

Do We Need To Save Salvation? Response to Paul Miller's Article

Danny Lehmann

Bio

Danny Lehmann is an evangelist and missionary trainer who lives in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii with his wife Linda. He travels extensively preaching the gospel and teaching on evangelism, missions and the disciplined life. He oversees Youth With A Mission in the Hawaiian Islands and is the Dean of the College of Christian Ministries for YWAM's University of the Nations. The Lehmanns have two married sons and six grandchildren.

Do We Need To Save Salvation?

Introduction

This paper is written in the hope that we may entertain a cautious optimism, both clear and Scriptural as well as implied and in principle, for the possibility of salvation of those outside the scope of gospel witness. I am limiting my remarks specifically to the concern of those who have not heard the gospel. Paul Miller, in his opening statement, describes those holding the "wider hope" theory as proposing, "explicit faith in Christ is not necessary for salvation."¹ This paper posits that while explicit faith in Christ is necessary for those who have been evangelized, for those who have not, the jury is still out.

I argue that holding out hope for the un-evangelized does not "gut evangelicalism of its central message and reason for being", nor does it nullify its "central coordination to the non- Christian world and to the wider body of Christ."²

I will formulate this paper around Paul Miller's question, "Is inclusivism a problem for evangelicals"? He answers with "a resounding yes."³ I contend it need not be. My view of this "wider" hope is that it is not only attractive in a pragmatic way, as opposed to a view that gives no such hope, but that the Bible was written and God's plan inaugurated by the God of hope in a world in which that God of hope "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."⁴

I write as one coming from the same evangelical roots as Miller. I was grounded in my faith during the Jesus Movement in California under Pastor Chuck Smith and was taught, as too was Miller, evangelical distinctives in Youth With A Mission, an

¹ Paul Miller, *Saving Salvation*, 1.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ See Romans 15:13 and I Timothy 2:4 (NRSV).

evangelical missionary organization formed in 1960. I am by gifting an evangelist and believe that people are lost without Christ and that the merit of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross is the only door to God's salvation.

I identify with Miller and his frustration with the paradoxical statements by scholars such as Terrance Tiessen who in Miller's words, "are contradicting themselves by their religions-as-such-don't-save-but-Christ-saves-through-other-religions" claim.⁵ I consider myself a "cautious inclusivist" and certainly do not advocate the neo-Universalism expressed in Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins* nor the classic Universalism promoted by Protestant Liberals or pluralists such as John Hick. I believe both are out of bounds concerning the question of the destiny of the un-evangelized. I have critiqued *Love Wins* elsewhere.⁶

I will begin by acknowledging points of agreement with Miller and then attempt with a "humble agnosticism" (John Stott's term regarding the subject)⁷ to put some thoughts forward that suggest that salvation need not be "saved" from the allegedly mistaken inclusivists.

First of all, I agree with Miller that there is no salvific value in the other religions, whether we say religions "per se" or "such as" or use any other dances with words around the issue.⁸ My view is that the issue is one of clarity of message and spiritual light (revelation). The question at hand is that of the Philippian jailor in Acts 16, "What must I do to be saved?"⁹ How much clarity does a truly God-seeking person need to have on the character of God, the nature of the atonement, and the specificity of believing what transpired on the cross when indeed they have never heard about the cross? John Wesley wrote, "God respects the goodness of the heart rather than the clearness of the head; and that if the heart of man be filled (by the grace of God) with the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man, God will not cast him into everlasting fire because his ideas are not clear or because his conceptions are confused. 'Without holiness,' I own, 'no man will see the Lord;' but I dare not add 'or clear ideas.'"¹⁰

It seems evident that people were saved (with no specific knowledge of the cross) in the Old Testament by responding to the light God had revealed to them (see below). Most evangelicals would agree with this. I simply extend the application of this truth to consider that on the basis of God's omniscience (knowing the hearts of all), justice, goodness, and impartiality inherent in his character that saving grace may be available to those outside the scope of clear gospel proclamation. In other words, as far as they are concerned Christ has not yet come so they may be held to the same level of accountability as the pre-Calvary "believers." John Stott said "What we do not know,

⁵ Miller, 5.

⁶ <http://www.stokerstuff.com/love-wins-by-rob-bell/>

⁷ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 319.

⁸ Miller, 5.

⁹ Acts 16:30 (NRSV).

¹⁰ John Wesley, "On Living Without God," Sermons of John Wesley, nnu.edu, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-125-on-living-without-god/>.

however, is exactly how much knowledge and understanding of the Gospel people need before they can cry out to God for mercy and be saved. In the Old Testament people were certainly 'justified by grace through faith' even though they had little knowledge or expectation of Christ. Perhaps there are others today in a similar position."¹¹

What Do The Scriptures Say?

Before I address some of the relevant texts, let's simply observe what the Scriptures do not say. The Bible does not explicitly declare what happens to people who have never heard the gospel. So we are left with the plain statements as well as the silences of Scripture, and the implication and application of biblical principles. In the space limits of this response paper it is, of course, not possible to exegete even one of the relevant texts adequately.

In Jesus' parable of the sower, the seeds that ended up bearing fruit were those that heard the word and understood it! Those who heard the word and did not understand it were those that did not bear fruit (Matt. 13:18-23). Apparently understanding what one hears is a factor in whether or not fruit is brought forth. If we glean from the parable that bearing fruit is in fact people coming to Christ, then by implication those that come to Christ must have somewhat of a minimal understanding of the Gospel in order to be saved.

Most evangelical scholars would agree with the following points on God's self-revelation: there are four revelational "lights" that enlighten God's truth with increasing clarity, with the first two labeled "General Revelation" and the latter two designated "Special Revelation."

- 1) Creation (Ps. 19:1-4, Rom. 1:18-23, 10: 17-18)
- 2) Conscience (Rom. 2:12-15)
- 3) The Law (Rom. 2:14-15) and
- 4) The Gospel (Rom. 2:16)

When asked about the proverbial "noble pagan" many would cite the example of Cornelius. He responded to the light he had been given by fearing God, praying continually and giving to the poor (Acts 10:2). He responded to lights 1 and 2 and although it cannot be proven that he was an official "God fearer,"¹² he most likely had some exposure to No. 3. We know that he was, as far as he could tell, a believer in, and obedient to, the one true God. As he responded to the light that was revealed to him, God saw his response, and sent Peter to give him No. 4 and hence he came to Christ.

That said, we have not yet addressed the fate of those Corneliuses out there in the world where a Peter has not responded to the call for whatever reason. There have certainly always been, as there are now, disobedient Peters in modern times, as well as visa problems, closed nations, persecution, spiritual warfare, geographical and cultural barriers and a host of other factors that make the gospel inaccessible to many.

¹¹ Stott 319.

¹² Gentile convert to Judaism.

Exclusivists insist from Romans 10 that only he who "calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved"¹³ and cite Acts 4:12, John 14:6, and other passages on salvation to make their point. The Romans 10 passage centers around the oft-quoted statement "So then faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God" in verse 17 (NKJV). This is usually taken by exclusivists to clearly mean that everyone without exception needs to hear the gospel, call on the Lord and thereby be saved.

However if we look at the very next verse Paul asks the rhetorical question: "But I say, have they not all heard?" He then answers saying, "Of course they did: 'their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.'"¹⁴ This is a direct quote from Psalm 19:4 (Light no. 1), so the hearing of the "words" and "voice" is accomplished through the heavenly bodies in some general way (hence the term "General Revelation"). Earlier in Romans this is backed up by Paul's declaration that people are without excuse not to believe in God because of this revelation (Rom. 1:20).

Another insight a chapter later has Paul expounding on Light no. 2 in that the Gentiles who do not have the benefit of Lights no. 3 and 4 "show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them."¹⁵ Earlier in Romans 2:7 he posits that, "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life."¹⁶

Returning to Acts 10, Peter told Cornelius, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."¹⁷ Of course neither this passage, nor the ones in Romans say that everyone who fears God is automatically saved but that from every nation such "seekers" have access to salvation by responding to revealed truth.

Hence comes the exclusive/inclusive divide. The classic exclusivist answer (I suggest with all due respect that it is a "pat" answer) that God will always send a Peter to the God-fearing Corneliuses of this world seems to me naive and superficial in light of Moffatt's famous quote "In the vast plain to the north I have sometimes seen, in the morning sun, the smoke of a thousand villages where no missionary has ever been."¹⁸

The biblical timeline indicates a progressive unfolding of the "clarity" of revelation. Peter and John, for instance, continued to visit the temple after the veil was torn (Acts 3:1). This unfolding of divine revelation in somewhat of a transitional form is also indicated at the Jerusalem Council. The Gentiles certainly were not commanded to keep the law but they were required to keep four Old Testament injunctions which apparently were transitional and not carried through by the church for too many more

¹³ Romans 10:13 (NRSV).

¹⁴ Romans 10:18 (NIV).

¹⁵ Romans 2:15 (NIV).

¹⁶ NIV.

¹⁷ Acts 10:35 (NIV).

¹⁸ "The Matabele Journals of Robert Moffat 1829 1860," Goodreads.com, accessed October 12, 2014, http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1630377.Robert_Moffat.

years after that. There was a period of transition.

In addition to this there are verses that speak about God not leaving himself “without testimony” and overlooking the sinfulness of man in “times of ignorance” (Acts 14:17 NIV, 17:30 NKJV). This time was apparently in some sense over at the incarnation and we are now commanded to spread the good news. The stubborn question remains: What about all those who have never heard and who in a very real way are still in a time of ignorance simply because they don't know - which is the very definition of ignorance? Did God slam shut the salvation door at Calvary or did he open the door to reveal more light?

Back to the issue of clarity: Abraham had saving faith and the righteousness of God imputed to him because he “believed the Lord” (Gen. 15:6 NRSV). He responded to the light that God gave him. The Old Testament saints (the Hebrews 11 “Hall of Faith”) are portrayed to us as shining examples of faith. They were justified by their faith as they looked forward to the cross. But again, a question of clarity: how clear were Abraham and the rest of the Old Testament saints on the details of the atonement, the incarnation, and the resurrection, which were to come in the future? It would take a real stretch to believe that they clearly understood any of these things. They simply responded to the light they were given. In the New Testament, consider even the Apostle Peter who needed Paul to clarify some major theological problems years after the former was “saved.”¹⁹

We must face the music that an estimated two billion people today and countless more throughout history have not been exposed to a clear presentation of the Gospel.²⁰ We may even dance around the question of a person listening to Joel Osteen present the Gospel as opposed to hearing a presentation by Billy Graham or Greg Laurie even in a gospel-enlightened culture like America! But I digress.

Romans 4 and Galatians 3 both display Abraham's faith as exemplary of saving faith. We must then ask: what about the others in the Old Testament who had revelation from God, whether “General” or “Special”, but enough revelation to at least be pleasing to God, if not “saved”? In his commentary on Romans, Martin Luther remarked, “Whoever fulfills the law is in Christ and receives grace because as much as he is able he has prepared himself for it...God could forgive them [the un-evangelized] on account of some act of humility towards God as the highest being they know. Neither were they bound to the Gospel and to Christ as specifically recognized, as the Jews were not either. For one can say that all people of this type have been given so much light and grace by an act of the prevenient mercy of God as is sufficient for their salvation in their situation, as in the case of Job, Naaman, Jethro, and others.”²¹

¹⁹ Galatians 2:11-14.

²⁰ Global Disciples, “The Challenge,” globaldisciples.org, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://globaldisciples.org/the-challenge/>. See also worldchristiandatabase.org.

²¹ Luther's Commentary on Romans, [www.thefishersofmenministries.com/Romans Section One.htm#](http://www.thefishersofmenministries.com/Romans%20Section%20One.htm#).

What Do The Scriptures Imply?

In any discussion about theology the first thing that needs to be considered is how any interpretation or viewpoint reflects on the character of God. The Scripture clearly defines our God as being "just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings" (Ps. 145:17, Deut. 32:4), "slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love" (Ps. 145:8), "not wanting any to perish" (2 Pet. 3:9)²² and asks rhetorically "Will not the judge of all the earth do what is right?" (Gen. 18:25 NLV). So the implication is that God will be just and merciful to those who through no fault of their own have never heard the Gospel. To quote J. I. Packer, "We can safely say (i) if any good pagan reached the point of throwing himself on his Maker's mercy for pardon it was grace that brought him there; (ii) God will save anyone he brings thus far; (iii) anyone thus saved would learn in the next world that he was saved through Christ."²³

How many Enochs, Melchizedeks, and Jobs are out there busily responding to the light they have received? Even so, Paul's description of fallen man in the early chapters of Romans does not give us much cause for any extreme optimism, for in reality "there is no one who seeks God" (Rom. 3:11) and hence the need for the revelational lights. However they are no more in darkness than we were before God "revealed" himself to those of us exposed to the light of the gospel.

Jesus commanded us to go into all the world with the good news and we have not, to say the least, broken any records in obeying him. Are the unevangelized automatically condemned because they have never heard? The exclusivist would say no but would quickly add that they are condemned because they are sinners. But to me this is not only theological double-talk (much like the question of whether we are sinners because we sin or we sin because we are sinners) but it begs the question and challenges the character of God.

The Scripture tells us that God's judgment is according to works (Matt. 25:31-46, 1 Cor. 3:10, 2 Cor. 5:10, Rev. 22:12) and that He will render to everyone "according to what he has done."²⁴ This is not to deny justification by faith and that believers are set free from judgment by that faith. But it is to say the principle on which God judges is by seeing a person's heart (as manifested in decisions and actions) and judging accordingly. I think this opens the door to a more inclusive stance on this question.

I differ from other inclusivists in that I don't think the answer to this dilemma is to fish around in the muddy waters of other religions to find some flickering lights of truth and to presume without qualification that, for instance "good Buddhists go to heaven" (which is a misnomer anyway because Buddhists don't believe in heaven). I don't think the other religions are the issue. The issue is the character of God and how God judges people. Hence my "soft inclusivist" position (as in Miller pg. 4).

²² Quotes from NRSV unless otherwise noted.

²³ J. I. Packer, *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 210.

²⁴ II Corinthians 5:10 and Revelations 22:12 (NASB).

Will an inclusive stance place us on a slippery theological slope toward pluralism and neo-universalism? Not if we are committed to anchoring our theology in the character of God, the nature of Jesus and the evangelical tradition.

Will inclusivism naturally lead to a sloppy missiology that dulls the missionary thrust of the church more than it already has been? It certainly didn't hurt Wesley and his Methodists who set many nations ablaze with missionary zeal. Nor has it dampened Don Richardson's zeal, who has been recruiting workers for the unreached for decades after spending 15 years pioneering among the Sawi headhunters and cannibals in Irian Jaya.²⁵

I began this paper with some statements about hope. I would like to close on that same theme with quotes from some of my mentors on this subject who are respected across the evangelical landscape. They are not fringe evangelicals, blatant liberals nor emergent post-evangelicals:

"We have great reason to hope, although they lived among the heathen, yet (many of them) were quite of another spirit, being taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion." (John Wesley)²⁶

"I believe the most Christian stance is to remain agnostic on this question. God has not revealed how he will deal with those who have never heard it ... however I am imbued with hope We have to leave them in the hands of the God of infinite mercy and justice, who manifested these qualities most fully on the Cross." (John Stott)²⁷

"We do know that no person can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved by him." (C. S. Lewis)²⁸

²⁵ Don Richardson, *Secrets of the Koran* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007), 238-252.

²⁶ John Wesley, "On Faith," in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Peabody Mass: Hendrickson, 1986), 7:197.

²⁷ David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 312-329.

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 65.

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