**Mere Christianity: What is the Minimum**

**That One Must Believe to be Saved?**

This paper will explore the issue of the minimum that must be believed by someone for him to be saved. Many restrictivists[[1]](#footnote-1) will say that one must affirm at least the basic tenets of the Christian faith, including the deity of Jesus and his incarnation, death, burial and bodily resurrection. Many inclusivists[[2]](#footnote-2) leave undefined the set of propositions that must be affirmed.[[3]](#footnote-3) They teach that the content of faith does not need to include what we know as the gospel message, and many of them say that salvation may occur for some who deny basic Christian truths.[[4]](#footnote-4) Suspecting that many restrictivists are too “restrictive,” and that many inclusivists are too “inclusive,” I am proposing a balanced position that makes a distinction between truths that must be affirmed and truths that cannot be denied.[[5]](#footnote-5) My position is rooted in the following Wesleyan presuppositions.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**My Presuppositions**

***About Truth and Belief***

1. Beliefs matter because truth matters. What one believes about reality, and in particular, God (and even God the Son), can determine the difference between salvation and damnation (Galatians 1:6-9; 3:1).
2. Satan’s main way of destroying souls is to deceive them into believing wrong things about themselves and about God (Genesis 3:1-6; John 8:44; Revelation 12:9; 20:10).
3. One does not need to have perfect knowledge of oneself and God in order to be saved. Perfect knowledge is not possible in this life (I Cor. 13:9-10).
4. To whom much is given (including knowledge) much is required. To whom little is given, little is required.

***About God***

1. God is both a God of justice (Job 8:3, Jer. 23:5, Zeph. 3:5, Romans 3:26) and a God of great love and mercy toward all of his human creatures (Ephesians 2:4, Nehemiah 1:5, John 3:16). The motive for God’s saving acts is divine love working within the constraints of justice and providing satisfaction for divine justice.
2. God sent Christ to die for everyone in this world (John 3:16) and He is not willing that any should perish. He wants everyone to come to repentance (II Peter 3:9; I Timothy 2:4).

***About Christ***

1. There is no other name, given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Jesus is the only way (John 14:6).
2. Jesus is God the Son, and He is identified in the Old and New Testaments as Yahweh, along with the other members of the Trinity (Exodus 3:14, John 8:58, Isa 6:1-2, John 12:40-41).

***About Salvation***

1. “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).
2. We are saved by grace through faith, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9).
3. We live in a grace-filled world in which everyone experiences the drawing power of God (John 12:32). Jesus is the light that lights every man (John 1:9, Rom. 1:19-20; 2:14-15). He is the source of prevenient grace, grace that draws everyone to salvation. This salvific grace of God has appeared to all men (Titus 2:11).
4. God did not unconditionally elect certain people for salvation and leave the rest to damnation (John 3:16; II Peter 3:9). Election is conditional.

***About Revelation and Depravity***

1. Through general revelation (creation and conscience – Romans 1, 2) everyone in the world know that there is a God who created the world, that he has offended this creator God, and that he is helpless to save himself.
2. Unfortunately, the truths revealed in creation and conscience are clouded by the depravity of mankind and the cultures that most people grow up in. Inherited depravity is a powerful influence in the decisions people make.
3. Though man is totally depraved, by grace his will is enabled to take steps toward God, who can help him overcome evil. Man is also free to commit evil acts.
4. It is through special revelation (which can include the special work of the Spirit) that we come to know how God has intervened in the world to save us from our sin.

***About the atonement***

1. One need not understand the meaning of the atonement in order to experience the benefits of it.
2. Infants who die, and those mentally-disabled individuals who from birth have not been able to make significant moral choices will automatically be covered by the atonement. This goes for anyone who dies before reaching the “age of accountability,” which varies from person to person, and may be higher in unevangelized cultures.
3. The benefits of the atonement are timeless, extending even to those who lived long before Christ came to give his life.

Given the foregoing presuppositions, it is difficult for me to embrace either a common restrictivist viewpoint or a common inclusivist viewpoint on what an unevangelized person must come to believe in order to be saved. Building on the beliefs just articulated, I will now argue for a position that fits somewhere between a “special revelation restrictivism” and a “general revelation inclusivism.” I will emphasize the importance of repentance from sin (which includes recognizing that one cannot save himself), and exercising faith in Christ (which entails turning away from false gods). And I will also promote the idea that someone can exercise true faith in Christ without understanding the historical details of the gospel.

**Summary of the Position I Will Seek To Prove**

I believe that if someone responds fully to general revelation (and seeks God with his whole heart), God will reveal to him enough additional information for him to be saved, whether this revelation comes through a missionary, an angel, or through a direct revelation from God.

But this special revelation may be quite limited. I doubt that the seeker has to have a Nicene or Chalcedonian understanding of the person of Christ, or even understand the historical content of the gospel (that Christ died, was buried, and rose bodily from the grave) in order to trust in Christ for salvation.[[7]](#footnote-7) The faith that saves can be a vague faith with a limited understanding of the content of faith. We can call it a content-limited faith. The object of this person’s faith is still Christ, though he may not yet know the name of Jesus, and may not understand that he is distinct from his Father. Jesus may be recognized as a promised deliverer, though more information is not revealed or understood. Or the believer may simply understand that the Creator God he is exercising faith in has somehow provided a way to bridge the gap between man and God. He is the Savior.

But this doesn’t mean that people can believe anything they want. By the grace of God, the seeker must forsake the false gods around him, recognize his helplessness, and reach out in faith to his Savior, the true God, the one who made the world, who is Jesus himself. A seeker who does these things believes certain things about himself and God.

The seeker I refer to may be exercising an implicit faith. I’m defining “implicit faith” as a subjective act of faith that connects one to God when the person doesn’t clearly understand the gospel. It is a faith that cannot be expressed in a doctrinal statement. It is still a genuine act of trust that results in obedience. Normally a saving act of faith is grounded in a clear understanding and acceptance of the content of the gospel (mental assent). I am suggesting that in unusual cases, God enables a person to place his faith in Christ his Savior, without his understanding all the historical content or meaning of the gospel. Yet the object of his faith is Jesus Christ, though possibly not known to him yet as such.

The seeker who has exercised implicit faith in Christ should embrace the most basic truths about Christ when they are explicitly revealed to him. He cannot deny the most basic Christian doctrines without his salvation being in jeopardy.

**Genuine Opportunity Given to the Unevangelized**

My understanding of prevenient grace significantly impacts my view of the unevangelized. I believe that prevenient grace is extended to everyone in the world. If one responds to prevenient grace, no matter how far removed he is from missionary influences, God will give him (or her) more light and grace. This grace can eventually enable the seeker to exercise faith in Jesus, even if the seeker doesn’t know the name of Jesus, or even if God has to send a missionary or angel to reveal important truths to him. God will save anyone who seeks the one true God of creation with his whole heart (Jeremiah 29:13).

No one will stand before God and truthfully say that it was impossible for him to find the true God and trust in Jesus. If someone is not a seeker of God throughout his life, he will realize when he stands at the judgment that he could have begun to seek God and would have been given sufficient special revelation (at least enough to exercise implicit faith in Christ) if he had been a genuine (and persistent) seeker of God.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Clues from the Old Testament**

The Old Testament gives us some clues about how God brings people into a relationship with himself through Christ without people having a cognitive awareness of the content of the gospel. Very few in the Old Testament era knew about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.[[9]](#footnote-9) Yet God saved many people, both Jew and Gentile. (The New Testament passages regarding the exclusiveness of Christ need to be explained in light of this.) The fact that there were many OT saints show us that God is willing to save those who are unaware of the historical content of the gospel (at least he was willing to then, and since the character of God doesn’t change, it seems that he would be willing to now for those in a similar situation). Examples of these saints include Abraham, Job, Melchizedek, and David. In every case, they had some measure of special revelation, and they trusted in the one true God and rejected false ones.

The Jews had an advantage over the Gentiles in the OT era because they had a better understanding of the nature of God, man, sin, and atonement. But still they did not know a whole lot about Jesus. They were aware of Messianic passages, but only had a vague understanding of how those passages would be fulfilled. Yet many of these Jews were saved through faith in the coming Messiah.

I insist that one can only be saved, whether in the Old Testament era or in the New Testament era, through trusting in Christ alone for salvation. Yet this faith can be implicit, with a limited comprehension of the One in whom he is trusting.

**The Content of Faith**

So what are the truths that must be understood cognitively in order for a sinner to be saved? What truths cannot be rejected? I am going to suggest a list of each, while being aware of the real possibility that these lists should be adjusted.[[10]](#footnote-10) I am open to suggestions. I have found it helpful to make a distinction between those truths that must be affirmed in order for someone to be saved, and those truths that must not be denied lest one’s salvation be in jeopardy.

**Truths that Must Be Affirmed**

The list of truths that must be affirmed is rather short (remember, we are not talking about persons who have immediate access to the message of the gospel). Most of this knowledge can be gained through general revelation, though the work of the Spirit is needed to clarify the concepts that should be derived from creation and conscience. I don’t believe that creation and conscience apart from the Spirit can stimulate saving faith in the unevangelized.

1. There is a transcendent personal and powerful Creator God (Romans 1, Hebrews 11:6).[[11]](#footnote-11)
2. Man is sinful (Romans 2).
3. Man is separated from God and in need of salvation (Romans 6:23).
4. Man is helpless; he cannot save himself (Ephesians 2:8-9).
5. God cares for his human creatures and will respond to their cry for mercy (Hebrews 11:6).
6. There is a Savior[[12]](#footnote-12) that is willing to save *me* (I Tim. 4:10, I John 4:14).

Hebrews 11:6 is a key verse on this issue: “He that comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.”

Some inclusivists[[13]](#footnote-13) would not require that these truths be affirmed, but I am not sure how people could be saved without somehow recognizing that they are sinful, lost, and in need of a Savior. Why would they reach out to a Savior if they don’t think they need One, or don’t think there is One? And without believing in a benevolent and powerful God, why would they and how could they reach out to receive forgiveness? Why would they “diligently seek him”? The sixth truth includes the belief in a personal Savior (a Savior willing to save *me*). Though the person believing this may not need to understand that this Savior is a distinct person in the Godhead (among the others), it still seems that this sixth truth would be information that the Holy Spirit would have to specifically reveal. This list, then, includes special revelation, beyond what should be known by creation and conscience.

Restrictivists might say that the list is too short and must include the historical content of the gospel message. But as we have seen, many OT saints were saved apart from knowing the content of the gospel. Based on my presuppositions, I don’t believe God has made it any harder for someone to get saved after Jesus came than before he came.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Truths that Must Not Be Denied**

These are truths, in addition to those that must be affirmed, that must not be denied. They are found clearly presented in the New Testament (and except for the last one, in the creeds).

1. Jesus Christ is the transcendent Creator God (John 8:58; John 8:24).
2. Jesus, as the God-man, died for our sins (I John 4:1-3, I Cor. 15:3-4).
3. Jesus rose bodily from the dead (I Cor. 15:3-4, 15-16; Galatians 1:8).
4. Salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-9; Galatians 1:6-9).

It would be difficult to see how someone could deny these truths without denying the Jesus who died for them, and thus cutting themselves off from their source of salvation. These are the truths that the cults deny to their own detriment. If one could be saved while persisting in denial of these doctrines, why evangelize the cults? Why not encourage them to evangelize, since they seem to be reaching a lot of people? The fact is that they have a false Jesus and a false gospel that cannot save anyone. The apostle Paul asked that a curse be brought on anyone who had a different Jesus and preached a false gospel (Galatians 1:6-9).

**The Act of Faith**

Following are actions that must be taken, even by the unevangelized, if one is to be saved. Proper belief does one no good if not acted upon.

1. Seek God with your whole heart (Jeremiah 29:13).
2. Turn from what you know is wrong (Acts 3:19).
3. Turn from any false god (including a false Christ) [Ez. 20:8, I Thess. 1:9].
4. Confess your helplessness (Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 7:24-25).
5. Trust in Jesus (the Savior) for salvation (implicit or explicit faith), and commit to follow him [Romans 10:13-14, John 3:16, James 2:17].

Repentance and faith are necessary even for the unevangelized. It is not enough for them to try to live a good life, so that their “good deeds outweigh their bad deeds.” The unevangelized must appropriate by faith the saving grace that God offers in a way unknown to us.

**Examples of Content-Limited Faith in the Bible**

The following are examples of persons in the Bible who exercised faith in Christ for salvation without understanding all the gospel message.

**Abraham** – He believed God and it was imputed to him for righteousness (Romans 4:3). There is no evidence that he knew about the resurrection of Jesus, but his faith was still a saving faith.

**Job** – There is no question that Job trusted in God and was in right standing before God, even without knowledge of the atonement of Christ. Yet is interesting to discover that Job had revelation to believe in a redeemer and to have hope of eternal life. “For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God” (Job 19: 25-26).

**Melchizedek** – This was a non-Jewish godly man that Abraham even paid tithes to. He was both the king of Salem and a priest of the God Most High (Hebrews 7:1-2). He worshiped the true God and rejected the false gods of the cultures that surrounded him.

**David** – Psalm 51 shows that this man knew what it meant to repent and to trust God for forgiveness and cleansing. David was a man after God’s own heart and knew the Lord as his Shepherd (Psalm 23).

**Disciples of Jesus** – Before Christ’s resurrection, the disciples of Jesus didn’t believe that Jesus would die and rise again, though he told them what would happen (Luke 24:25-26). Yet long before the crucifixion Jesus told his disciples to rejoice that their names were written in heaven (Luke 10:20). According to John 10, he had already given them eternal life, as he had to all his “sheep.”

**The thief on the cross** – “And he said unto Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.’ And Jesus said unto him, ‘Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise’” (Luke 23:42-43). What truths did the thief on the cross affirm? It appears that he recognized Jesus as a divine person (the Messiah) who had the power of the Kingdom entrusted to him. The thief realized that he was a sinner and that he needed salvation. He also recognized that Jesus was willing and able to provide salvation. He even believed in the afterlife. He acted on this knowledge by asking Jesus to remember him when He entered into His Kingdom (his repentance from sin and commitment to Christ are implied in this). Jesus responded to that act of faith even though the thief most likely did not have an understanding of the meaning of the atonement or an explicit faith in the bodily resurrection of Jesus (though if the thief had been asked about it, he probably would have agreed that Jesus had the power to rise from the dead).

**John Wesley’s “Faith of a Servant”**

John Wesley has been considered an inclusivist partly for his sermon “On Faith.” There he describes the difference between the “faith of a servant” and the “faith of a son.”

But **what is the faith which is properly saving**; which brings eternal salvation to all those that keep it to the end? It is such a divine conviction of God, and the things of God, as, even **in its infant state,** enables every one that possesses it to **"fear God and work righteousness."** And **whosoever, in every nation, believes thus far, the Apostle declares, is "accepted of him."** He actually is, at that very moment, in a state of acceptance. But he is at present only a servant of God, not properly a son. Meantime, **let it be well observed, that "the wrath of God" no longer "abideth on him.”**

Indeed, nearly fifty years ago, when the Preachers, commonly called Methodists, began to preach that grand scriptural doctrine, salvation by faith, they were not sufficiently apprized of the difference between a servant and a child of God. They did not clearly understand, that even one "who feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him." In consequence of this, **they were apt to make sad the hearts of those whom God had not made sad.** For they frequently asked those who feared God, "Do you know that your sins are forgiven?" And upon their answering, "No," immediately replied, "Then you are a child of the devil." No, this does not follow. It might have been said, (and it is all that can be said with propriety,) "Hitherto you are only a servant, you are not a child of God. You have already great reason to praise God that he has called you to his honourable service. Fear not. Continue crying unto him, `and you shall see greater things than these.'"

**And, indeed, unless the servants of God halt by the way, they will receive the adoption of sons.** They will receive the faith of the children of God, by his revealing his only begotten Son in their hearts. Thus, the faith of a child is, properly and directly, a divine conviction, whereby every child of God is enabled to testify, "The life that I now live, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." And whosoever hath this, the Spirit of God witnesseth with his spirit, that he is a child of God…This then it is, that … properly constitutes the difference between a servant of God, and a child of God. "He that believeth," as a child of God, "hath the witness in himself." This the servant hath not. Yet let no man discourage him; rather, lovingly exhort him to expect it every moment.

Wesley is making a distinction between those with a genuine but “infant” faith, and those who have a full confidence in Christ for salvation. Wesley claims that even the “infant” faith is salvific. This may be true, but I’m not sure I like his term “faith of a servant.” For if these Gentiles (that Wesley referred to) who “feared God and worked righteousness” were right with God, it was because they were “born again,” which means they already were children of God. Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). So if these God-fearing Gentiles were right with God, it is because they already had in some implicit sense, the “faith of a son.”

Should we use this sermon of Wesley to suggest that all one needs to do to be saved is to “do the best he knows how,” living according to his conscience? No. The Gentiles that Wesley referred to were “fearing God”—the God of Israel. They weren’t serving false gods. In some way, they were already trusting Christ for their salvation, and were living in obedience to him. If they were trusting in themselves, God would not have “accepted” them.

**C.S. Lewis and Tash**

C.S. Lewis is a famous inclusivist, and the following story from his *The Last Battle* is a well-known description of certain aspects of his inclusivism. In this story, a noble pagan named Emeth is confronted by Aslan, the Lion:

"Then I fell at his feet and thought, Surely this is the hour of death, for the Lion (who is worthy of all honour) will know that I have served Tash all my days and not him. Nevertheless, it is better to see the Lion and die than to be Tisroc of the world and live and not to have seen him. But the Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, Son, thou art welcome. But I said, Alas, Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash. He answered, Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me. Then by reason of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord, is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one? The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then, though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, Child? I said, Lord, thou knowest how much I understand. But I said also (for the truth constrained me), Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days. Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me thou shouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek” (Lewis, 188-189).

Emeth didn’t seem to have the minimum requirement for belief in the true Aslan. In fact, he had decided to serve Tash instead of Aslan. But evidently, Emeth had attributed character traits to Tash that belonged to Aslan and visa versa. The things he thought were true of Tash were really true of Aslan. He, unlike the other Tash followers, lived according to the holy principles that he thought Tash had, but that really belonged to Aslan. In the end, he found out that he was really seeking Aslan rather than Tash. Quite the surprise!

I’m skeptical that something like this could really happen in relation to the real God (Jesus warns of false Christs and false prophets who would deceive many, and we are told that we must reject false gods), but on the other hand, I’m wondering how many will be surprised to find out in the end that they had been serving a god of their own making (or Satan) rather than the God of the Bible, even though they profess to know Christ and do marvelous things in the name of Christ (Matthew 7:22-23). These people think they are serving “Aslan,” but in reality, because of evil motives, they are serving “Tash.”

One reason I bring up this passage from C.S. Lewis is because it could be used to suggest that one’s beliefs are not important for salvation, though one’s motives and actions are. I don’t think that was the point of the story. If it was, I disagree. Certainly motives and actions are important, but beliefs are just as important, as motives and actions flow from belief. (Emeth did have correct belief, though he associated those beliefs with the wrong name.)

A follower of another religion who actually begins following God will not just be an extra-zealous adherent of his false religion and be saved by sincerely believing it. A follower of Tash who exceeds the other followers of Tash in his zeal would be even more cruel than the others. In contrast, a person who is implicitly following God while in the religion of Tash (if this is possible) would be exceptional in that he would take a diverging course and not uphold the same ideals at all.

Remaining skeptical that there could be some Emeths in the real world, I wonder if the story could partially apply to the followers of Allah. It is intriguing that some converts to Christianity from Islam think they need to completely repudiate “the false god of Islam” while some converts to Christianity think Jesus has allowed them to come into fellowship with Allah, whom they had been seeking their whole life. Is Allah simply the Arabic name for God (though the Muslims define him inaccurately) or he is a false god? This may depend on what attributes the Muslim personally ascribes to Allah, and the motives of the Muslim’s heart. If the Muslim is truly seeking the Creator God, then Allah to him may be the true God, and the Muslim may have more correct belief about Allah than the Muslim textbooks have. To this Muslim, Jesus may appear and show him how to know the true Allah, and that Jesus is Allah himself. On the other hand, if the Muslim is not truly seeking God, Allah may simply be another false god, as he is for the Muslim terrorists, who are really serving Satan.

I am not saying that the Muslim is in a right relationship with God. Muslims, if they believe the fundamentals of their faith, deny the deity of Christ, his atoning death, and his resurrection. They persist in a denial of these essential truths. That’s why it is so important to get the message of true salvation to them. But I think some are more prepared for the gospel than others because they have developed, by responding to prevenient grace, a true heart for the true God. Because of this, a great many Muslims today are being won to Jesus through missionary efforts, and even through visions of Christ—I’ve heard of many stories of Jesus actually appearing to Muslims who are seeking the true God.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Missionary Activity Still Justified**

Though it is possible for an unevangelized person to cry out to God for mercy and receive it, missionary activity makes it much more likely that someone is saved, since the evangelist is reminding people of their responsibility to God, a responsibility they may have forgotten. Missionaries are not just delivering a message; they are also speaking to the conscience of sinners, and trying to motivate them to give their hearts to God. I ask my students how many of them responded to the gospel the first time they heard it. My count of students who were saved the first time they heard the gospel is still zero. In spite of the possibilities of faith in unevangelized regions, missionaries are still needed. There is still an extremely important and clear rationale for missionary activity.[[16]](#footnote-16)

It is not news to the unevangelized that they are in trouble with God. Romans 1:20 tells us what everyone knows: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.” But the gospel message itself is not included in general revelation. The “good news” is the way God has made for man to be reconciled. The purpose of the missionary is to make this message known and to make disciples of all nations based on this message.

Missionary activity/preaching/evangelizing is the normal way for people to be saved. “How can they believe on him of whom they have not heard? How can they hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14). The implied answer to these questions is that they can’t. Fortunately, there are examples in the Bible and in history where the “preacher” is none other than God himself, or maybe an angel. A human messenger isn’t strictly necessary, though he is very important in this process of evangelization.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Everyone in this world has or will have an opportunity to seek and find the true God (since God is drawing everyone to Himself), but the likelihood of each person responding to the call of God depends on a number of factors, including prayers of the saints for the lost, and active evangelism. This teaching of the possibility of salvation for everyone in the world should spur us on to do more evangelism since we know that God out of love and concern is at work in every heart and that we can increase the possibility of salvation for any person by bringing more light to him. If God is saving some apart from our work, how much more will He do if we intercede for the lost and witness to them?

Sometimes inclusivists talk about the many unevangelized that are saved because they are being faithful to the light they have already been given. But this may be an argument against missionary activity. If vast numbers of “heathen” are already saved apart from the gospel simply by being faithful to the light that they already have, why bring them more light when they might reject it? If they reject it, they may bring damnation to themselves. Accordingly, they would be better off without the light of the gospel. But actually, most of the unevangelized are not walking in the light; they have “suppressed the truth in unrighteousness,” and need someone to remind them of their responsibility to God. Though some of the unevangelized are genuine seekers after God (and will receive all the grace they need to be saved even apart from a missionary), missionaries are desperately needed. Experience has taught missionaries that unevangelized areas are generally full of darkness. Some missionaries have said, out of their personal experience, that there is no such thing as a “noble savage.”

However, missionaries have also found that in a lot of cases God had prepared the way for them by putting within the unevangelized cultures some elements that are analogous to aspects of the gospel. This enables missionaries to make a connection with the unevangelized and be able to adequately teach them the gospel, which many accept! Missionary statesman Don Richardson has written extensively about these analogies that God uses. If you haven’t done this already, I encourage you to read his books *Eternity in Their Hearts,* and *Peace Child*. Richardson’s work has been used by Pinnock and Sanders to support inclusivism.[[18]](#footnote-18) But the books I just mentioned don’t make the claim that God is saving unevangelized people through these analogies, apart from missionary activity (Pinnock and Sanders admit this). Richardson is simply showing that the analogies prepare the way for the presentation of the gospel.

In cases where the unevangelized are actually saved before a missionary reaches them, I believe that because of the work of the Spirit, the unreached will respond positively to the truth when the missionary shares it. After all, they may have heard the truth already in a vision.

**Conclusion**

The more one knows about theology (such as God, Man, Sin, Christ, and Salvation), the better Christian he can be (all other things being equal). As a Systematic Theology professor, I know theology can be very practical and beneficial. However, the focus of this paper has been on the minimum that an unevangelized person must believe to be saved. I believe that God in his mercy has tolerated a lot of ignorance and misinformation in his human creatures. Yet there are certain beliefs that must be affirmed for salvation to occur, and there are certain beliefs that cannot be denied. I have outlined above what I think should go on those lists. In both cases, they are exclusive. Many people are left out because they do not affirm basic Christian truths or they deny others.

But that doesn’t mean that there is no opportunity for even those without a Christian witness to find God. Prevenient grace opens up some real possibilities. If anyone anywhere in the world persistently and whole-heartedly cries out for mercy to the God they know made them, God will respond to their cry. Because of his great love, and through his great grace, he will send a missionary to them, or reveal truth to them in another way, such as a vision. If one of these whole-hearted seekers needs a clear presentation of the gospel presented to him, that is what God will reveal. If someone can exercise genuine faith in Christ without as much information, then God may not reveal quite as much. In any case, by grace the genuine seeker will repent of his sins, and trust in Christ for salvation, though maybe in an implicit way. A seeker with implicit faith in Christ should recognize the truth when it is finally revealed to him. A denial of the basic truths of Christianity may be proof that the person hadn’t truly trusted in Christ, or had walked away from him.

Since the vast majority of people in the world are not actively seeking God with all their hearts, and there are many false religions that are deceiving would-be seekers of God, evangelists are needed to share the truth about Christ and motivate people to turn to him in repentance.

Since God requires more of those who are given more, we should tremble at the responsibility that we have. Let’s be diligent in seeking God with our whole heart, let’s obey him with our whole heart, and let’s diligently reach out to the lost in the world so that they will not only know the “minimum” to be saved, but that they will also be motivated to act on that knowledge.

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1. The restrictivists referred to here believe that sinners cannot be saved unless they hear and respond to a clear gospel presentation. These can also be called exclusivists or particularists. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The form of inclusivism I am most referring to is religious inclusivism, the view that followers of other religions can be saved by the work of Christ without converting if they are sincere and they are faithful to the truth (genuine truth) that they realize within that non-Christian faith (possibly even while holding to completely non-Christian ideas regarding the nature of God and Jesus). Clark Pinnock would fit into that camp (at least in *A Wideness of God’s Mercy*). Inclusivism more broadly defined is the view that the unsaved can be saved apart from hearing the gospel message in this life. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Inclusivists grant that saving faith certainly involves knowledge, but they maintain that it is an open question how much knowledge is required and what its specific content is. Is cognitive information the most important element in saving faith, or is a person’s attitude the decisive factor? On the basis of 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, restrictivists state flatly that ‘first one must know the fact that the death of Christ was for sins according to the Scriptures; second, that He was buried; and, third, that He arose from the dead.’ (Phillip Hook, ‘A Biblical Definition of Saving Faith’ *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June 1964, p. 136). Inclusivists respond that in this passage Paul is not saying that an individual has to know these facts to be saved; he is simply stating that he had proclaimed these facts to the Corinthians” (Sanders, 225). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Clark Pinnock points out that “Vatican Two went out on a limb stating that God will save even the atheist who, though rejecting God (as he understands God), responds positively to him implicitly by acts of love shown to the neighbor” (Pinnock, 98). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There are many shades of exclusivism and inclusivism, including: Church Exclusivism, Gospel Exclusivism, Special Revelation Exclusivism, General Revelation Inclusivism, World Religions Exclusivism. (*Faith Comes From Hearing, 352*). I hold to aspects of Special Revelation Exclusivism and Gen Revelation Inclusivism. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Most of these could also be held by a non-Wesleyan. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It may be true that someone needs to know that, but if he does, God will reveal it to the one who seeks God wholeheartedly. I don’t believe that any unevangelized person is completely without hope. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Not everyone will be presented with a clear gospel message. God has not obligated himself to share the full gospel message to those who reject him (though he does allow many God-rejecters to hear it). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Though, especially after Isaiah was written, there was enough information in prophecy for the Jews to understand that the Messiah would die and be resurrected. Jesus called the disciples “fools and slow of heart” for not understanding the necessity of death, burial and resurrection—based on OT scripture (Luke 24:25). But it doesn’t appear many caught on. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I also acknowledge that one may be required to accept much more truth, if it is available to them. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Of course, none of these concepts would be articulated in precise theological terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A coming Deliverer? [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For example, Pinnock. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Acts 17:30 seems to raise the standard for belief: “And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent. Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” According to this passage, the message that Christ has risen from the dead was being spread everywhere. “All men” were given assurance that the resurrection took place. And everyone who heard this message should be expected to respond in repentance (turn away from sin to Christ). But what about those who are still ignorant (“all men” can’t be taken too literally), and don’t have an opportunity to know? They seem to fit better with the older “dispensation” than with the new “dispensation,” and it seems that God would deal with them accordingly.

Also, Acts 4:10-12 says, Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole.11This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. 12Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Certainly this passage teaches the exclusiveness of Jesus as the Savior of all men. But it doesn’t negate the salvation of all those in the OT who didn’t know the name of Jesus; neither does it deny salvation to those today who can only exercise an implicit faith in Christ, since they know so little about him. It is only through the person of Christ (and in his authority) that anyone can be saved. And the unevangelized who cry out to God for mercy and are able to trust him (Christ, implicitly) for forgiveness are taking advantage of the benefit of Christ’s atoning work. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Steve Beard reported this: The director who leads Campus Crusade for Christ's work in the Middle East and the Muslim nations of Northern Africa oversees a radio program that is being broadcast to the entire region. He is reporting an astounding phenomenon. "His office has received thousands of letters from Muslims," says Bright. "Many tell of a dream they had: `I saw Jesus. He declared to me "I am the way." Moved by this compelling dream, they are writing the Campus Crusade's Middle East office to find out just who Jesus is. Once they know, they freely respond. In Algeria, a number of people discovered they had the very same dream. They began to talk with one another and discovered each had experienced the same dream. The details were the same, and even the words Jesus said to them were the same. On their own, they have formed a Bible study and are following Christ. A fanatical Muslim woman had spent four years in prison for her political activities. While there, Jesus appeared to her in her cell. He personally explained redemption and the gospel. She is now on the Campus Crusade staff, totally sold out to reaching her Muslim people for her Savior." Bright continues: "I could tell you other stories--miraculous, incredible stories of visions. Muslims are seeing the risen Christ. Can there be any doubt? Our great, wonderful Lord is calling the Muslim world to himself. Praise his holy name." "Perhaps you already know that Islamic theology has no place for forgiveness. Islam is primarily law, legalism, punishment, death, and vengeance," writes Bright. "That is why they are stunned, even troubled for days, after they view the `Jesus' film. When they learn of Jesus' life of love and forgiveness they are drawn to him.  *(From the January/February 1996 issue of Good News* [*http://www.evanwiggs.com/revival/history/visions.html*](http://www.evanwiggs.com/revival/history/visions.html)*).* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In a very real sense, we are “our brother’s keeper” in relation to the unevangelized. The lack of evangelizing of the lost is not God’s fault; it is our fault. Much of the disparity of missionary influence is due to Christians not responding to the call of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. If Christ reveals himself personally, a missionary is usually involved as well. My friend and missionary leader Tim Keep recently told me a story he heard directly from the man who experienced it: Devadas was orphaned at six. He slept under a tree with his sister until twelve. He washed tables for a motel in the day and at night used the table cleaning rags as a covering as he and his sister slept under the tree. Being extremely destitute, he saw no hope and thought to kill himself with poison. He went out and found some rat poison. He was going to kill his sister and then himself with it. But his sister argued with him and begged him not to. At night while under the tree, he heard a voice calling to him. He thought it was the owner of the hotel trying to wake him up to start work. But it was still dark with no one around. He went back to sleep. He heard the voice a second time. This time he turned around and there in the tree were hands with nail prints and blood oozing from the wounds. The voice said, "I died for you. Why do you want to kill yourself?" The next day an evangelist came down the street and pointed at him and said, "the Lord appeared to you last night and has sent me to speak to you." Devadas said, "I denied it, took up a shoe and hit him twice on one cheek and then once in the other. But the evangelist took my head in his hands and kissed me twice on one cheek and once on the other. Then the evangelist returned the next day and this time I listened and was converted!” Jesus directly revealed himself to the boy, gave some information, but brought the missionary to him to explain the rest of the gospel. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Sanders, 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)