

CHRISTIANITY IN A RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE WORLD

Session 5

Restrictivism and Narrow Accessibilism

Outline

Restrictivism

- I. Definition: Only those who put their faith in Christ explicitly can receive salvation.
- II. Biblical Support for Restrictivism
 - A. Man is hopeless without the gospel (Romans 1:21, Romans 3:9-11)
 - B. Christ is central to salvation (Acts 4:12; John 1:12; 1 John 5:11-12; 1 Corinthians 3:11; John 14:6; John 17:3)
 - C. Receiving Christ's salvation requires explicitly accepting Him as savior. (John 3:36; 1 John 2:23; Romans 10:9-10; John 3:16, 18)
 - D. The only way to know about Christ is by hearing and receiving the gospel (Romans 10:14-17)
 - E. Peter's retelling of Cornelius' conversion shows Restrictivism in action (Acts 11:13-14)
 - F. Conclusion: the Bible teaches that explicit belief in Christ is required and that this comes primarily through receiving the gospel.
- III. Theological Arguments for Restrictivism
 - A. The content of saving faith must include knowledge of Christ.
 - B. General Revelation is insufficient; it does not show how God can save.
 - C. Restrictivism provides the best basis for the strong emphasis on missions we see in the New Testament.
- IV. Responses to Restrictivism's Arguments
 - A. Restrictivism's central claim is that receiving Christ's salvation requires explicitly accepting Him as savior.
 - B. Biblical passages cited in support of Restrictivism are speaking of accepting or rejecting the gospel. That choice is not available to the unevangelized.
 - C. Old Testament saints exercised saving faith without explicit knowledge of Christ. They had faith in the God they knew and what He was doing.
 - D. There's insufficient reason to think that knowledge of how God saves is necessary for salvation. But even if General Revelation could be faulted for this, it does not follow that Restrictivism is true.
 - E. The belief that the unevangelized can possibly receive salvation is sufficient for a strong motivation for missions when coupled with the belief that few, if any, actually receive salvation without hearing the gospel.
- V. Arguments Against Restrictivism

- A. The salvation of Old Testament saints falsifies Restrictivism. Why think their mode of salvation is no longer available?
 - B. The unevangelized are in a pre-Christianity state like Old Testament saints were.
 - C. Restrictivism suggests God does not in fact love all people and want all to be saved.
- VI. Conclusion: Restrictivism is the most plausible view examined so far, but is not the best view available.

Narrow Accessibilism

- I. Definition: the unevangelized can access salvation (**Accessibilism**), but few, or perhaps none, actually do receive it (**Narrow**).
 - A. Restrictivism has been rejected.
 - B. God is sovereign and may show mercy on whomever He wishes, even the unevangelized (Matthew 20:15; Romans 9:15).
 - C. God loves all people and wants to save them.
 - D. Narrow Accessibilism was true in the Old Testament.
 - E. The gospel is enormously more effective (Romans 1:16)
- II. Suggested mechanism of access: faith in the God revealed through General Revelation
 - A. The Bible is silent on how the unevangelized can be saved.
 - B. General Revelation is suggested as a possible avenue to access salvation.
- III. Clarifications
 - A. The New Testament focuses on the gospel, not on whether the unevangelized can be saved. This speaks to the lack of examples of the unevangelized being saved and to the relative effectiveness of the gospel.
 - B. The idea that the unevangelized may receive salvation based on their response to General Revelation is a suggestion made by Christian thinkers, not a doctrine taught in Scripture.
 - C. Christ's sacrifice pays for salvation. Salvation is accessed through saving faith. General Revelation provides the propositional content and attitude of saving faith.
 - D. Christ is the God of General Revelation.
- IV. Responses to Biblical Concerns
 - A. Even if Old Testament saints "looked forward to Christ" there were saved by their faith in God as they knew Him.
 - B. Old Testament saints may have received special revelation prior to being saved, but this is speculation.
 - C. The lack of New Testament examples of the unevangelized being saved can be explained by the New Testament's strong focus on the gospel due to its relative effectiveness in bringing people to salvation.

- D. While no nations or people groups seek God collectively (Romans 1-3), individuals do, whether they know about the gospel or not (e.g., Acts 10).
- E. 1 Peter 3 is ambiguous and does not provide a basis for salvation of Old Testament saints.
- V. Responses to Theological Concerns
 - A. Due to the **Narrow** component of Narrow Accessibilism, our impetus for missions is not undermined by this view.
 - B. Knowledge of how God saves is not necessary for salvation, so General Revelation cannot be said to only condemn.
 - C. The noetic effects of sin need to hinder the Accessibilism. God may regenerate a person's heart and mind so that they may be able to respond to General Revelation.
- VI. Conclusion: The New Testament does not commit us to Restrictivism, the unevangelized can access salvation (some clearly did in the Old Testament), but if any actually do, they are very few. There is access to salvation for the unevangelized, but little hope.

Further Reading:

- **An exposition and defense of Restrictivism:** "Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World" see article by R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips.
- **A journal article including an analysis of Romans 10:14-17 against Restrictivism:** "Those Who Have Never Heard Have They No Hope" by Evert D. Osburn.
- **A summary of Restrictivism, including arguments for and against:** "No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized" by John Sanders (pages 37-80).
- **A critique of different theologies of salvation and how they relate to the unevangelized and missiology:** "A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal" by Gerald R. McDermott and Harold A. Netland.