being lowered before him was direct, divine revelation that stripped away the salvation requirement for a gentile to become a Jew. It left open the question of what part of the Jewish law still applied - something that was only resolved some years later with the assistance of the Apostle Paul.

Cornelius was a gentile officer in the Roman army. He was a man who honored God, gave to the poor, was favored with angelic messengers, and probably followed at least the Noahide laws. We know that he was accepted by the Jews. (Acts 10:22) For these reasons, it is likely that Cornelius was already “saved” in God’s eyes according to the eternal gospel.

Still, Peter indicated in his after-action report to the other apostles that Cornelius was not saved prior to hearing about Jesus.

"And he [Cornelius] reported to us [Peter and his companions] how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' [Acts 11:13-24]

However, this statement about Cornelius’ salvation is not found in the other references to Cornelius’ angelic visit. (Acts 10:5,22,33) Peter bases his version of the report on the fact that the Holy Spirit appeared in power while he was preaching the gospel of the Christ, supposedly indicating the timing of God’s salvation. Yet those present had made no recorded confession of faith, something that is normally associated with the salvation process. This suggests the possibility that Cornelius did not receive an impartation of the Holy Spirit based on a salvation – which he may already have possessed. It is difficult to be sure one way or the other.

If Peter was wrong in assuming Cornelius needed to be saved, then what would have been the purpose in his visit? Apparently it opened for the apostles a new chapter in cross-cultural evangelism for which they were getting on-the-job training. Cornelius and his household were fertile ground for the new message.

What was the role of the super-natural manifestations if not to confirm salvation? The purpose of the *charismata* or *dunamis* empowerment is to enable kingdom work. It aids evangelism by confirming the truth of the gospel. Cornelius was receiving an impartation – not necessarily as a sign of acceptance by God, but so he could become a witness for the Messiah within his sphere of influence. As we have seen, there is a special authority and empowerment granted to those that choose to follow after Christ and assist in fulfilling his great commission.

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."
 [Matthew 28:18-20]

Peter shared with Cornelius the things that the Apostles were commanded to do as part of this commission.

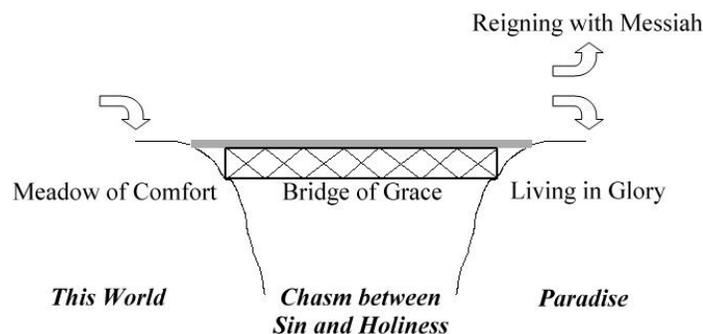
"And He [Jesus] ordered us [his followers] to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One [Jesus] who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him [Messiah] all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him [the prophesied Messiah] receives forgiveness of sins."
 [Acts 10:42-42]

Peter probably explained a) the eternal gospel including its hope for a redeeming Messiah (eg., Psalm 2 and Isaiah 53), b) God's grace in forgiving all who are repentant (made possible by the finished work of the cross), and c) the principles of church multiplication (discipling).

We can see here how easy it was to be confused by the things God was doing through his apostles. Causalities were not always clear, and there was no roadmap to follow. They were writing the New Testament daily and trying to develop theology from what they were experiencing. From Peter's perspective, Jesus and the Holy Spirit added a new dimension to the salvation requirement. There is a subtle shift that takes place as one transitions from the Old Testament through the Gospels to the Apostolic Epistles. The Apostles refocused the source of salvation from the Father's loving and inclusive grace to Jesus himself. This was not inappropriate for Jesus' contemporaries and others familiar with Israel's messianic expectation, but it does raise the bar for people who have never been exposed to the Christian testimony. This was a shift in perspective, but not a shift in the essentials of the eternal gospel.

Beyond salvation

If there is an eternal promise of salvation for those that honor their Creator and appropriate his grace for themselves through repentance, then there is something even greater for those that take up the Messiah's mission to bring others to the Father. They are granted special spiritual authority to carry out that mission, and are promised that they will reign with him in the age to come.



We all have been given the freedom of at least two salvation choices. 1) Stay in this familiar world and reject God's salvation offer. 2) Accept God's offer and honor Him eternally in paradise. For those who hear the gospel of the Christ, there is a third. 3) Follow Christ's commission to share this offer with those that have not heard it. This third option is the call of Christian service; to lead others out of this broken world, across Messiah's bridge, and into reconciliation with God. In this calling, Christianity is unique among the world's faiths.

Targeting the Right Things

Christians need to judge the fullness of scriptural revelation regarding salvation. A person may not be disqualified either for lack of knowledge about God as Jesus, or for choosing to follow only God the Father. A person is more likely disqualified if he:

- Having heard the testimony, actively denies Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God (anti-Christ spirit)
- Rebels against God's laws and the ministry of Messiah (lawless spirit)
- Attributes the Holy Spirit's signs to Satan (unforgivable sin)
- Denies that God's grace alone grants forgiveness for sin (doctrine of works or special knowledge)

The key to salvation is the patriarch Abraham's simple, childlike faith in God's willingness and ability to provide the needed redemption and reconciliation. This does not require understanding the nature of the Christ or which part of the Godhead should get credit for which ministry. If we believe that God really embodies perfect fatherhood, then we can have confidence that our salvation will not be disqualified by a technicality. Jesus made this wonderful truth possible by putting the bridge of grace in place for everyone to cross who honors the Creator.

We can have confidence that a God who loves his children and desires that they come to him is capable of saving them. He draws them to himself, and promises that those that come to him will in some way be taught his resurrection truth.

"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. "It is written in the prophets, 'AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me." [John 6:44-45]

Christians should indeed preach and evangelize the risen Christ and the completed work of the Cross. They should identify Jesus as the prophesied Messiah of Isaiah who is the hope of Israel. There is great joy in this message, a level of fellowship with the Holy Spirit that is not possible without Jesus, and confidence that the God of the Old Testament keeps his promises and is working on behalf of his kingdom today. This gospel carries with it confirmation that a person's salvation is assured.

But Christians should never cast off those that are not prepared to see the Creator in any form but the Father. They must never forget the simplicity of the basic eternal gospel of love and honor for God as the Great Mystery. Perfect love casts out all fear of not achieving salvation. There are many reconciled lovers of God who are appropriately confident in their inheritance as well.

Notes

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