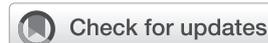


'Only' or 'also' or 'never mind' Jesus?



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This article explores two Christian perspectives on how to inherit eternity: The inclusive Christianity view and the exclusive Christianity view. The central research question is: What role does Jesus play in human salvation? Using a semi-systematic or narrative review approach, representative documents were analysed. According to these sources, many scholars believe that salvation can only be attained through Jesus by being a devoted follower. Other scholars argue that Jesus is merely instrumental in human salvation, while some assert that Jesus' death has made salvation accessible to everyone. Additionally, another group of scholars claims that all individuals will get salvation, even without knowledge of Jesus.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: From a Christian perspective, the conclusion of these arguments asserts that the Bible should remain the primary source for finding answers. However, it is unclear whether individuals inherit eternity through their own free will (by grace) – justification through faith – or through God's intervention or predestination.

Keywords: inclusive Christianity; exclusive Christianity; Jesus; Heidelberg Catechism; Belgic Confession; Canons of Dort.

Introduction¹

Life after death, also called the afterlife, eternal life or eternity, is a reality for people on Earth, depicting what happens to (the soul of) a person after death. According to the Christian view, there are two spaces ('places') after death: Heaven and hell. Other religions have other convictions about this although they mostly still believe in an afterlife. The question is whether there is a 'good' and a 'bad' afterlife, or is it just good? If both of them are a reality, what does a person have to do to inherit the 'good' part, seeing that nobody would like to enter the 'bad' part? This article only focuses on the 'good' part of life after death and what a person should 'do' to inherit that part. There are essentially two main views that indicate how an individual or 'everybody' can inherit (the 'good' part of) eternity, namely the exclusive Christianity view and the inclusive Christianity view. The former refers to the Christian view that salvation is only possible through Jesus Christ, either by one's personal positive answer to God's calling or by God's sole will ([single or double] predestination); the latter view (together with pluralism) alleges that, based on the fact that Jesus has died on the cross for all people, all people will be saved. The discussion of these views sometimes overlaps with each other and will therefore be presented with these overlaps.

The 'only Jesus' view

The question whether Jesus is the only way to inherit or obtain eternal life is a real existential and epistemological question as it concerns the 'future' of every Christian (and for that matter, *everybody else* living on Earth), based on the kind of life that they have lived on Earth.² From a Christian point of view, this can be called justification through faith – positively responding to the calling of God. With texts such as John 3:16, 18, 36, 14:6 and Acts 4:12 to substantiate this argument, Christians believe that they receive their salvation and eternal life by accepting this gift from God *only* through Jesus Christ and in no other way (Craig 1989:172). Christians also refer to two of the three confessions of faith, namely the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession, to confirm what they have read in the Bible.³

The *only Jesus* combined with the *also Jesus* view: The Canons of Dort, in line with certain biblical texts such as John 6:44, 64-65, 15:16 and Romans 8:28-30, 9:18, seemingly takes away

1. We dedicate this article to Prof. HA Lombard, who was a mentor for Willem in the Department of New Testament at UNISA between 1989 and 1992. Being already a nonagenarian and still enjoying good health, it is wonderful to think back to these days and to still contact him from time to time. Thank you, Prof., for your very positive input in my life. I will always remember it.

2. This also makes us think about the 3.6 billion people who are still unaware of Jesus and his salvific actions on Earth (Koh 2023). Are they all lost, on their way to hell? The disruptive question that the church of God on Earth should ask herself is, Why are there still so many people on Earth who have not heard the gospel about Jesus?

3. This excludes the Confession of Belhar (1986) that does not have any relevance to this theme.

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the positive response (personal conviction) of a person to God's calling and leans more to God's *predestination* as he is the one who has already decided whether an individual will enter his kingdom or not, even before the foundation of Earth.

The 'also Jesus' and 'never mind Jesus' view

Contra the above views are two views that in fact complement each other: Inclusivism and pluralism. Inclusivism argues that everybody on Earth will be saved, according to a specific interpretation of verses such as 1 Timothy 2:3b-4 and John 12:32. This could still include faith in Jesus. Pluralism postulates that 'everybody' on Earth will be saved – that includes members of all religions (Maximiano & Laput 2024) – and is supported by the Roman Catholic Church (cf. Vatican 2 being discussed in this article). In the latter view, Jesus is in fact excluded as people do not have to know (about) him in order to be saved; therefore, *never mind Jesus*.

In this article, we want to investigate the above views, focusing on the exclusive (including predestination) and inclusive views of Christianity (together with pluralism).

Methodology

As a tool and line of investigation for this article, we have implemented the literature review method using qualitative research. This is a 'more or less systematic way of collecting and synthesizing previous research' (Snyder 2019:333), referring to sources that are disparate and interdisciplinary, and to identify areas where more research is needed (Snyder 2019:333). This method indicates which directions are followed by authors and where they differ from each other. This forms the structure for the article. As part of this methodology, we use the semi-systematic or narrative review (Snyder 2019:335). While using this method, mainly these sources that explicate a specific view are used.

The research question that needs to be answered in this article is: What role does Jesus enact in human salvation? This leads us to the two different views on the topic, which will be discussed in 'The exclusive Christianity view ('Only Jesus')'.

The exclusive Christianity view ('Only Jesus')⁴

According to the exclusive Christianity view (absoluteness of Christianity), Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. A person can therefore only attain salvation with explicit knowledge of and full belief in Jesus (Hick 1987:17; cf. Troeltsch 1901). There are two views to this point: Justification through faith, where the individual answers God's call and repents by his grace (Re 3:20), and predestination, where God has decided 'before the foundation of the world' who will eventually belong to him and be with him in eternity.

4.Craig (1989:173) refers to it as 'this exclusivistic, Christocentric view of salvation'.

Justification through Faith

The exclusive Christianity view implies that a Christian believes that Christianity – focused on Jesus Christ – is the only religion with regard to eternal salvation (cf. Cagle n.d.:2). This view is built on an exclusive message from the Bible as interpreted by Christians, indicating that only through Jesus people can get salvation based on the texts already mentioned. The exclusive Christian view is also built on an exclusive membership as portrayed by 2 Corinthians 6:14–16.⁵ According to this passage, Christians should not be 'yoked together' with unbelievers, therefore participating in sin together with unbelievers. However, Christians must draw a fine line between being 'yoked together' with unbelievers and engaging with them. Jesus has set the perfect example when he spent time (engaged) with the tax collectors, according to Matthew 9:10-13, whom he called 'sick people' and 'sinners' (Mt 9:12–13), in order to make them believers.

Cagle (n.d.:3) concludes from this that '[i]f someone tells you that your Christianity is narrow-minded, that should be received as a compliment'. This means that a Christian should reject anything that contravenes Christian beliefs, without being intolerant – rather being humble (Grube 2023:25). Grube (2023:25) elaborates that exclusive Christianity is 'to claim cognitive superiority for one's own religion – but in a "broken" way. Broken superiority and a humble exclusivism fit best with Christianity's emphasis upon "fallenness"'. It is therefore wrong to state, 'This is the truth according to the Bible, but whatever you want to believe is also good'. There is a thin line between being tolerant and being accommodating.

Specific insights from the Bible

The Gospel according to John explicitly argues that Jesus is the only way to eternity, specifically John 3:16, 18 and 36: Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογεῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον [...] ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν οὐ κρίνεται· ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἤδη κέκριται, ὅτι μὴ πεπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ [...] ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον· ὁ δὲ ἀπειθῶν τῷ υἱῷ οὐκ ὄσεται ζωὴν, ἀλλ' ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ θεοῦ μένει ἐπ' αὐτόν. (For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life [...] Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the Name of God's one and only Son [...] Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see [eternal] life, for God's wrath remains on them.)

In line with these verses comes John 14:6, λέγει αὐτῷ [ὁ] Ἰησοῦς. Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωὴ· οὐδεὶς ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸν πατέρα εἰ μὴ δι' ἐμοῦ [Jesus said to them, 'I am the [only] way that reveals the truth about God and gives

5.2 Corinthians 6:14–16: Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

life to people⁶]. Acts 4:12 concurs: *καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἄλλῳ οὐδενὶ ἢ σωτηρία, οὐδὲ γὰρ ὄνομά ἐστιν ἕτερον ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν τὸ δεδομένον ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἐν ᾧ δεῖ σωθῆναι ἡμᾶς* [Salvation is found in no one else [referring to Jesus], for there is no other Name under Heaven given to mankind that is necessary for us to be saved]. Acts 4:12 is, in fact, the most explicit about exclusive salvation as it specifically states that only Jesus is the way to salvation.

These verses are direct and to the point, stating that without Jesus, there is no salvation (but only condemnation). However, Paul wrote a passage that seemingly contradicts the above verses, and that is Romans 2:12-16⁷ within the context of Romans 2:1-17: *ὅσοι γὰρ ἀνόμως ἤμαρτον, ἀνόμως καὶ ἀπολοῦνται· καὶ ὅσοι ἐν νόμῳ ἤμαρτον, διὰ νόμου κριθήσονται· οὐ γὰρ οἱ ἀκροαταὶ νόμου δίκαιοι παρὰ [τῷ] θεῷ, ἀλλ' οἱ ποιηταὶ νόμου δικαιοθήσονται. ὅταν γὰρ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν, οὗτοι νόμον μὴ ἔχοντες ἑαυτοῖς εἰσιν νόμοι· οἵτινες ἐνδείκνυνται τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν, συμμαρτυροῦσες αὐτῶν τῆς συνειδήσεως καὶ μεταξὺ ἀλλήλων τῶν λογισμῶν κατηγορούντων ἢ καὶ ἀπολογουμένων, ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ὅτε κρίνει ὁ θεὸς τὰ κρυπτὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου διὰ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ.* [Those who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law. And those who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them, on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.]

At first glance, it seems as if Paul is alluding here to the fact that those who are uncircumcised and do not know the law of Moses can enter Heaven – ‘never mind Jesus’ (cf. Davies & Allison 1997:423). However, one term that needs to be clarified here is *ἔθνη* – usually translated with ‘heathen’ – people who have never heard of Jesus. According to authors such as Hall (2010:34), Gathercole (2002:29), Cranfield (1975:157), Jewett (2007:213) and White (2009:176), the term in Romans 12:14 does not refer to these gentiles, but to people who were not Jews, who became Christian believers (not proselytes). These people did not have the law ‘by nature’ (in this context, *φύσει* can also be translated with *by birthright* [Hall 2010:33–34]) and were ‘new covenant’ people (White 2009:176). The phrase *ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις* could be an allusion to both Jeremiah 31:33 (cf. White 2009:170) and 38:15 (cf. Gathercole 2002:41). Although Paul did not provide any eschatological expectations in this pericope, eschatological themes are prominent in verses 12 and 13, where he discussed who will perish, who will be judged by the law and who are righteous in God's sight. In this pericope, therefore, ‘Paul is

6.Cf. Oliver (2024:5 of 6).

7.White (2009:175; original emphasis) refers to Romans 2:14–15 as ‘something of a *crux interpretum*’.

not condemning his Jewish brothers and sisters for holding on to the Law, but rather that their focus in following the Law was not Christ, and therefore incomplete’ (Hall 2010:36). This is why Paul referred to the ‘gentiles’ as an example for the Jews, to indicate to the Jews how and why they (the ‘gentiles’) have accepted Jesus. White (2009) summarises it as follows:

Paul here is relativising all distinctions between Jew and Gentile, showing that both are guilty, and neither can seek refuge in the possession (v. 13) or non-possession (v. 15) of the law. Therefore, they both need a Saviour. (p. 180)

This passage is therefore not primarily about Jesus as the only way to salvation.

The Heidelberg Catechism and Belgic Confession⁸

In the Heidelberg Catechism (1563:69–70), Question and Answer 1 state that Christians belong to Jesus Christ, who assures them of eternal life and that they live for him. Question and Answer 18 state that Jesus is the Mediator between his followers and God – he ‘makes us right with God’ (Heidelberg Catechism 1563:74). Question and Answer 20 indicate: ‘Only those are saved who through true faith are grafted into Christ and accept all his benefits’. Question and Answer 29 is maybe the most explicit, referring to Jesus as ‘Saviour’, claiming that he ‘saves us from our sins, and [that] salvation should not be sought and cannot be found in anyone else’ (Heidelberg Catechism 1563:78). Question and Answer 30 (Heidelberg Catechism 1563:79) confirm this point of view, narrating that ‘those who in true faith accept this savior have in him all they need for their salvation’. Question and Answer 67 once more affirms ‘that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross’ (Heidelberg Catechism 1563:92). These serve as confirmation that the Heidelberg Catechism regards Jesus as the only source of a Christian's salvation.

In Article 20 of the Belgic Confession (1561:44), we read: ‘[...] in order that by him we might have immortality and eternal life’, implying that Christians can (only) be saved by Jesus. Article 22 argues in the same vein: ‘For it must necessarily follow that either all that is required for our salvation is not in Christ or, if all is in him, then those who have Christ by faith have his salvation entirely’ (Belgic Confession 1561:46). In Article 26, the Belgic Confession (1561:52) quotes John 14:6, ‘What more do we need? For Christ himself declares: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”’. However, within the context of the Confession, this is not a reference to Jesus as the only way of salvation, but to Jesus as Intercessor or Mediator between humankind and God.

Single predestination and double predestination

Single predestination rests on the fact that God has determined in advance what the future state of salvation of every human would be, with specific reference to those that

8.The three Creeds of Faith (the Apostles' Creed [CRC 2023c], the Nicene Creed [CRC 2023d] and the Athanasian Creed [CRC 2023a]) each deals with this case in a way that can be understood that Jesus is the only way.

he has chosen to spend life with him in eternity (Cornell 2024:2). The Canons of Dort can be regarded as a good example of a Confession of the church, which champions God's predestination. In Article 2 of Divine Election and Reprobation, the Canons of Dort (CRC 2023b:119)⁹ refer to John 3:16, but not as a clear indication that one can only go to Heaven if they believe in Jesus. This article is more about the manifestation of God's love. Article 4 (CRC 2023b:119) can be interpreted that the 'gift of eternal life' is only received through 'Jesus the Saviour'. This is in line with Article 7, which refers to the prerequisite for someone to receive the gift of eternal life, and that is God's *election*, based on Ephesians 1:4–6 and Romans 8:30 (CRC 2023b):

Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, God chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin. Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery. God did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation. (p. 120)

Article 9 confirms this, 'Accordingly, election is the source of every saving good. Faith, holiness, and the other saving gifts, and at last eternal life itself, flow forth from election as its fruits and effects' (CRC 2023b:121). The implication of these articles is vast: It is in fact neither 'only Jesus', nor the individual's willing and active faith in Jesus as portrayed by John 3:16, but *God's election* (predestination) that determines salvation. *Article 11* concludes:

Just as God is most wise, unchangeable, all-knowing, and almighty, so the election made by him can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled; neither can God's chosen ones be cast off, nor their number reduced.^{10,11}

Under the heading Christ's Death and Human Redemption Through It, Article 5 of the Synod of Dort (CRC 2023b:127) states that 'whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life'. Article 8 mentions that those people who are called through the Gospel will come to God and will receive eternal life (CRC 2023b:131). Here, nothing is explicitly mentioned about Jesus. This is somehow contradictory to what has already been mentioned by Dort although one could argue that this context presupposes the election of God.

Whereas the first two Confessions of Faith, already discussed above, are fairly explicit about Jesus being the only way to salvation, the Canons of Dort seemingly pose an 'also Jesus' (or instrumental Jesus) view with ample emphasis on God's

9.The 'discrepancy' between the first two Confessions and the Canons of Dort requires further investigation either to align them with each other, as we have done in our Conclusion to this article or to clarify the source of their divergence.

10.The doctrine of God's election will not be discussed in this article, as it is a topic on its own about which ample articles and books have already been written (cf. MacGregor 2016).

11.The Canons of Dort add yet another element to God's election, and that is the salvation of infants of believers in Article 17 (CRC 2023b:123). It argues that the 'children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included'. However, does this mean that they have already received the 'gift of eternal life'?

elective powers 'before the foundation of the world', which he executes through Jesus as the Mediator – in this case Jesus as instrument. Jensen (2023:1) criticises this view, stating that although it is God's desire to save every person on Earth, a person still has a choice, therefore taking away the forceful note of the previous sentences.

Double predestination was championed by Luther in the 1520s (cf. Gleckman 2019:29) and is a specific kind of predestination in that God has selected both the 'elect' and the 'reprobate' 'without regard to merit (as in single predestination thinking) but also without regard to sin'. Already in the 9th century, Rabanus Marus argued that God's predestination is binding on all humans, implying that if someone is reprobated, that person can do whatever they want to do in the form of faith or good deeds, 'he would labor in vain and for naught, if he has not been predestined to life' (Gleckman 2019:31).

This form of predestination therefore indicates, just like predestination, that God has chosen some people to inherit eternal life and rejected others, by implying limited atonement – Jesus thus only died for the elected. According to Craig (1989:176), this view has its focus on God's will: If he wants to save an individual, with or without knowledge about Jesus (without even revealing Jesus to them?), then he will and can do so because he has elected them. Maybe this was not the intention of either Rabanus or Luther, but it still has the implication.

Excursus: πιστεύω

From what we have discussed up to this point, with both justification through faith and (single) predestination, Jesus is regarded as the only way to eternal life. With regard to the former (justification through faith), one first has to accept Jesus as the only way and believe [πιστεύω] in him with all of their heart. Bing (1996:25), maybe with Romans 1:16–17¹² in mind, refers to this as 'justification through faith in Jesus Christ (or salvation by grace through faith)'. The thesis *sola fide* forms part of the four (or five) *solas* of the Reformation (cf. Strawbridge 1993). However, what does the term *by faith alone* imply? Bing (1996:28) states that πιστεύω – either used with the dative, or with the prepositions εἰς, ἐπί, or ὅτι – does not denote a static position, but a dynamic one, referring to *saving faith* as indicated in verses such as John 5:24: Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ὁ τὸν λόγον μου ἀκούων καὶ πιστεύων τῷ πέμψαντί με ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον [Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life].¹³ It is therefore not good enough to mention that one is a Christian – *Christian action* is needed.

12.Οὐ γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι· δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, καθὼς γέγραπται, Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται (For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: First to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith').

13.In this verse, we see the close unity between the revelations of God, as Jesus stated here that the people must believe in *him who sent me* and not in Jesus himself. However, with John 14:1 in mind, where Jesus narrated, 'You believe in God; believe also in me', we understand that belief in '*him who sent me*' therefore also implies belief in Jesus himself.

Linked to the terms πιστεύω and πίστις are the different interpretations of salvation. *First*, one may ask, 'From what are we saved?' Certain verses refer to eternal torment, such as Matthew 13:40–42 ('blazing furnace'); 25:41 ('eternal fire'), 46 ('eternal punishment'); Mark 9:43–48 ('hell'); Jude 7 ('eternal fire') and Revelation 14:10 ('burning sulphur'). Other verses refer to annihilation, such as Matthew 7:13 ('destruction'); Acts 3:23 ('completely cut off from their people'); Hebrews 10:39 ('those who shrink back and are destroyed') and 2 Peter 3:7 ('destruction of the ungodly'). There are also verses that indicate that people will perish: Luke 13:3, 5; John 3:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:10 and 2 Peter 3:9.

The *second* question relates to who will be saved. Specific verses can be interpreted that God has the intention to save *everybody*: John 12:32 ('all people'); Romans 5:18 ('all people'), 11:32 ('them all'); 1 Corinthians 15:22 ('all [people]') and 1 Timothy 2:4, 6 ('all people'), although verses such as Matthew 7:14 and Luke 13:24 indicate that God will only save a few people. Related to this question, the Bible is not clear on whether a Christian's salvation depends on their personal free will (by grace) or whether God has predestined their salvation. In the following verses, we derive that a Christian's salvation depends on their free will (by grace): Matthew 19:16–17 and Luke 10:25–28 ('keep the commandments'); Matthew 25:34–36 (doing good deeds); Mark 10:17–21 and Luke 18:18–22 ('keep the commandments; 'go, sell everything you have and give to the poor'); John 5:28–29 ('do what is good'); John 8:51 ('obey Jesus' word'); Romans 2:5–10 ('persistence in doing good') and James 2:14–20 ('show your faith by your deeds'). However, the following verses support God's predestination: John 6:44, 64–65, 15:16; Romans 8:28–30, 9:18; Ephesians 1:4–5, 11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2 and Revelation 17:8. In the next paragraphs, the free will of the individual will be discussed in more detail.

There are at least four ways in which people expect to inherit eternal life by demonstrating their personal πίστις, as shown in Figure 1 (cf. Drange 1994). The Bible can be interpreted in two ways for each of these methods, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Person 1 has a full belief in Jesus but has not yet reached the point of a conversion to God. According to John 3:36, this person will inherit eternal life: Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. However, Luke 13:3 and 5 both state, But unless you repent, you too will all perish. In the context of John 3, the implication could well be that Nicodemus has already made a choice for Jesus, but whether he has reached the point of a conversion to God is not stated explicitly.

Person 2 is a 'passive' believer – they believe in God through Jesus with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but do not do any good deeds. According to John 3:16 and Romans 1:17, this person will inherit eternal life. However, Matthew 25:41–46 implicates that good deeds are a condition for being saved. This verse is supported by John 5:28–29; Romans 2:6 and James 2:14. If, furthermore, John 3:16 and Romans 1:17 are linked to specifically John 5:28–29 and Romans 2:6, within

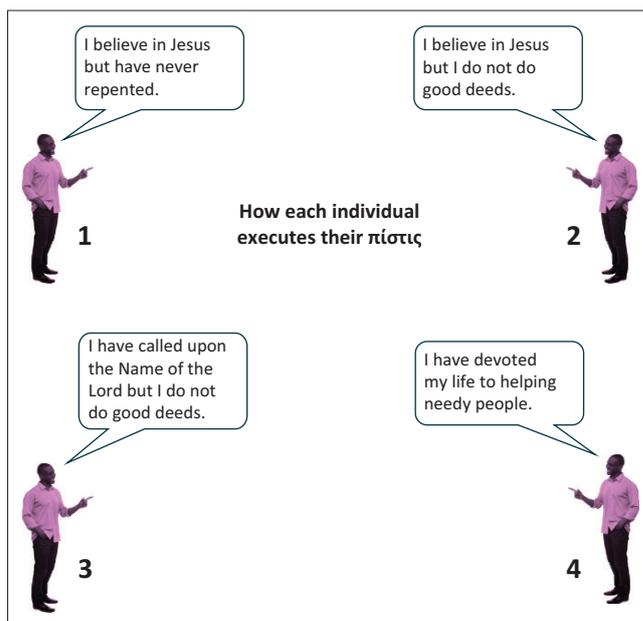


FIGURE 1: Four ways in which a person 'could inherit' eternal life.

the context of the two books, respectively, then it becomes clear that πιστεύω should be understood as an 'action' verb.

Person 3 seeks the Lord when needed and is passive (no good deeds), like person 2. If Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13 are read outside their contexts, then one could get the impression that this person will be saved. However, the New Testament clearly indicates that to believe in God is a full-time commitment (cf. e.g. Ga 6:10; Jud 20–21), not just when one needs God. It has also been indicated in the previous paragraph that πιστεύω is an 'action' verb requiring a Christian to be active in the service of God and their neighbours.

Person 4 could be regarded as a difficult case because although this person loves their neighbours with all of their heart, they are not converted at all and could even belong to another religion. People look up to them as outstanding, good people and praise them for their good deeds. According to Matthew 25:31–46 (the parable of the sheep and the goats), John 5:28–29 (Jesus' second coming[?]) and Romans 2:7, 10 (people who do good will inherit eternal life), there is a possibility that Person 4 could inherit eternal life. However, according to verses such as Mark 16:16; John 3:18, 36, 14:6; Acts 4:12 and 1 John 5:12, the first and foremost condition to inherit eternal life is to have faith in Jesus. These verses act as a disqualification for Person 4 even though they are living an exemplary life.

This concludes the first part of the article. We will now move on to the second part.

The Church 'crossing the Rubicon' from absolutism to inclusivism

According to Hick, the absolute view of Christianity has faded from the beginning of the 20th century, especially

between the two world wars (Hick 1987:17). The 'Expansion of Europe' from 1450 to 1750 gave occasion to this (Craig 1985:82–92).¹⁴ Hick (1987) alleges that the most important reason could be the explosion of knowledge that Christians had about other religions worldwide:

The immense spiritual riches of Judaism and Islam, of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, of Confucianism and Taoism and African primal religion, have become better known in the West. [The second reason is that Christianity has] sanctified exploitation and oppression on a gigantic scale, especially the colonisation of the Third World (pp. 17–18).

This led to the pronouncement of Vatican 2, which will be discussed next (Hick 1987:20). It also opened the way for Christianity to be regarded by many, within a pluralistic context and environment

as *one* of the great world faiths, *one* of the streams of religious life through which human beings can be savingly related to that ultimate Reality Christians know as the heavenly Father. (Hick 1987:20; original emphasis)

The next step was to admit that salvation is not an exclusive Christian experience, but that it happens within every religion (Hick 1987:22).

Today, many Christians worldwide reject the 'conviction [i.e. orthodox doctrine] of the New Testament writers ... that there is no salvation apart from Jesus' (Craig 1989:172). One of the main reasons is that it implies that most of the human race will then not be saved (Craig 1989:175–176), which actually were the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:14 (cf. Lk 13:24). This could be regarded as a blatant rejection of the Bible, specifically the words of Jesus in this regard.

The inclusive Christianity view

This view is also called inclusive theology. This premise is based on an interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:3b–4, where Paul stated, ' [...] God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth'. This verse is supported by a specific interpretation of John 12:32 where Jesus stated, 'And when I am lifted up from Earth, I will draw all people to myself'. In both cases, the term πάντας (ἀνθρώπους) is interpreted to refer to 'every person' on Earth (cf. the discussion of πᾶς).

Craig (1989:176) regards the notion of hell as 'incompatible with a just and loving God'. His reason is that God wants 'everybody' to repent and become his children. If someone decides to reject God's salvation, they are self-condemned. However, if someone

un, ill-, or misinformed concerning Christ, [God would graciously grant them eternal life, as his] condemnation of them is neither unloving nor unjust, since He judges them according to standards of general revelation vastly lower than those which

14.Craig (1989:174) refers to a twofold effect when people in Europe realised that Christianity was 'confined to a small corner of the globe': (1) Religious beliefs were relativised, and (2) Christianity's claim to absoluteness suddenly seemed to be narrow and cruel.

are applied to persons who have been recipients of His special revelation. (p. 176)

His supporting questions are: 'Why did God create this world when He knew that so many persons would not receive Christ and would therefore be lost?' and '[W]hy did God not create a world in which everyone freely receives Christ and so is saved?' What Craig has in mind is an ever-loving God that would just do good to everybody. Something that he does not take into account is that God has given humans a free will to decide for themselves (cf. e.g. Re 3:20). Even though Jesus has died on the cross for *everybody*, only those who accept his redeeming death and give themselves *in toto* to the Lord are saved.¹⁵

Part of the inclusive Christianity view is the anonymous Christian theory ('never mind Jesus'). This theory was introduced by the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner in the 20th century (Rahner 1965; cf. Ströbele 2019). According to this theory, all people who live a true and sincere life filled with love and goodness, following all the moral truths known to them, have a chance to enter God's kingdom – eternal life – even though they might not know God or specifically Jesus (cf. Figure 1, person 4). These people could therefore do this by means of other religions *without Jesus*. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross thus also includes these people. Rahner interprets the second part of John 3:16 (that whoever believes in him [Jesus] shall not perish but have eternal life) that people might believe in Jesus without even knowing it – they are living a good life – or without them knowing Jesus.¹⁶

The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1962–1965) is in line with this point of view as it is evident in the *Dignitatis Humanae*, written by Pope Paul 6 (1965). This is specifically explicated in *Lumen Gentium* 16 (Paul 6 1964):

Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God [...] the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims [...] professing to hold the faith of Abraham [...] Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God. Those also can attain to 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. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.

15.No human does God a favour when they repent and become his children. People tend to disregard this fact.

16.Rahner states: "Anonymous Christianity" means that a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity. A Protestant Christian is, of course, "no anonymous Christian"; that is perfectly clear. But, let us say, a Buddhist monk (or anyone else I might suppose) who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian; if not, I would have to presuppose that there is a genuine path to salvation that really attains that goal, but that simply has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. But I cannot do that. And so if I hold if everyone depends upon Jesus Christ for salvation, and if at the same time I hold that many live in the world who have not expressly recognized Jesus Christ, then there remains in my opinion nothing else but to take up this postulate of an anonymous Christianity' (Imhof & Biallowons 1986:207).

On the eve of 2024, the current Pope Francis has confirmed this pronouncement, stating that '[a]ll religions are paths to God' (Maximiano & Laput 2024).¹⁷ Hart also has the conviction that:

'all shall be saved, [arguing] that any understanding of what God accomplished in Christ that does not include the assurance of a final apokatastasis in which all things created are redeemed and joined to God is ultimately entirely incoherent and unworthy of rational truth.' (Hart 2019:66)

Artman (2020:83, original emphasis) explicates the 'primary mystery' with which the inclusive universalist grapples: 'How can God be all-good, all-knowing, and all powerful and grace *not* save all?' The two biblical examples that he uses to demonstrate that even the hardest individuals were turned towards God by God himself are Paul (Ac 9) and the Gerasene demoniac (Lk 8:40–56). The implication is that God will press a person till that person panders to God's saving efforts.

Pluralism ('never mind Jesus')

Inclusivism, which has already been discussed, mostly argues that one religion, that is, Christianity, holds the ultimate truth, although other religions may also have aspects of truth and even ways to salvation. Against this, pluralism regards all religions as equal and therefore as valid ways to truth and salvation.

Although Troeltsch's book, *The absoluteness of Christianity and the history of religions* (Troeltsch 1901), championed the idea that Christianity is absolute, unique, final, normative and ultimate (cf. Hick 1987:16), in his paper in 1923 (cf. Hick 1987:16), he still maintained that Christianity is absolute for Christians, but then added that other religions are also absolute for their adherents. In 1979, Pope John Paul 2 wrote in his encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (John Paul 2 1979) that 'man – every man without exception whatever – has been redeemed by Christ ... because with man – with each man without any exception whatever – Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it'. Hick (1987:22) comments on this: 'The Christian mind has now for the most part made the move from an intolerant exclusivism to a benevolent inclusivism'. This inclusivism goes so far, according to Hick, that it negates the Christ event as the 'sole and exclusive source of human salvation' (Hick 1987:22). With this, salvation has therefore lost its Christian label, moving on from inclusivism to pluralism. This will be commented on in the 'Conclusion'.

πᾶς: 'All without exception' vs 'All without distinction'¹⁸

While quantification in English is indicated by terms such as 'all' (universal quantification), 'each' (distributive quantification)

17. In his book, *Lies we believe about God*, Young contradicts the Second Ecumenical Council by stating, 'No, I don't believe all roads lead to God, but I do believe that God goes down any road to find us' (Young 2017:115).

18. The 'all without distinction' interpretation is ascribed to Calvin (cf. *Inst.* 3.24.16 in Calvin [1549–1556] 1998:38–40, 196; [1552a] 1856:90; [1552b] 1857:55–56; 1563:73–79). However, it seemingly originates with Augustine of Hippo in his *Epistula* 149.17 (Augustine 2003:18), *Enchiridion de Fide, Spe, et Caritate* 103 (Augustine 1887a:229–276) and *De Correptione et gratia* 14 (Augustine 1887b:467–491).

and 'every' (universal-distributive quantification), Greek mostly uses the term πᾶς¹⁹ (Miller-Naudé & Naudé 2021:1 of 9).²⁰ The discussion here is therefore about the interpretation and translation (into English) of this term as a quantifier in the New Testament (NT).

Some scholars allege that πᾶς in the NT, when referring to people, should always be translated with 'everybody' (Baggett 2018) – all without exception. Miller-Naudé and Naudé (2021) have written an article in which they discuss the syntactic patterns of πᾶς in the NT. According to them, the universal quantifier in the Greek NT is 'semantically and syntactically the more basic (or, unmarked) quantifier in contrast to the distributive quantifier (*every*)' (Miller-Naudé & Naudé 2021:2 of 9; original emphasis). In light of this assumption, they claim that '[w]hen πᾶς modifies a definite plural noun, the quantified noun phrase refers to the totality of the (specific/inclusive) group' (Miller-Naudé & Naudé 2021:7 of 9) as in Matthew 4:24: καὶ προσήνεγκαν αὐτῷ πάντας τοὺς κακῶς ἔχοντας [and they brought to him all the sick people].

Baggett (2018) refers to verses such as 1 Timothy 4:10 (Jesus is the Saviour of all people), Colossians 1:20 (Jesus has reconciled all things to himself) and 2 Corinthians 5:18 (God has reconciled us to himself through Christ) to indicate that God saves all people without distinction.²¹ 1 Timothy 2:4 ([God] wants all people to be saved); John 12:32 (And when I am lifted up from the Earth, I will draw all people to myself); Romans 5:18 (Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people); 1 Corinthians 15:22 (For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive); Romans 11:32 (For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all); Luke 3:6 (And all people will see God's salvation); John 1:29 (... the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world) and 1 John 4:14 (The Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world) could, according to him, also be added to this group.

However, in line with Calvin (cf. fn 18, read together with fn 19), many Christians argue that πᾶς in the NT, when referring to people, could be translated with 'some', which is 'all without distinction'. Already in the 17th century, Owen ([1648] 1862:344) has indicated that πᾶς, when referring to

19. Louw and Nida (1988:190) allocate the following possible meanings to πᾶς:

- a All
- b Any
- c Total
- d Whole
- e Every kind of

'All without exception' would fit in well with possible meaning a, while 'all without distinction' fits best with possible meaning b.

20. According to Miller-Naudé and Naudé (2021:1 of 9), this term occurs 1219 times in the NT.

21. These verses are interpreted correctly by him but do not confirm his point, as they do not imply that every person will be saved. Fact is that God has died on the cross through Jesus for everybody, but the second part of John 3:16 also applies, referring to humans' free will to accept God's offer to them. The important determinant is always the context of the pericope, read within the context of the chapter or book and read within the context of the NT. Baggett (2018) calls it 'the contextually determined domain'.

people, should not always be translated with the inclusive 'all'. One example given by him is Jeremiah 29:1 LXX: This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Owen ([1648] 1862:345–346) argues that $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ should or could be translated with 'many of all sorts'. He adds that $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ could only be translated with 'all' if the context determines it; in all other cases, this quantifier has a more restricted meaning. Johnston (2004:33–36) indicates that the use of $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ in the NT can either be interpreted as summative (implying the whole group referred to) or distributive (some or most of the individuals), thus 'having either a universal scope or one limited to the subject matter or to kinds.'

According to Artman (2020:78), the concept of Christian universalism ('all without exception') seemingly violates human free will (by grace). Firstly, the implication is that God *forces* everybody – even against their own will – to become his children. Secondly, it can imply that God will save everybody, no matter how they lived on Earth – good or bad. Bishop Ware (2000:214) describes these two indicated opposite sides – universal salvation and human free will (by grace) – as a 'mystery', for on the one hand God wants to save 'everybody', while on the other hand, humankind has a free will to accept or reject God's gift (cf. Artman 2020:79; Von Balthasar 1988:219). Artman therefore opts to use the term 'hopeful inclusivism' (Artman 2020:80), as 'this view stresses the full inclusion of all humanity in Christ without insisting this means all will inevitably be saved'.

The discussion that follows can be regarded as an indication that the usage of the term $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ in the NT does *not always signify full inclusivity*.²² If we take the book of Romans as an example, in at least three instances Paul seemingly used $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ without being fully inclusive, namely Romans 1:5, 5:18, and 11:26:

Romans 1:5: δι' οὗ ἐλάβομεν χάριν καὶ ἀποστολὴν εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ [Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake]. Here, Paul has all the Gentiles in mind, but he would never reach all of them.

Romans 5:18: Ἄρα οὖν ὡς δι' ἐνὸς παραπτώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς κατάκριμα, οὕτως καὶ δι' ἐνὸς δικαιώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς δικαιοσύνην ζωῆς [Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people]. God has freely availed his justification and life to everybody, but that does not mean that everybody will accept it.

Romans 11:26: καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται· καθὼς γέγραπται, Ἦξει ἐκ Σιών ὁ ῥυόμενος, ἀποστρέψει ἀσεβείας ἀπὸ

22. Added to these verses (and read together with fn 23), indicating 'all without distinction' are specific verses not explicitly being discussed or referred to in this article: Verses referring to animals and things (Gn 7:14 LXX; Lk 10:22, 11:42 and Ac 10:12); regions (Mt 3:5; 9:35) and also people (Jr 31:34 LXX; Lk 6:26, 21:17 and 1 Cor 9:22).

Ἰακώβ [and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob']. Here, Paul also has all of Israel in mind, knowing well enough that this is 'all without distinction'.

Already in 1647, Rutherford had identified quite a few verses in the NT (including the Septuagint) where $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ can be translated with 'the most part' (Rutherford 1647:422–425).²³ Rutherford also argues that when referring to redemption, $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ is not inclusive, referring to Joel 2:28, John 12:32, Acts 2:17 and Romans 11:26a (Rutherford 1647:426–427). He labels certain verses as hyperbole (Rutherford 1647:426–427):²⁴

Genesis 2:16 (LXX): And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden'.

Matthew 4:23: [...] people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases.

Acts 2:5: Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under Heaven.

Rutherford (1647:429–436) also indicates certain verses where $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ refers to certain people and not to all:25

John 1:16: Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

John 3:26: They came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan – the one you testified about – look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him'.

John 11:48: If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him.

Acts 3:25: Through your offspring all peoples on Earth will be blessed.

Verses such as John 3:16 and Romans 10:13 can be interpreted to mean that not all people will be saved, but only those who accept God's call:

John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Romans 10:13: Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved.

Then there are verses using the term $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ twice, where the term could be interpreted differently in each case:

23. These verses are: Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 41:57; Exodus 9:6 (?); 32:26 (?); Psalm 86:9; Isaiah 2:2; 40:5 (?); 60:7; Jeremiah 13:19; Haggai 2:7; Matthew 3:5; Mark 14:64 and Luke 17:27. The verses with a question mark between brackets indicate that we do not necessarily agree with them.

24. He added Genesis 24:10 and Luke 11:42, which could be regarded as dubious cases.

25. He has also added Exodus 28:14; Romans 5:18; 1 Corinthians 15:22 and Revelation 13:8, with which we do not agree.

Romans 3:23-24: πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ,²⁴ [πάντες] δικαιούμενοι δωρεὰν τῆ αὐτοῦ χάριτι διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ [for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus].

Corinthians 15:22: ὡσπερ γὰρ ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ πάντες ἀποθνήσκουσιν, οὕτως καὶ ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ πάντες ζωοποιηθήσονται [For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive].

Corinthians 15:51: ἰδοὺ μυστήριον ὑμῖν λέγω· πάντες οὐ κοιμηθήσόμεθα, πάντες δὲ ἀλλαγθήσόμεθα [Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed].

Corinthians 2:3b: πεποιθῶς ἐπὶ πάντας ὑμᾶς ὅτι ἡ ἐμὴ χαρὰ πάντων ὑμῶν ἐστίν [I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy].

Thus it could be concluded that the term *πᾶς* is not always inclusive.

Concluding remarks

We are Christians and therefore we argue with a Christian bias. However, as discussed in this article, it is not clear what the Christian's belief about salvation should be. Which part does Jesus have in our salvation (research question)? Is he the only one through whom we can inherit eternity (exclusive Christianity view), does he only play an instrumental part in or salvation (single [and double] predestination) or was his job just to come to Earth and die on the cross so that everybody would be saved, even if they do not know (about) him (never mind Jesus)?

The discussions in this article were mostly done from a 'neutral' perspective, putting all the perspectives on the table for the reader to decide. However, when we as Christians take the Bible seriously and let the Bible speak, instead of prescribing the Bible what it should say, it looks as if the Bible balances on two viewpoints: Humankind's free will (by grace) and God's (single) predestination. Why free will *by grace*? This means that when one becomes a Christian, this person cedes their will to what God wants them to do, and that every person is saved only by God's grace (cf. Rm 3:24; Eph 2:5, 8).

Predestination could also be interpreted from another point of view that we must take into account. God is omniscient, implying that he knows *everything* about the past, the present and *also the future*. To know everything that happens in the future is too big for our minds to comprehend, but not for God. God, therefore, knows when each person will be born and which decisions that individual will make with their free will while being on Earth. We could therefore derive that God's predestination, although before the foundation of the Earth, was based on how a person would live many years later. God's predestination is therefore not something forced upon a person but based on a person's life out of their free will.

Having discussed this existential issue depicted in the title of this article, we as humans must admit that we know almost nothing about God, about his intentions with humankind and about his thoughts. In Isaiah 55:8-9, we read God's words: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways [...] As the Heavens are higher than the Earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Our theories and thoughts are therefore only postulations about God and 'the free good pleasure of his will' (CRC 2023b:120). We only have the Bible to rely on, and each of us has different assumptions from what we read, as is clear in this article. We can therefore not speak on God's behalf when it comes to salvation. We can only state what (we think) the Bible prompts us to say.

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