

GOSPEL, SALVATION AND OTHER RELIGIONS

Dr. Todd Miles



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Gospel, Salvation and Other Religions

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Session 1: Introduction to a Christian Theology of Religions

I. Introduction

II. Course Outline

A. Exclusivity of Christ – Explicit Biblical Teaching

Exclusivism is the conviction that none are saved apart from the work of Christ and one must repent and believe the gospel to be saved.

B. Exclusivity of Christ – Christ as the Center of Scripture

C. The Bible and Religions – Are There Many Gods?

D. The Bible and Religions – Jesus, the Apostles, and Religious Others

E. Universalism

Universalism is the belief that all will eventually be “saved.”

F. Pluralism

Pluralism is the belief that there are many roads to “God,” but not all will be “saved.”

G. Inclusivism
Inclusivism is the belief that none are saved apart from the work of Christ, but one does not necessarily have to hear or believe the gospel to be saved.

H. The Holy Spirit and the Glorification of the Son

I. Practical Questions and a Call to Proclamation

III. What is a Christian Theology of Religions?

A. A theology of religions seeks, in a coherent and consistent manner, to answer questions concerning the relationships among world religions, special revelation, general revelation, and salvation.

B. The Church needs a theology of religions that is at once Christ-honoring, biblically faithful, intellectually satisfying, compassionate, and that will encourage Spirit-empowered mission.

C. A Christian theology of religions addresses the reality and significance of religious others from a distinctly Christian perspective.

IV. What is it to be “Christian?”

A. Christians were those who believed the claims of Jesus and submitted to His lordship (Acts 11:26; 2:32-36).

B. Jesus comes in a context – the context of “Redemptive History” recorded in and guided by the Bible (Gen 12:1-3; 48:9-10; 2 Sam 7:12-13; Isa 9:6-7; 11:1-5; Jer 23:5; Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Zech 12:10; Luke 24:25-27,44-47; Matt 5:17-18; Rom 10:4).

C. Where I am coming from: I hold to . . .

1. worship of the one God who fully exists simultaneously and without division or confusion in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit;
2. the authority of Scripture that is grounded in its inspiration by the Holy Spirit;
3. the supremacy and centrality of Jesus Christ, demonstrated in his life, substitutionary death, resurrection, and ascension, as the hinge upon which all redemptive and human history turns;
4. the necessity of personal conversion and regeneration to enter the Kingdom of God;
5. the lordship and guidance of the Holy Spirit;
6. the fellowship of the local church for worship, witness, and service;
7. the exercise of personal piety through spiritual disciplines; and
8. the priority of evangelism and mission manifest in the Spirit-empowered proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

V. What is the Gospel?

A. 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 (cf. Rom 5:25; 8:5; 1 Cor 15:11; John 3:16)

B. Acts 2

C. The gospel is to be proclaimed

The following is a list of occurrences where the gospel is tied to proclamation and preaching: Matt 4:23; 9:35; 11:5; 24:14; 26:13; Mark 1:14-15; 13:10; Luke 3:18; 4:18; 7:22; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1; Acts 8:25; 14:7,15; 16:10; Rom 1:15-16; 15:19-20; 1 Cor 1:17; 9:14,16; 15:1-2; 2 Cor 10:16; 11:4,7; Gal 1:11; 2:2; 3:8; 4:13; Col 1:23; 1 Thess 2:2; 1 Pet 1:12; 4:6; Rev 14:6.

D. The Church is a proclaiming entity – We exist by the gospel and for the proclamation of the gospel

Session 2: Exclusivity of Christ – Explicit Biblical Teaching

I. Introduction: Salvation Is of the Lord

Acts 16:30-31; Rom 1:16; 10:8b-9

II. What is Christian Salvation?

A. The concept of salvation in the Bible is diverse

1. In Scripture, salvation is “a comprehensive term denoting all the benefits, physical or spiritual, that are graciously bestowed on humans by God.”¹
2. See, for example, Ps 34:6; Matt 8:25; Mark 5:34; Acts 7:25.

B. Scripture also speaks of salvation in a more particular way.

1. It is God’s work of rescuing His fallen and rebellious people (e.g., Rom 5:9-10; 1 Cor 1:18; Eph 2:5; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 3:5).
2. The Bible speaks of salvation as a past deliverance (Rom 8:24; Titus 3:5-8), as a present deliverance (2 Cor 2:15; 1 Pet 1:9; Heb 7:25), and as a future deliverance (1 Thess 5:8; Heb 1:14; 1 John 3:2).
3. Only God saves (Isa 43:11; cf. Isa 45:21; Hos 13:4).
4. Jesus is described as the Savior (John 4:42; Acts 5:31; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet 1:11).

¹ M. J. Harris, “Salvation,” *NDBT*, 762.

III. The Case for the Necessity of Conscious Faith in Christ for Salvation

A. The Biblical Logic Behind Exclusivity

1. There is one God who created everything and everybody.
2. We cannot know this God apart from revelation.
3. We have rebelled against God and are justly condemned.
4. Humans are not neutral toward God.
5. Humans suppress the revelation of God in unrighteousness.
6. God establishes the path to reconciliation.
7. Jesus is the non-negotiable, essential, and necessary focus of this plan.
8. Not many take the path to salvation.

B. Explicit biblical statements that support exclusivity

1. Statements from John (1:12; 3:16; 3:18; 5:24; 6:40; 8:12; 10:10; 11:25; 17:3; 20:31)

2. Great Commission and Apostolic Response (Luke 24:47; Matt 28:18-20; 2 Cor 15:1-4; Acts 2:21; 2:38; 3:19-20; 13:38; 16:30-31; 22:16; 26:17-23)
3. Acts 4:12
4. Acts 13:16-48
5. Acts 9-10
6. Acts 15
7. Acts 19:1-7
8. Rom 10:9-18
9. Other NT Teaching (1 Cor 15:1-4; 2 Cor 4:3-4; Gal 1:6-10; 3:2; Eph 2:1, 8-9; 3:13; Heb 1:1-4; 2:1-4; 4:2; 10:19-22; 11:6; 12:2; 1 Pet 1:22-25; 1 John 4:6)

Session 3: Exclusivity of Christ as the Center of Scripture

I. The Christocentric Nature of Scripture

A. How are we supposed to read the Bible?

1. Expect that passages have only one meaning.
2. Recognize that though a passage can have many interpretations, only one can be right.
3. Inclusivists, exclusivists, pluralists and universalists will all try to use the Scriptures as proof texts.

B. Christ and the Interpretation of Scripture

1. Luke 24:1-35
2. Luke 24:36-49
3. Acts 2:14-41; 26:22-23

C. The Old Testament and the New Testament

1. John 5:39-40
2. Matt 12:1-8,39-42

II. A Short Proposal for Theological Method

A. The Full Authority and Uniqueness of the Bible

B. A Biblical Theology that Is Canonical

C. A Christocentric Theology

Session 4: The Old Testament and Religions

I. Creation and Fall – Genesis 1-3

- A. Creator-Creature Distinction (Gen 1)
- B. Man Created in the Image-Bearer – *imago Dei* (Gen 1:27)
- C. The Fall and the Promise (Gen 3; cf. Rev 12:9)

II. Religions in Genesis 4–50

A. Language

1. Call on the name of the Lord (Gen 4:26)
2. Walk before . . . (Gen 17:1)
3. Fear the Lord . . . (Exod 14:31; Gen 20:11; Deut 1:29-32)

B. Genesis 4–11

C. Genesis 12–50

1. Move from inclusiveness to exclusiveness - the plan narrows to Abraham
2. The strange case of Melchizedek (Gen 14)

III. Old Testament Monotheism

- A. Deut 4:32-35**

- B. Monotheism is the belief that only one god exists, while henotheism is the commitment to worship only one god regardless of whether that deity is the only one in existence.**

- C. The uniqueness of God: Who is like the Lord?**
Deut 4:34; Ps 71:19; 89:8; Jer 49:19; Mic 7:18

- D. The incomparability of the Lord**
Lev 18:27-28; Deut 32:36-39; Isa 46:1-2, 9-10

Session 5: Are There Many Gods?

I. Do Other Gods Exist?

A. Only the Lord Is God

Deut 4:32-39; 1 Kgs 8:60; 2 Kgs 5:15

B. Other Gods Do Exist

Gen 35:2; Exod 15:11

C. Summary

Even though these so-called gods are nothing in comparison to the Lord, they are something in the hearts and minds of those who worship them (Zeph 2:11)

D. Worship of other gods and the worship of demons

1. There are few references in the OT to demons
2. The Lord is sovereign over all aspects of life (Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6-8; Isa 45:5-7)
3. There are some texts that connect the worship of gods with the worship of demons (Lev 17:7; Deut 32:16-21)

II. Idolatry in the Old Testament

- A. Idolatry can refer to either the worship of images and things, the worship of foreign gods, or the worship of the one true God in a manner not prescribed by Him.**

Exod 20:4-6; Lev 19:4; 26:1; Deut 4:25-26; 5:8

- B. Idols and Demons**

Deut 32:16-21; Ps 106:37-38

- C. Idols Are the Work of Human Hands**

1 Kgs 18:20-29; 2 Kgs 19:15-19; Isaiah 41:21-23

- D. Idolatry Evokes the Lord's Jealousy**

Exod 34:14; Deut 4:15-16; 32:37-39; Ps 97:7-9; Isa 40:18-20; 42:8; Jer 2:11

- E. Idolatry is Failing to Worship the Lord According to His Commands**

Gen 4:5; Exod 25:31; Lev 10; 1 Sam 13:8-14; 2 Sam 6:6-7; 2 Chr 26:16-23

Session 6: The New Testament and Religions Sensitive Confrontation and Gospel Proclamation

I. Jesus and Religious Others

A. Matt 8; Mark 7; John 4

B. Did Jesus learn from religious others?

II. New Testament Monotheism

A. 1 Cor 8

B. Supremacy of Jesus

C. The New Testament and other gods

D. Idolatry in the New Testament

1. Rom 1

2. Apostolic confrontation with idolatry
Acts 14, 17, 19

III. The Apostles and Religious Others

A. The state of religious others

Eph 2:1-3, 12; 1 Thess 1:9; 2 Cor 4:1-4; Rom 1:18-19, 21; 2:14

B. Respectful confrontation

1. Paul and Barnabas at Lystra (Acts 14)
2. Paul at Athens (Acts 17)
 - a. Paul surveys the city
 - (1) Epicureanism
 - (2) Stoicism
 - b. Reaction to the gospel
 - c. Paul at the Aeropagus - Simultaneously courteous and bold
 - (1) God is the Creator of All
 - (2) God is utterly independent and self-sufficient
 - (3) God is sovereign
 - (4) God is self-disclosing
 - (5) A call to repentance
 - (a) God overlooked ignorance in the past
 - (b) Now people everywhere are commanded to repent
 - (c) The call to repentance is urgent because a day of judgment is coming
 - (d) God has validated Jesus as judge by raising Him from the dead.
 - (6) What are the times of ignorance?
 - (7) The importance of the resurrection

Session 7: Universalism – All Will Be Saved

I. Introduction

A. Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

B. Some Data from 2008

59 percent of Americans surveyed believe that hell awaits the evil person, down from 71% belief in the existence of hell found in a 2001 Gallop survey.

II. History and Description

A. Central Tenets

1. The universal fatherhood of God,
2. The spiritual authority and leadership of His Son Jesus Christ,
3. The trustworthiness of the Bible as containing a revelation from God,
4. The certainty of just retribution for sin,
5. The final harmony of all souls with God.

B. Proponents

John A. T. Robinson, George MacDonald, Madeleine L'Engle, Paul Young

III. Christian Universalist Arguments

A. Common Theological Arguments for Universal Restoration

1. The Sovereign Love of God
2. The Omnipotence, Patience, and Eternality of God
3. The Nature and Experience of Heaven and Hell

B. Commonly-Used Biblical Proof Texts for Universal Restoration

1. Cosmic Restoration Texts
Colossians 1:19-20. See also Acts 3:21, 1 Cor 15:22-29, Phil 2:6-11.
2. Universal Salvific Desire Texts
Romans 11:32; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9.
3. Unlimited Extent of the Atonement Texts
John 12:32. See also Hebrews 2:9; 1 John 2:2.
4. Results of the Atonement Texts
Rom 5:12-21; 2 Cor 5:19. See also 1 Tim 4:10 and Titus 2:11.

IV. Response

A. Analysis of Christian Universalist Exegetical Arguments

1. Universal Restoration Texts
2. Divine Desire for Universal Salvation Texts
3. Universal Atonement Texts
4. Universal Results of the Atonement Texts

B. Analysis of Universalist Theological Pre-commitments

1. The Sovereign Love of God
 - a. Complexity of God's Love
 - (1) The unique intra-Trinitarian love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father (John 3:35; 5:20).
 - (2) God is the providential Lover over all His creation (Matt 10:29).
 - (3) God has a loving salvific stance toward the fallen world (Ezek 33:11; John 3:16).
 - (4) God has a particular, effective, selecting love toward His elect people (Deut 7:7-8; 10:14-15; Isa 43:1-5; Mal 1:2-3; Eph 1:4-5; 5:25; 1 John 4:8-10).
 - (5) God has a provisional love that is conditioned on the obedience of His chosen people (Exod 20:6; Ps 103:9-11; John 15:9-10; Jude 21).
 - b. Should we emphasize one attribute over another?

2. The Omnipotence, Patience, and Eternality of God
 - a. Is it not possible for God genuinely to value many possible states of affairs that are not compatible with His particular plan for the cosmos and humanity?
 - b. Why can the Lord not omnipotently exercise His sovereignty by sending some to hell?
 - c. The Lord is patient, far more so than any human, but the patience of the Lord does run out. It is not limitless.
3. The Nature and Experience of Heaven and Hell

Session 8: Pluralism – Many Paths to God

I. Pluralism Introduced and Defined

II. Pluralist Arguments

A. Arguments of Reduction

1. The Transcendence of God Leading to Different, Often Divergent, Human Conceptions of Him
2. The World Religions as Different Receptions of and Reactions to the Same Ineffable God
3. Salvation Redefined
4. Little ethical difference in the participants of various religions

B. Arguments of Obfuscation

1. Pluralists and the Authority of the Bible
2. Pluralists and the deity of Christ

III. Response to Pluralism

- A. Addressing Reductionism: Affirming the Uniqueness and Personhood of God**

- B. Addressing Obfuscation: Affirming the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ**

- C. God: a Particular Being**

IV. The Christian Response

Session 9: Inclusivism – Saved by Christ Apart from Belief in the Gospel

I. Introduction

- A. **Key Proponents: Amos Yong, Clark Pinnock, others**

- B. **Cyprian: “For they cannot live out of it, since the house of God is one, and there can be no salvation to any except in the Church.”***Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“no salvation outside the church”)

II. Arguments for Inclusivism

- A. **Optimism of Salvation for the World**
 - 1. Two Impulses
 - a. God must love all people equally
 - b. The grace of God cannot be limited to the confines of the Church
 - 2. Response
Matt 7:13-14; cf. Luke 13:23-24

- B. **Uniqueness of Jesus Christ**
 - 1. Salvation by no other name than Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus are absolutely necessary for you to be saved (ontological necessity)

2. You do not have to believe in him to be saved by him (no epistemological necessity)

3. Response – Cornelius in Acts 10-11

C. Pagan Believers and Salvation History

1. Job, Melchizedek, Daniel (not the one in the Lion's den), Cornelius, Roman Centurion, etc.

2. Response:

D. Practical

Is the exclusivity of Christ a valid motivation to mission?

III. Pneumatological Inclusivism

A. The Spirit as Creator

Gen 1; 2:7; Job 33:4; 34:14-15; Ps 33:6; Acts 17:25

B. Christ and the Holy Spirit

Let us see what results from viewing Christ as an aspect of the Spirit's mission, instead of (as is more usual) viewing Spirit as a function of Christ's.

C. The Salvific Work of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit and World Religions

1. Acts 2 - The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh

2. Discernment of the Holy Spirit in Religious Others

3. The Need for Dialogue

Session 10: The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

I. Introduction – John 16:14

II. Creation

A. Genesis 1:2

B. Job 33:4; cf Ps 104:30; Isa 40:12-14.

III. Special Empowerment

A. Introduction

In the OT, there are 60 references to approximately 100 individuals that are separated into four groups.

B. Four groups

1. Craftsmen

Exod 31:2-3; cf Heb 9:23-26

2. Judges

Judges 3:10; 6:34; 14-15

3. Civic Leaders

a. Moses (Num 11:17-29), Joshua (Num 27:18; Deut 34:9), Saul (1 Sam 11:6; 16:14), and David (1 Sam 16:13; Ps 51:11).

b. Numbers 11; cf Joel 2:28-29

4. Prophets
 - a. The Spirit came upon the prophets (Jer 20:7-9)
 - b. Anticipation of the Spirit's work in the Age to Come
There are roughly 100 passages in the OT that speak of the actions of the Holy Spirit. Approximately 40 are prophecies of what the Spirit will one day do in the age to come.
 - c. The Spirit Poured Out
 - (1) Isa 32:15
 - (2) Isa 44:1-5
 - (3) Ezek 36:25-27 – Moses' wish fulfilled
 - (4) Joel 2:28-29
 - d. The Spirit-filled Messiah
Isa 11:1-5; cf. Isa 11:1-10; 28:5; 42:1; 48:16; 59:21; 61:1
 - e. Summary

Session 11: The Holy Spirit in the New Testament

I. Incarnation

A. The Conception of Jesus

1. Matt 1:18
2. Luke 1:35
3. Luke 2:40-47

B. Baptism

Luke 3

C. Temptation

Luke 4

D. Ministry

1. Luke 4
2. Matt 12 – tied to Isa 42:1-3.
3. Acts 10:38

E. Death and Resurrection

1. Heb 9:14
2. 1 Pet 3:18
3. Rom 8:11

F. Summary

II. Son and Spirit – Church Age

A. Introduction

B. Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit

1. The Paraclete – John 14:15-17,26; 15:26; 16:7-15
2. The nature of the Paraclete
3. The Holy Spirit and revelation
4. The ministry of the Holy Spirit
John 15:26-16:15
5. The Holy Spirit glorifies the Son
1 John 4:1-6; Rom 10:13-17; 1 Cor 12:3

C. The Present work of the Holy Spirit

1. Promise fulfilled at Pentecost
2. Inspiration
3. Proclamation of the gospel—Rom 15:19; 1 Thess 1:5; 1 Pet 1:12
4. Presence in the believer
 - a. Sanctification, washing, and regeneration--1 Cor 6:11
 - b. Confession of Jesus as Lord—1 Cor 12:3
 - c. Freedom in the Spirit—Rom 8:2,14-15; cf Rom 15:16; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 John 3:2.

5. The proleptic work of the Holy Spirit
 - a. Firstfruits – Rom 8:19-25; 1 Cor 15:20
 - b. Seal and Guarantee – Eph 1:12-14; 2 Cor 1:22; 2 Cor 5:5 Acts 10:45-47; Eph 1:13; 4:30

III. Conclusion

Session 12: Critical Questions

I. Is general revelation sufficient for salvation?

A. General Revelation is . . .

B. Special Revelation is . . .

C. In summary, general revelation and special revelation were never meant to be separated. Even before sin entered the world, humanity was dependent upon God's special revelation to interpret rightly God's general revelation. This need was made more acute with the fall of humanity in Genesis 3. The fall also introduced the need for God's redemptive action in the world and God's announcement of those redemptive acts. General revelation, which has always been dependent upon special revelation for right understanding, cannot carry the good news of Christ's salvific work. The absence of special revelation that interprets general revelation and announces redemption through Christ is evidence of God's just judgment on sinful humanity. (Miles, 333-34)

II. Does special revelation require a human messenger?

God is not limited by human capacity. In God's wisdom, He has chosen to use human messengers, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in the task of bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have not heard. Even when God employs other supernatural means, such as dreams or visions, he usually uses humans to proclaim the gospel.

III. Is there truth in other religions?

A. Given the powerful voice of God in general revelation and the passing down of special revelation from times past, we should not be surprised to find truth in the sacred texts and practices of other religions. The critical issue is whether the gospel of Jesus Christ is understood.

B. When referencing the sacred text of another religion ...

1. Use of those texts should be limited to evangelistic outreach to people already familiar with those texts.
2. Use of non-Christian texts should be limited to corroborate Christian truth, not serve as an independent source.
3. Lift the non-biblical text out of its setting and reorient it within the Christian setting.

IV. Is there salvation in other religions?

Religion of any kind does not save—including Christianity. Only Jesus Christ saves. Salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus. Period.

V. Is interreligious dialogue beneficial?

A. Christians must engage in dialogue with people of other faiths.

B. Christians engaged in dialogue must be listeners.

C. **Christians must not abandon their Christian convictions for the sake of “authentic dialogue.”**

D. **The goal of interreligious dialogue must be the conversion of the conversation partner to Christ.**

VI. Is interreligious social cooperation legitimate?

If the precondition to social cooperation is the restriction of identification with Christ and gospel proclamation, then it is not legitimate.

VII. A Call for Identification With Christ and Proclamation of the Gospel

Reflection Questions

1. A member of your extended family at dinner just told you that he was not concerned about his eternal future. After all, he had his own faith and was confident that though you and he were traveling on different paths, you would both end up at the same destination. What is the one thing you would want him to know to encourage him to rethink his position and how would you approach the topic? What do you think your likelihood of success would be?
2. If you were to consider the various philosophies – universalism, pluralism, inclusivism, or exclusivism – as if you were once again a non-believer, which do you think you would personally find most attractive? Why? Depending on your choice, how willing do you think you would be to have the Bible speak directly to your belief?
3. What is the spiritual climate of your community? Do you think the church, the representative of Christ in your community, is “winning” the philosophical argument?