

# JESUS

THE ONLY WAY TO GOD

Must You Hear the Gospel  
to Be Saved?



JOHN PIPER

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**THE ONLY**  
**WAY TO GOD**

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John Piper, *Jesus, the Only Way to God*

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Must You Hear the Gospel  
to Be Saved?

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**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Piper, John, 1946–

Jesus: the only way to God : must you hear the gospel to be saved? / John Piper.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8010-7263-5 (pbk.)

1. Salvation—Christianity. 2. Jesus Christ—Person and offices.

I. Title.

BT751.3.P57 2010

232'.8—dc22

2010005226

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Italics in Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added by the author.

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Introduction

I have written this book with a sense of urgency. It seems to me that the very people who have historically been the most joyfully and sacrificially aggressive in world evangelization are losing their nerve. In our shrinking, pluralistic world, the belief that Jesus is the only way of salvation is increasingly called arrogant and even hateful. In the face of this criticism, many shrink back from affirming the global necessity of knowing and believing in Jesus.

There has always been a price to pay to take the good news of Jesus to those who need it and don't want it. The difference today is that those voices are closer to us than ever—whether in the neighborhood or on the internet. Their nearness makes them seem more numerous (which they aren't), and feel more dangerous (which they are).

These are not days for the timorous to open their mouths. A thousand bloggers stand ready to echo or condemn your commendation of Christ to a Jew, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist, or anyone else. Once upon a time, there was a safe, private place to take



your controversial stand for Jesus. No more. If you are going to stand, you will be shot at—either figuratively or literally.

As I write this, there is news across the web of fourteen Christians killed in rioting because the other religion believed their holy book had been desecrated. What if, in your town, the “other” religion defined desecration as the public statement that their holy book is not the infallible guide to God?

### **The Commercialized, Psychologized Temperament**

If the evangelical church at large was ever too confrontational in its evangelism, those days are gone. The pendulum has swung, with a commercialized and psychologized temperament, in the other direction. The church today leans strongly toward offering Jesus as appealing or not offering him at all. And what’s new about this temperament is that we are more inclined than we used to be to let the customer, or the person who is offended, define what is appealing.

The commercialized mindset moves away from personal conviction toward pragmatic effectiveness. It feels that if the consumer is unhappy with the presentation, there must be something wrong with it. When this feeling becomes overriding, it circles around and redefines the “truth” being presented so that the presentation can be made enjoyable. If the claim that Jesus is the only way of salvation offends

people, the commercialized mindset will either not talk about it or stop believing it.

The psychologized mindset defines love as whatever the other person feels is loving. The effect is the same as with the commercialized mindset. If a person or group finds your summons to believe on Jesus for salvation to be arrogant instead of humble and loving, then, if you have the psychologized mindset, you will feel guilty and apologetic. It must be your fault. If this mindset becomes overriding, it too will circle around and change not only the presentation, but, if necessary, the thing presented, so that the other person will not feel unloved.

In this way, the unhappy consumer and the offended listener take on a power that once belonged only to the Bible. There is an epidemic fear of man behind these two mindsets. In the name of marketing savvy or sensitive communication, cowardice capitulates to the world, and we surrender the offensive truth of Christ's uniqueness and supremacy.

## **What Is at Stake**

My sense of urgency increases the more I think about what is at stake in surrendering the universal necessity of believing on Jesus in order to be saved. Consider these seven issues.

### ***Believing and Obeying the Bible Is at Stake***

Believing and obeying the Bible is at stake. Treating the Bible as our authority in matters of faith

and practice is being lost in regard to the matter of people's destiny. Fearful squeamishness about what the Bible teaches is a bad sign in the church. It signifies a movement toward self, and away from God, as our authority.

The effects of this movement are not felt mainly in the first generation, because we still have enough of the residual effects of the Bible working in us for good. But in the next generation or two, the power of the Book will be broken and our children and grandchildren will be helpless in the riptides of popular culture.

"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). If we are cut loose from the anchor of God's Word, we will not be free. We will be slaves of personal passions and popular trends.

### ***Genuine Love Is at Stake***

Genuine love is at stake if we lose the universal uniqueness and supremacy of Jesus as the only way to God. "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10). But, oh, what a wrong we do to our neighbor if we neglect to take him the message that, by faith in Jesus, he will have everlasting life (John 3:16). The world will tell you that you are arrogant, not loving, if you spread the message of Jesus's saving work as the only way to God. But God calls it love.

The teaching that diminishes the urgency for reaching all the unreached peoples of the world with the

only news that can save them is a teaching that *opposes* people. Listen to these severe words spoken by the apostle Paul about what it means to “oppose all mankind.” He says that those who killed the Lord Jesus “drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by *hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved*” (1 Thess. 2:14–16). This is what people do who tell us that the nations don’t need to hear about Jesus in order to be saved. They oppose all mankind. Oh, how we need to let the Bible define what love does!

### ***The Salvation of People in Other Religions Is at Stake***

We will see over and over in the following pages that the salvation of people in other religions is at stake. They will not be saved by being sincere about their own faith. They will not be saved through the revelation of God in nature. The point of Romans 1:18–20 is that all people everywhere are without excuse in the judgment because, although God has revealed himself in nature, nevertheless fallen men “by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” Natural revelation does not save. It does not overcome this suppression. Only the gospel does.

God has appointed one way of salvation. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). There is one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5). There is no other name but Jesus by which we must be saved (Acts

4:12). Jesus is the way, and no one comes to the Father but through him (John 14:6). All who call upon the name of Jesus will be saved, but they cannot call on the One they have not heard, and they cannot hear without a preacher (Rom. 10:13–14). What is at stake is the eternal salvation of perishing people.

### *The Strengthening of Missionaries Is at Stake*

What is at stake as well is the encouragement and the empowering of thousands of missionaries, who are laying their lives down to reach people who have no access to the good news of Jesus. The teaching that people may be saved without hearing the gospel can rip the heart out of a missionary. There are already huge forces at work to undermine their faith, and destroy their joy, and ruin their ministry, and drag them home defeated. If we add this—that those who never hear about Jesus may be saved, no matter how we qualify it or nuance it—the devil himself will use it, if he can, to destroy his most feared and hated humans, the missionaries.

My aim here is to celebrate the immeasurably important work of missionaries. There is nothing like it in the world. Nothing can replace it. Oh, what a rare band—what a rare breed—of human beings are the pioneer missionaries who say with the apostle Paul, “I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who

have never heard will understand” (Rom. 15:20–21). The One whom the nations have never heard of, the One they will see when we tell them, is Jesus. In spite of all their sinfulness and ordinariness, there are no people more to be admired and encouraged than the missionaries who share this holy ambition.

### ***Our Own Souls Are at Stake***

At stake in this issue are our own souls. If we embrace a limitation on the universal necessity of the gospel to be heard and believed, we will begin to lose the gospel, and with it our own souls. When God appoints the gospel of his Son as the universal remedy for the guilt and corruption of mankind, and we diminish that, the gospel is diminished. And you cannot diminish the gospel without being diminished yourself. The spiritual health of the church hangs on her full-blooded gospel-engagement—with all its dangers and joys—in the mission of Jesus to gather his sheep from every religion and every language and every culture on the planet.

It is almost certain that cultural compromise and the fear of man are, in large measure, behind the abandonment of the dangerous doctrine of Jesus’s global claim on the allegiance of every person. Therefore, if we surrender to this teaching, we embrace fear and conformity. It will not feel like fear and conformity, because the adversary will constantly tell us it is love and humility. But renaming a disease is no remedy. It goes on eating away at the soul, and will either lead

to repentance or to more and more weakness. This is no small thing. Jesus is needed by the whole world for salvation. If we say otherwise, we strike a blow against our own conscience, and wound our soul.

***The Enjoyment of All the Benefits of Christ  
Is at Stake***

What is at stake in denying the necessity to hear and believe the good news of Jesus is not only the escape from hell, but the enjoyment of all the benefits of knowing Christ. This may seem obvious and even redundant. What else is the escape from hell but the entrance into God's presence and immeasurable pleasures at his right hand? But there are always cynics—even high-minded Christian cynics with motives too high, and aspirations too holy, to allow for a craven concern about hell—who remind us that there are greater goals in world missions than the “mere” escape from hell.

Well, there is no such thing as a “mere” escape from hell. Rescue from the worst and longest suffering can only be called “mere” by those who don't know what it is, or don't believe it's real. But implicit in the rescue from hell is the experience of praising God forever, and loving people forever, and enjoying creation forever, and creating beauty forever. All of this will be lost by everyone that the good news of Jesus does not reach. So what is at stake in diminishing the universal necessity of the gospel is the everlasting pleasures of people personally praising God, loving others, enjoying God's

creation, and creating beauty. This is what people lose by not hearing and believing the gospel of Jesus.

### *The Glory of Jesus Is at Stake*

This loss of pleasure means, in the end, that the glory of Jesus is at stake—at least in the limited sense of not shining brightly in the minds and hearts of those who deny the need for all to see it for salvation. But not only in that sense. God intends for the revelation of the glory of his Son to be the awakening of dead and blind hearts among all the peoples of the world. Everywhere in the world where the gospel has not spread, people suppress the truth about God and are blinded by Satan. “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers” (2 Cor. 4:4).

What is the remedy for these blind eyes? They were made to see and admire Jesus—especially the glory of his grace manifest supremely in the cross and resurrection. Therefore, the remedy, in God’s great wisdom, is the preaching of the cross by the people God sends. So Jesus says to Paul, “I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins” (Acts 26:17–18). God opens the eyes of the blind when his spokesmen portray Jesus Christ. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in the world—to glorify Jesus (John 16:14).

Where Jesus is proclaimed as Lord and Savior and Treasure, God raises the spiritually dead and opens the eyes of the spiritually blind. And in that moment,



## Introduction

Christ is seen as glorious. He is trusted and treasured, and therefore honored. This is what is at stake, and why I have written this book.

May the Lord have mercy, and make it a means to motivate missions, magnify the necessity of the gospel, rescue the perishing, and glorify Jesus as the only way to God.

# 1

## Is Jesus the Only Way of Salvation?

*Three Questions in One*

It is a stunning New Testament truth that since the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ, all saving faith is consciously focused on him. This was not always true. And those previous days Paul called *the times of ignorance*. “*The times of ignorance* God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness *by a man* [Jesus Christ] whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30–31).

But now it *is* true, and Christ is made the conscious center of the mission and the faith of the church. The aim of missions is to “bring about the obedience of

faith *for the sake of his name* [the name of Jesus] among all the nations” (Rom. 1:5). This is a new thing with the coming of Christ. Since the incarnation, God’s will is to glorify his Son by making him the conscious focus of all saving faith. Without this faith—faith resting consciously in Jesus as he is presented in the gospel—there is now no salvation.

That is what I believe the Bible teaches, and what I will be arguing in this book. As you can see, the implications are momentous. We are not dealing with a small matter. If this is true, the urgency of reaching unbelievers with the gospel is as great as it can be.

### **Three Questions in One**

The general question that we often ask in regard to Christ and the other religions of the world, or in regard to those people who have never heard the gospel, is whether he is *the only way to salvation*. But that general question is ambiguous. It contains at least three questions. All of them are important for the missionary task of the Christian church.

The three questions will emerge if we listen to the way different people explain what they mean.

#### **Question #1:**

***Will Anyone Experience Eternal, Conscious Torment under God’s Wrath?***

The first of the three questions is, “Will anyone experience eternal, conscious torment under God’s

wrath?” There are at least two ways of answering this question in the negative. One is to say that all people and devils will be saved eventually, and that hell, if it exists at all, will lead to repentance and purity and salvation. This approach is called *universalism*. The other is to say that those who are not saved are annihilated. They go out of existence rather than being cast into hell. This is known as *annihilationism*.

### UNIVERSALISM

There is a personal side to this question for me. It is one thing to know that there are always “certain people” in the church who deny the reality of eternal hell, and it is another to love an author and then discover he is one of them. Since my college days, I had read three novels by George MacDonald: *Phantastes*, *Lilith*, and *Sir Gibbie*. I enjoyed them. I had also read a lot of C. S. Lewis and benefited immeasurably from the way he experienced the world and put that experience into writing.

I knew that Lewis loved MacDonald and commended him highly: “George MacDonald I had found for myself at the age of sixteen and never wavered in my allegiance.”<sup>1</sup> “I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him.”<sup>2</sup> “I know hardly any other writer who seems to

1. C. S. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 203.

2. C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946), 20.

be closer, or more continually close, to the Spirit of Christ Himself.”<sup>3</sup>

Largely because of this remarkable advocacy by Lewis, I think, George MacDonald continues to have a significant following among American evangelicals. I certainly was among the number who was drawn to him. Then I picked up Rolland Hein’s edition of *Creation in Christ*, a collection of MacDonald’s sermons. To my great sorrow, I read these words: “From all the copies of Jonathan Edwards’ portrait of God, however faded by time, however softened by the use of less glaring pigments, I turn with loathing.”<sup>4</sup>

Those are strong words spoken about the God I had come to see in the Bible and to love. I read further and saw a profound rejection of the substitutionary atonement of Christ: “There must be an atonement, a making up, a bringing together—an atonement which, I say, cannot be made except by the man who has sinned.”<sup>5</sup> And since only the man who has sinned can atone for his own sin (without a substitute), that is what hell is for.

MacDonald is a universalist not in denying the existence of hell, but in believing that the purpose of hell is to bring people to repentance and purity no matter how long it takes. “I believe that no hell will be lacking which would help the just mercy of God to redeem

3. *Ibid.*, 18.

4. George MacDonald, *Creation in Christ: Unspoken Sermons*, ed. Rolland Hein (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1976), 81.

5. *Ibid.*, 70.

His children.”<sup>6</sup> And all humans are his children. If hell went on forever, he says, God would be defeated. “God is triumphantly defeated, I say, throughout the hell of His vengeance. Although against evil, it is but the vain and wasted cruelty of a tyrant.”<sup>7</sup>

I mention George MacDonald as an example of a universalist not only because of my personal encounter with him but also because he represents the popular, thoughtful, artistic side of Christianity which continues to shape the way so many people think. A hundred years after MacDonald, another very popular Christian writer of fiction and award-winning children’s books, Madeleine L’Engle (1918–2007), showed the influence of MacDonald. She wrote,

I know a number of highly sensitive and intelligent people in my own communion who consider as a heresy my faith that God’s loving concern for his creation will outlast all our willfulness and pride. No matter how many eons it takes, he will not rest until all of creation, including Satan, is reconciled to him, until there is no creature who cannot return his look of love with a joyful response of love.<sup>8</sup>

Both MacDonald and L’Engle reject the good news that Christ became a curse for us and bore the wrath of his Father in our place. Instead, they turn hell into an extended means of self-atonement and sanctifica-

6. *Ibid.*, 77.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Madeleine L’Engle, *The Irrational Season* (New York: Seabury, 1977), 97.

tion. In hell the justice of God will eventually destroy all sin in his creatures. “Punishment is for the sake of amendment and atonement. God is bound by His love to punish sin in order to deliver His creature: He is bound by His justice to destroy sin in His creation.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, God will bring everyone to glory. Everyone will be saved. Hell is not eternal.<sup>10</sup> All will be saved.<sup>11</sup>

### ANNIHILATIONISM

Others would say that while not everyone is saved, there is still no eternal punishment because the fire of judgment annihilates those who reject Jesus. Thus they go out of existence and experience no conscious punishment. Hell is not a place of eternal punishment, but an event of annihilation.

For example, theologian Clark Pinnock says,

I was led to question the traditional belief in everlasting conscious torment because of moral revulsion and broader theological considerations, not

9. MacDonald, *Creation in Christ*, 72.

10. I have given an extended critique of MacDonald’s view of divine justice, self-atonement, and universalism in *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 168–74.

11. Years ago I interacted with a more philosophically sophisticated defense of the MacDonald position put forward by Thomas Talbott, who was professor of philosophy at Willamette University. His articles included “What Jesus Did for Us,” *Reformed Journal* 40, no. 3 (March 1990): 8–12; “On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God,” *Reformed Journal* 33, no. 2 (February 1983): 11–14; “God’s Unconditional Mercy—A Reply to John Piper,” *Reformed Journal* 33, no. 6 (June 1983): 9–12. I responded to these last two articles with: “How Does a Sovereign God Love?” *Reformed Journal* 33, no. 4 (April 1983): 9–13; “Universalism in Romans 9–11? Testing the Exegesis of Thomas Talbott,” *Reformed Journal* 33, no. 7 (July 1983): 11–14.

first of all on scriptural grounds. It just does not make any sense to say that a God of love will torture people forever for sins done in the context of a finite life. . . . It's time for evangelicals to come out and say that the biblical and morally appropriate doctrine of hell is annihilation, not everlasting torment.<sup>12</sup>

John Stott surprised and disappointed many of us in the late 1980s with a view that later he came to describe as agnostic on the question of annihilationism: “Emotionally, I find the concept [of eternal, conscious torment] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain.” He gives four arguments that he says suggest that

Scripture points in the direction of annihilation, and that “eternal conscious torment” is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture. . . . I do not dogmatize about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among Evangelicals on the basis of Scripture. I also believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.<sup>13</sup>

12. Clark H. Pinnock and Delwin Brown, *Theological Crossfire: An Evangelical/Liberal Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 226–27.

13. David Edwards, *Evangelical Essentials, with a Response from John Stott* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 314–20. I will have more to say about Stott's position below and the interaction we had about this. For another annihilationist defense see also Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That*



So when we ask, “Is Jesus the only way to salvation?” we are asking the question: *Is he the only way to escape from an eternal conscious torment called hell?* So the question includes: Is there such a thing? Is eternal punishment at stake in the evangelization of the world? Will anyone be eternally cut off from Christ and experience eternal conscious torment under the wrath of God?

**Question #2:**

***Is the Work of Christ Necessary for Salvation, or Are There Other Bases?***

Another question embedded in the question “Is Jesus the only way to salvation?” is whether other religions also provide ways of salvation which are effective in leading people to eternal bliss, but are not based on the saving work of Christ. This is not the question about whether a person has to know about Jesus, but whether, known or not known, his work is the basis for all salvation.

All the people we mentioned so far in this chapter would agree that Christ’s work *is* necessary. There would be no forgiveness of sin and no eternal life without it. But now we meet a more radical view, usually called “pluralism.”<sup>14</sup> The pluralists believe that Jesus is

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*Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*, rev. ed. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994).

14. Don Carson defines pluralism as “the view that all religions have the same moral and spiritual value, and offer the same potential for achieving salvation, however ‘salvation’ be construed” (D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 278–79).

the provision that God has made for Christians, but there are other ways of getting right with God and gaining eternal bliss in other religions. The work of Christ is useful for Christians but not necessary for non-Christians.

For example, British theologian John Hick argues that different religions are “equals, though they each may have different emphases.” Christianity is not superior, but merely one partner in the quest for salvation. We are not to seek one world religion, but rather we look to the day when “the ecumenical spirit which has so largely transformed Christianity will increasingly affect relations between the world faiths.” Hick quotes from the *Bhagavad Gita*, iv, 11, “Howsoever man may approach me, even so do I accept them; for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine.”<sup>15</sup>

Similarly John Parry, Other Faiths Secretary of the World Church and Mission Department of the United Reformed Church in London, wrote in 1985,

It is to the faith of Jesus Christ that we are called. The change of preposition from *in* to *of* is significant. It is a faith that is shown in one's trust in God, in surrender to God's purposes, in giving oneself. Such a response of faith I have witnessed among my friends of other

15. John Hick, “Whatever Path Men Choose Is Mine,” in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 188. For a survey of Hick's thoughts as well as a compelling response, see Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998), and Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

faiths. I cannot believe they are far from the kingdom of heaven; what is more, as Dr. Starkey writes, “People will not be judged for correct doctrinal beliefs but for their faith. Those who will enter the kingdom on the day of judgment are those who in faith respond to God’s love by loving others.”<sup>16</sup>

The position of pluralism means that the question we are asking must include: Is the work of Christ the necessary means provided by God for eternal salvation—not just for Christians, but for all people in all religions?

**Question #3:**

***Is Conscious Faith in Christ Necessary  
for Salvation?***

This brings us to the third question embedded in the general question of whether Jesus is the only way to salvation: “Is conscious faith in Christ necessary for salvation?” This is the question I am most concerned about because it is the one where more people are surrendering biblical truth. The view that says no to this question is usually called *inclusivism*. Don Carson defines it this way: “Inclusivism is the view that all who are saved are saved on account of the person and work of Jesus Christ, but that conscious faith in Jesus Christ is not absolutely necessary: some may be saved by him who have never heard of him, for they may respond positively to the light they have received.”<sup>17</sup>

16. John Parry, “Exploring the Ways of God with Peoples of Faith,” in *International Review of Mission* 74, no. 296 (October 1985): 512.

17. Carson, *Gagging of God*, 278.

For example, John Sanders says of the texts that seem to limit salvation to those who believe on Christ, “It is not certain from these passages that one must hear of Christ in this life to obtain salvation. They simply say there is no other way one can get to heaven except through the work of Christ; they do not say one has to know about that work in order to benefit from the work.”<sup>18</sup>

Millard Erickson argues from Romans 1–2 and 10:18 that the revelation available in nature opens the way for people to be saved who have not heard of Christ. The essential elements of the “gospel message” in nature are:

- (1) The belief in one good powerful God.
- (2) The belief that he (man) owes this God perfect obedience to his law.
- (3) The consciousness that he does not meet this standard, and therefore is guilty and condemned.
- (4) The realization that nothing he can offer God can compensate him (or atone) for this sin and guilt.
- (5) The belief that God is merciful, and will forgive and accept those who cast themselves on his mercy.

Then he asks,

May it not be that if a man believes and acts on this set of tenets he is redemptively related to God and receives the benefits of Christ’s death, whether he consciously knows and understands the details

18. John E. Sanders, “Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?” *Evangelical Quarterly* 60 (1988): 246.

of that provision or not? Presumably that was the case with the Old Testament believers. . . . If this is possible, if Jews possessed salvation in the Old Testament era simply by virtue of having the form of the Christian gospel without its content, can this principle be extended? Could it be that those who ever since the time of Christ have had no opportunity to hear the gospel, as it has come through the special revelation, participate in this salvation on the same basis? On what other grounds could they fairly be held responsible for having or not having salvation (or faith)?

But here he is very tentative, for he goes on to say, “What Paul is saying in the remainder of Romans is that very few, if any, actually come to such a saving knowledge of God on the basis of natural revelation alone.”<sup>19</sup>

Some scholars say we just don’t know if or how God saves people who have never heard the gospel. For example, John Stott says, “I believe the most Christian stance is to remain agnostic on this question. . . . The fact is that God, alongside the most solemn warnings about our responsibility to respond to the gospel, has not revealed how he will deal with those who have never heard it.”<sup>20</sup>

19. Millard Erickson, “Hope for Those Who Haven’t Heard? Yes, But . . .” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (April 1975): 124–25.

20. John Stott, quoted in David Edwards, *Evangelical Essentials*, 327. In the collection of essays edited by William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), Timothy Phillips, Aida Besancon Spencer, and Tite Tienou “prefer to leave the matter in the hands of God” (259n3).

So when we ask, “Is Jesus the only way to salvation?” we must make clear what we are really asking. One of the most important things we are asking is: *Is it necessary for people to hear of Christ in order to be eternally saved?* That is, can a person today be saved by the work of Christ even if he does not have an opportunity to hear about it and therefore never believes in Christ in this life?

In summary, then, we are asking three questions:

**Question #1: Will anyone experience eternal conscious torment under God’s wrath?**

**Question #2: Is the work of Christ necessary for salvation?**

**Question #3: Is conscious faith in Christ necessary for salvation?**

### **A Nerve of Urgency**

Biblical answers to these three questions are crucial because in each case a negative answer diminishes the urgency of the missionary cause. Evangelicals like Erickson do not intend to diminish that urgency, and their view is not in the same category with Hick or MacDonald. Those evangelicals insist that the salvation of anyone apart from the preaching of Christ would be the exception rather than the rule and that preaching Christ to all is utterly important.

Nevertheless, there is a felt difference in the urgency when one believes that preaching the gospel is

absolutely the *only* hope that anyone has of escaping the penalty of sin and living forever in the happiness of God's presence. It does not ring true to me when William Crockett and James Sigountos argue that the existence of "implicit Christians" (saved through general revelation without hearing of Christ) actually "should increase motivation" for missions.

They say that these unevangelized converts are "waiting eagerly to hear more about [God]." If we would reach them, "a strong church would spring to life, giving glory to God and evangelizing their pagan neighbors."<sup>21</sup> I cannot escape the impression that this is a futile attempt to make a weakness look like a strength. On the contrary, common sense presses another truth on us: the more likely it is that people can be saved without missions, the less urgency there is for missions.

So with all three of these questions, there is much at stake. Nevertheless, in the end it is *not* our desire to maintain the urgency of the missionary cause that settles the issue, but: *What do the Scriptures teach?*

My aim in this book is to argue that the teaching of Scripture leads to a positive answer to each of these three questions. I hope to show that in the fullest sense, Jesus is man's only hope for salvation. To do this, I will gather together the biblical texts that relate most directly to the three questions we have posed and make some explanatory comments along the way.

21. Crockett and Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own*, 260.