

## **Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: Making Salvation Accessible by Clothing the Gospel with Community**

Some contemporary evangelical theologians in the English speaking world have proposed the idea that salvation's parameters are broader than traditionally portrayed by evangelicals. Newbigin hinted at this idea in his description of the freedom of the Spirit among religious others.<sup>1</sup> In his earlier writings, Pinnock contended for a salvifically optimistic postmortem encounter with Christ for those who have not heard the name of Jesus and defended a Logos Christology.<sup>2</sup> More recently, however, he has proposed that salvation is globally accessible by rejecting the *filioque* clause when describing the Trinitarian procession of the Spirit and by arguing for an all encompassing Spirit Christology which portrays salvation as a universal work of the Spirit freed from Christological constraints such as those found in the gospel.<sup>3</sup> Yong, inspired by Pinnock, posits a pneumacentric reassessment of salvation and of theology of religions in general so that traditional categories of special and general revelation become malleable.<sup>4</sup> Yet another recent addition to these voices comes from Tiessen who argues for the universal sufficiency of God's grace such that at least on one occasion in a person's lifetime salvation is accessible through a kind of faith determined by the kind of revelation given. He understands ecclesiocentrism to be the traditional evangelical understanding of making salvation dependent upon belief in the gospel, proclaimed by the Church.<sup>5</sup>

These kind of theological attempts to make salvation widely accessible to all humanity have previously not been a major influence in the evangelical domain. These formulations flow, in part, from a question about which the Bible traditionally has been interpreted by some evangelicals to be silent or ambiguous: What is the fate of those who have not heard the gospel? The answer usually provides only a theoretical possibility for salvation, but nevertheless leaves the salvific door open a little.<sup>6</sup> Despite a traditionally cautious evangelical stance on this issue, the evangelical writings exemplified in the first paragraph above optimistically suggest that a large number of people will be saved in such a manner. Evangelical contemporary theology is under reconstruction.

However, missional ministry and motivation derive from the clear Biblical teaching that salvation is for those who believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul made salvation accessible through proclaiming the gospel and founding local churches. This is gospel centered thinking, not ecclesiocentrism. It results in the birth of local churches which make the gospel, its Author, and his salvation visible. Under this Biblical model the local church is only significant as it remains subservient to Jesus Christ, proclaiming his gospel and being shaped by it.

Contemporary church planters have the task of making salvation accessible to those who have never heard the name of Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and then clothing it with a local community of believers who have experienced the power of God unto salvation in the gospel. This gospel centered missiological understanding of salvific accessibility follows the major contours of Scripture more closely than some of the new evangelical proposals. May our gospel centered church planting make salvation accessible to many people in our part of the world!

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<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, 1995) 137-39, 174-83, 187.

<sup>2</sup> Clark Pinnock, "The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand

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Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 165-67. Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 77-78, 103-04

<sup>3</sup> Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996) 23, 61, 63, 73-74, 80-82, 93, 111, 161, 163-64, 187-89, 193, 196-97, 212, 277.

<sup>4</sup> Amos Yong, "Discerning the Spirit(s) in the World of Religions: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions," in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 39, 48-51.

<sup>5</sup> Terrance Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004) 104, 163, 230-58, 493-97.

<sup>6</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 308-11; David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988) 327; Millard J. Erickson, "Hope for Those Who Haven't Heard? Yes, But..." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 11 (April 1975) 122-26; Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved? The Destiny of Those Who Do Not Hear of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 63-64, 157-58, 194; Stuart Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 244; Alister McGrath, "A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach," in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 178-79; Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001) 323; J. I. Packer, *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1981) 210; J. I. Packer, "What Happens to People Who Die Without Hearing the Gospel?" *Decision*, January 2002, 11; Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996) 274.