

It was a story that made the national news.

Carlton Pearson, a graduate of Oral Roberts University, one of the first black ministers to host a weekly program on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, and the lead pastor of a Tulsa, OK megachurch with an average attendance of 6,000 people, had a conversion.

He called it a personal epiphany.

After viewing a documentary on the carnage produced by Rwandan genocide in 1994, and then considering the teachings of his church that non-Christians were going to hell, he concluded that, while **hell exists on earth** due to human depravity, and while some form of punishment may await wrong-doers in the afterlife, **hell will not last forever**.

Instead, God will save everyone. Love will win.

Unfortunately, the response to Pastor Pearson’s change of heart was swift and unforgiving.

In the months that followed, 5,000 people left his church—reducing it to a mere shadow of what it once was. For these Christians, believing in hell was an essential part of the Christian faith.

The summons of death comes to us all, and each of us (it would seem) must take responsibility for our salvation: either we accept Christ, or we burn in hell forever.

### **The Problem with Universal Salvation**

The consequences Pearson endured raise a difficult question: why do so many Christians insist upon believing in eternal hell as something *essential* to their faith?

Is it because they see **universal salvation**, that is, the eternal salvation of all people, as unfair? After all, should not a follower of Christ ultimately be *rewarded* for his or her faith? Otherwise, why even be Christian?

Or is it because of Scripture? While the Apostle Paul never refers to hell in any of the letters he personally wrote, Matthew’s Gospel has Jesus characterize damnation as eternal punishment three times, the first in reference to stealing (Matt. 18:8), the second and third in response to the *failure of his followers* to care for the sick, the needy, the outcast, or the poor (Matt. 25:41, 46).

Hell exists as a punishment for sin, the thinking goes, because Jesus said so.

More commonly, however, those who support the idea of eternal hell see it as a consequence of not *believing* in Christ as one’s savior.

Consider 1st Timothy, our second reading for today.

There we read that while God desires the salvation of all people, we can access it only through Christ Jesus, the “one mediator between God and humankind” (1 Tim. 1:5).

We might also think of Acts 4:12, where Peter declares that apart from Christ “no other name under heaven” exists “by which we must be saved” (4:12). And then, of course, we have John 14:6, where Jesus famously identifies himself as “the way, the truth, and the life [such that] no one comes to the Father except through [him].”

The Apostles’ Creed reinforces the passages I just mentioned. Since at least the third or fourth century, Christians have confessed their belief in “Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord.”

Belief in divine justice coupled with references to Scripture and theological tradition, in short, have led many Christians, including the 5,000 who left Carlton Pearson’s church, to deny that God saves all people.

But is this where the story ends?

Must the “true Christian” accept the view that non-Christians will roast eternally in the unforgiving fires of hell? Or do Scripture and Christian tradition provide alternatives?

### **Four Options**

It would be tempting here for me to follow Carlton Pearson’s bold example by preaching my personal view on the subject and attributing to it some kind of special epiphany or divine revelation.

But what if we took a different approach?

What if we explored together the options available to us so that each of us could draw our **own** conclusions on the subject of salvation?

How does that sound?

If good, then listen closely as we tackle four different ways of answering the question of whether Christ is the only path we have to salvation.

And yes – there will be a test at the end: **where**, I will ask, **do you stand** having now heard these options? And why?

### **Option 1: Exclusivism**

The term “exclusivism” names the position I described a few moments ago: eternal salvation comes to us through Christ alone. Only through him can we enter the gates of paradise after we die. All the other religions of the world lead either to perdition (the eternal suffering of those outside of Christ) or annihilation (the eternal death of those outside of Christ).

This position has a long history.

Up through the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman Catholic Church taught the doctrine of “*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*,” which means not just that “outside of Christ, there is no salvation, but that “outside the Church, there is no salvation.”

Beyond historic precedent, Christian theologians have likewise criticized other religious traditions by saying they delude their adherents with fanciful stories of false gods, or that they invariably reveal their idolatrous nature insofar as they try to conform God to our way of thinking rather than letting God be who God freely reveals Godself to be in Jesus Christ.

Here we might pause.

What kind of God does Jesus Christ reveal to us? Is this a God who condemns people eternally, even if they have never heard the gospel? Or do we see through Christ a kind of love that has no bounds?

Our second option, the inclusivist position, answers “yes” to the latter of these two possibilities: in Christ, God reveals God’s universal will and intent for all people to be saved.

## Option 2: Inclusivism

Like exclusivism, inclusivism maintains that eternal salvation comes to us through Christ alone. However, it broadens the effect of salvation to include not only every person but every corner of creation. It also has plenty of support in Scripture.

Consider Colossians 1:19-20.

It says that in Christ, “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

Did you hear that?

The text says, “all things.”

We find a similar claim in 2 Cor. 5:19. There Paul boldly declares that “in Christ God was reconciling **the world** to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (emphasis mine).

That message, the message that God has already begun reconciling the world to Godself, would compel Christian theologians going all the way back to the third century to insist upon the “triumph of grace,” such that God through Christ will ultimately even redeem Lucifer, the Angel of Light, who fell from heaven after contemplating the light within him as his own rather than as a reflection of God’s glory.

We do that a lot too, don’t we?

We turn inward and trust in our own resources or abilities, rather than turning to God to seek our strength from God.

While the Church initially condemned the earliest Christian theologian to espouse the idea of eternal reconciliation or universal salvation through Christ, the “heresy” persisted.

By the twentieth century, it had become relatively mainstream.

The Catholic Church endorsed it in the mid- 1960s, and some of the brightest Protestant theologians like Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer likewise gave it their stamp of approval.

Here's a quick story: a few years ago, I met the most famous living theologian from Germany, a man named Jurgen Moltmann. During a luncheon I attended with him as the guest, I asked him about his view of salvation.

"Are you a universalist?" I said, suspecting he would answer in the affirmative.

"Yes," he replied gruffly.

"So, you believe that God will even save Hitler?"

"**You got a problem with that?**" he declared as I shrank in my chair, fearing the fury of a man fifty years my senior!

But then I got to thinking.

Moltmann was a German POW for three years after the end of WWII. One day, an army chaplain gave him a copy of the New Testament and the Psalms. He read it and became a convert to Christianity.

Why?

Presumably because God's boundless love for all humanity beaming through the cross of Jesus Christ became so apparent that such love could forgive even Moltmann himself, **a man who fought on the wrong side** of the twentieth century's bloodiest war.

Inclusivism, in short, affirms the invincible nature of God's love, the kind that includes even the most "irredeemable" men and women in history. It witnesses powerfully to the love of God we see for all people in Christ.

At the same time, however, it presents a problem.

Imagine you identify as a Muslim. It might be encouraging to hear that your Christian neighbor thinks you will also be saved from eternal damnation, but it will not be on your terms. Instead, it will be on the terms of your Christian neighbor, who believes his or her religion has fulfilled yours.

A pluralist, by contrast, insists that each faith offers its **own path** to the sacred.

### **Option 3: Pluralism**

The pluralist option is a popular one in Seattle.

I hear it often after I share with someone that I am a pastor or that I teach religion. "Oh," someone says, "well, I just believe that all religions are essentially the same. Many paths, sure, but one source."

Interestingly enough, a pluralist can also appeal to Scripture. In Acts 10:34, for example, Peter declares, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

A pluralist, however, often resorts to other religions to make his or her case. Hindu tradition, for example, reflects a teaching central to contemporary pluralism. It appears in a the famous parable of a group of blind men and their encounter with an elephant.

According to the story, the blind men have never come across an elephant before. Because they lack eyesight, they have to imagine what the elephant is like by touching it. Each blind man feels a different part of the elephant's body, but only one part, such as the side or the tusk. When they subsequently share with one another what they discovered based on their limited experience, they realize that the other men describe the elephant differently.

The moral seems obvious: people tend to claim absolute truth based on their own limited, subjective experiences, ignoring the validity of other perspectives in the process.

What a great lesson in humility, one that the Apostle Paul mirrors in 1 Cor. 13:12 when he says, "Now I know only in part; [only] then [at the end] will I know in full" (1 Cor. 13:12b).

For a critic, however, the irony of pluralism is its potential for arrogance.

Let me use my own experience as an example.

I was baptized a Christian as an infant. I grew up in the Lutheran Church. Since then, I have studied Scripture, Christian history, and Christian theology for over 25 years. I would be the first to tell you, however, that the "essence" of the Christian faith eludes me.

The more I learn, the less I know.

Now, if I cannot fathom the depths **of my own religious tradition**, who am I to claim I know the "essence" of other religions, especially those of the Far East that differ wildly from my own?

Pluralism rightly encourages humility, a proponent of our next and last view might argue, but for the sake of consistency, that humility should lead pluralists to refrain from making **absolutist claims** about other religious traditions.

After all, who among us could truthfully say we know the essence of all the world's major religions, especially if we have never studied or practiced them?

#### **Option 4: Particularism**

Particularism, in contrast to pluralism, acknowledges and respects the **differences** that exist between the various religious traditions on the topic of salvation. It resists boiling them down to their essence by pointing out their diversity.

When Buddhism, for instance, emphasizes the elimination of desire or craving for things of this world, "salvation" takes the form of stillness and peace. Mainstream Christianity, on the other hand, teaches not that one should **rid oneself** of desire but that one should **redirect it** – toward God.

Rather than claim that Buddhism and Christianity “essentially” teach the same thing, the particularist steps back and tries to appreciate each religion on its own terms.

Some like to call this view non-parallel pluralism. It invites Christians humbly to learn from our Muslim, Buddhist, or Jewish neighbors while affirming our own experience of salvation in Christ. We may come to agree on some things (the commitment we share, say, to help the poor), but in other ways we may fundamentally differ, especially with respect to matters of doctrine or religious teaching.

## You Decide

You have now heard of four ways to approach the question of whether salvation occurs through Christ alone.

The exclusivist maintains that Christ is the only way to salvation. For those who do not accept him, or for the unbaptized eternal death or damnation constitutes the only alternative.

The inclusivist likewise maintains that God saves us exclusively through Christ but by embracing all of creation. “To hell with hell,” it says, in the words of Carlton Pearson. Love will win.

The pluralist affirms that Christ offers but one of many paths to God, while the particularist stresses the importance of sticking to one’s own faith tradition while acknowledging the differences and remaining open to what they might learn from others.

Which one of these resonate with you?

Where do you stand?

For me, while I have wondered about the question of whether salvation comes through Christ alone, today I feel that the question of what happens after we die kind of **misses the point** in relation to being Christian: if my faith makes no difference in *this life*, if it doesn’t change me by gradually making me less self-centered and more a person for others, then what’s the point?

Salvation, in short, should not be relegated to life after death. We would do better, in my view, to focus on the healing and wholeness of God’s grace through Christ in this world and leave what happens after we die to God.

1 Tim. 2:3-4 puts it beautifully: the “peaceable life” to which the Spirit calls us here and now “is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires **everyone to be saved** and to come to the knowledge of truth.”

God’s desire for “everyone to be saved” or healed resonates not just with me, but with other Lutherans too. As the theologian Carl Braaten writes, “Lutherans say that we are saved by grace through faith. We have never said that we are the only people saved that way.”

It would also resonate with Carlton Pearson, even if it didn't resonate with his congregation or his colleagues. Indeed, in 2004, after he left his church in Tulsa, the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops declared him a heretic.

Pearson was condemned to a hell in which he didn't believe!

But God, it would seem, had a different plan. Pearson moved to Chicago, started a slew of successful ministries, and became the subject of *Come Sunday*, a feature-length film of critical acclaim.

You can watch it on Netflix.

In the meantime, may the unsurpassable, invincible love of God which surpasses all human understanding, be with each of you through Christ our Lord.

Amen.