

I. Session 6 – Pluralism, Inclusivism, and Exclusivism

A. Historical snapshot, William Carey

- i. In the late 1700's the expansion of the French and British empires along with the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution made it much easier for people to travel throughout the world than ever before.
- ii. In addition to this, the Great Awakening in England and America had brought with it a renewed appreciation for the importance of evangelism and missions.
- iii. These factors and others led to the 19thth century being called 'the Great century' in church history because it marked the beginning of what is called 'the modern missionary movement' through which the gospel was brought to more people groups throughout the world than in any previous generation in history.
- iv. Some of the missionaries who have become most well-known to us today were active during this period. One of them was an Englishman named **William Carey**.
- v. Carey was born in 1761 near Northampton in England. He was a bi-vocational pastor whose trade was shoe-making.
- vi. Being of the lower classes, Carey was largely self-educated, but was a voracious reader and was particularly gifted in languages and geography. He devoured missionary stories as well as the writings of British explorers especially the famous Captain James Cook.
- vii. Through his study of the Bible and other reading, Carey became convinced that his contemporaries among British Evangelicals had been neglecting the work of global missions.
- viii. This neglect was due largely to two factors. **First**, it had become common to interpret Matthew 28:18-19 as having applied only to the apostles and having been fulfilled in their lifetime, and **second**, a form of hyper-Calvinism had become prevalent among his fellow particular Baptists which undermined human responsibility in evangelism.
- ix. In response to these (and other) hindering factors, Carey published a now famous pamphlet called, "An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means For The Conversion of the Heathens."
- x. This pamphlet sparked a movement among Carey's Particular (or Calvinistic) Baptist contemporaries which eventually led to the formation in 1792 of 'The Particular Baptists Society for Propagating the Gospel amongst the Heathen,' later called 'The Baptist Missionary Society.'
- xi. William Carey himself became the first missionary sent out by this society.
- xii. In 1793 Carey left for Calcutta, India on a Danish ship with his wife and children, as well as his brother and sister-in-law. Five months later they arrived at their destination and spent the next 41 years seeking to spread the gospel in India.
- xiii. Over the years Carey suffered many hardships, including the deaths of his wife and son, but by God's grace he saw many Indians converted, started the first Baptist church in India, trained many pastors, recruited many other missionaries, and started a college which is still in operation today.

- xiv. In many ways William Carey's missionary efforts, both the establishment of the Baptist Missionary Society, and his pioneer work in India, served as both a catalyst and a model for missions throughout the 19th century.
- xv. **Theologically**, Carey reminds us that the Bible's clear teaching on the sovereignty of God in salvation, which he as a Calvinist fully affirmed, is not in tension with the Bible's teaching that the church is responsible to go and make disciples of all nations until the end of the age.
- xvi. **Practically**, Carey was instrumental in providing an enduring model of local churches partnering together to send out their most qualified members to do go to the unreached people groups of the world to bring the gospel to them through faithful and sacrificial gospel ministry.
- xvii. I pray we learn much from William Carey.

B. Introduction and Secondary Literature

- i. We are entering a section of the class where we are going to address various topics pertaining to the subject of missions
- ii. Today we are going to address the topics of pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism
- iii. These topics have to do with whether everyone in the world actually needs to hear the gospel and believe it in order to be saved.
- iv. Our understanding of these issues will determine whether we believe missions is necessary or not.
- v. If you want to read more on these *important* and *controversial* subjects, I recommend the following resources:
 - 1. *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*, by Harold Netland
 - 2. *A God of Many Understandings*, by Todd Miles
 - 3. *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, by Bruce Ware

C. Definitions and Arguments

- i. NOTE: in my responses to Pluralism and Inclusivism I will be giving the arguments for the position called Exclusivism.
- ii. Pluralism
 - 1. Not just that many religions exist (an undeniable fact), but that many religions have the same ultimate result of giving people access to the same transcendent reality (various world religions each offer legitimate paths to 'God').

2. **Popular level pluralism** – all religions teach basically the same thing - all religions are equally right – this position is rooted in ignorance
 3. **Sophisticated level pluralism** – while the world’s major religions *are* contradictory to one another, yet they each offer a legitimate experience of the one transcendent reality – thus all religions get some things right and other things wrong.
 4. Behind all forms of pluralism is the assumption that the truth about God cannot be known with certainty by human beings, so it is wrong for any religion to claim to be the one true religion which provides the only way to God.
 5. Responses to Pluralism
 - a. Christianity is not a man-made religion but is the religion revealed by God in the Bible
 - b. The Bible claims to be not just the words of man about God but the very Word of God itself and therefore must be true in everything it affirms.
 - c. The teaching of other religions contradicts the Bible and therefore must be false
 - d. The Bible explicitly tells us that other religions are false – i.e. idolatry in the OT and NT – see also Paul’s speech in Acts 17:22-31
 - e. The Bible explicitly tells us that the God it reveals is the one true God and that Jesus is the only way to God – John 14:6; Acts 4:12
 - f. Pluralism is self-defeating because it’s fundamental claim: ‘the truth about God cannot be known with certainty’ is itself a truth about God which they claim to know with certainty – mountain example.
- iii. Inclusivism (Vatican II)
1. Affirms that Christianity is the only true religion
 2. Affirms that salvation is only possible on the basis of Christ’s atoning work
 3. But claims that conscious faith in Christ is NOT necessary to be saved by Him
 4. Thus, it concludes that while we are commanded to preach the gospel to all nations, it is not necessary for a person to hear the gospel in order to be saved.

5. Rather, sometimes the Holy Spirit will apply the saving benefits of Christ's atoning work to certain individuals who have never heard the gospel and believed in Christ.
6. Inclusivists differ as to what a person has to do to be saved by Christ apart from conscious faith in Him but many would suggest that responding positively to general revelation is sufficient (i.e. the external revelation of God in nature and the internal revelation of God in the human conscience).
7. Inclusivism is now the official position of the RCC since Vatican 2
 - a. *Quote from Lumen Gentium* (a document produced by the 2nd Vatican Council): "Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience."
8. Inclusivism in evangelicalism
 - a. *Billy Graham in an interview with Robert Schuller in 1997*: "I used to play God but I can't do that anymore. I used to believe that pagans in far-off countries were lost and were going to hell—if they did not have the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached to them. I no longer believe that" ... "I believe that there are other ways of recognizing the existence of God—through nature, for instance—and plenty of other opportunities, therefore, of saying 'yes' to God."
 - b. C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, "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."
9. Response to Inclusivism
 - a. The Bible nowhere teaches that general revelation is sufficient to save but only that it makes a person responsible for their sin (Romans 1:18 - Romans 2)
 - b. The Bible teaches that conscious faith in Christ is necessary for salvation – Acts 16:30-31; Romans 1:16; John 3:16
 - c. The Bible teaches that hearing the gospel is necessary in order to believe the gospel - 1 Cor 1:21; Galatians 3:2-9; 1 Thess 2:15-16

- d. Even non-Christians who are described as fearing God in some way are still said to need to believe in Jesus to be saved – Acts 10:1-2; 34-44
- e. Inclusivism separates salvation from a personal relationship with Christ while the Bible doesn't – Jer. 31:34; John 10:14; John 17:3; Phil 3:8
- f. Inclusivism is in tension with the Great Commission. If inclusivism is true why fulfill the Great Commission? Why did Paul risk his life to proclaim the gospel around the Roman Empire? In fact, couldn't it end up damning more people than it saves?

iv. Exclusivism

- 1. Christianity is the only true religion
- 2. Salvation is only possible on the basis of Christ's atoning work
- 3. Conscious faith in Christ IS necessary to be saved through Christ
- 4. Hearing the gospel is necessary to believe in Christ
- 5. The key text is Romans 10:5-17

D. Application

- i. There will be a great temptation to adopt inclusivism and pluralism in order not to offend our culture and others.
- ii. If we abandon exclusivism to embrace inclusivism, we will undermine our commitment to global missions at all costs? If conscious faith in Christ through hearing the gospel proclaimed isn't necessary for salvation, then is it worth sending people to proclaim the gospel to them knowing (a) they might die for proclaiming the gospel, or (b) their hearers might die if they accept the gospel?