"Evangelical Inclusivism" and the Exclusivity of the Gospel: A Review of John Sanders's *No Other Name*

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Introduction

Pluralism advances by utilizing multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusivism. Of course, the pluralism in mind here is not the *fact* that there exists a *plurality* of race, value systems, heritage, language, culture, and religious belief systems.[1] Rather, the pluralism under consideration is itself a belief system that both cherishes and celebrates plurality[2] and also refuses to tolerate any ideology or religious creed that asserts itself to be exclusively right and true and that other creeds are false or inferior.[3] Cultural and social pluralism's dogma of multiculturalism has been described as a Trojan horse in America.[4] Likewise, religious pluralism has invaded the church to subvert the gospel of Christ, the very foundation upon which the church is built.

The ideology of pluralism that spawns social and cultural inclusivism also gives birth to religious inclusivism that wages war against Christianity's affirmation that believing in Jesus Christ is the exclusive means of eternal salvation. Ironically, those who see themselves as the evangelical guardians against "the modern flow toward pluralism"[5] are the very ones who advance the cause of pluralism and inclusivism from within the camp of evangelicalism. As with social and cultural pluralists, these patrons of religious pluralism conceive of people as corporate groups and they elevate themselves morally above the benighted traditional and exclusivist Christians who allegedly believe in a God who "does little in the way of seeking the redemption of the great majority of human beings" but adopt the cold "idea that all the unevangelized are indiscriminately damned."[6] Take note how Clark Pinnock indulges in the pluralism's "new virtue" to express his dislike of evangelicalism's emphasis upon individual salvation as he advances his "outcomes-based" sense of fairness.

> It is instinctive for us to think immediately of the eternal destiny of individual persons, while the Bible prefers to address large issues of justice and restitution, focusing much less on the judgment of solitary individuals. . . . This corporate emphasis contrasts rather sharply with the popular evangelical view of judgment which focuses on the much narrower issue of verbal assent to the gospel—or the decision for Christ. In particular, it contradicts an implication of the thinking that the unevangelized, most of whom have endured oppression and misery, in this earthly life, will go on suffering in hell forever because they did not believe in Jesus, even though this is something they could not have done. The implication of popular eschatology is that the downtrodden of this world, unable to call upon Jesus through no fault of their own, are to be rejected for eternity, giving the final victory to the tyrants who trampled them down. Knowing little but suffering in this life, the unevangelized poor will know nothing but more and worse suffering in the next.[7]

Professing to defend the God who has "great love for all humanity,"[8] the inclusivists criticize those who hold to the "popular eschatology," concluding that such a belief blames the victims for their plight. They reject the God of the "popular eschatology" who condemns all who have not obeyed the gospel. To these "evangelical pluralists," a God who does not make salvation accessible to everyone without exception is harsh and unloving; such a God lacks the "new virtue." Even worse, the inclusivists introduce pluralism's dogma of "victimization" as they corrupt the biblical verdict of eternal condemnation upon God-hating rebels.[9] To be sure, these pluralists give lip service to humanity's guilt, but unless everyone has equal access to God's salvation in Christ Jesus, God is spiteful and unloving to condemn them. These "evangelical pluralists" shudder at Christian exclusivists who allegedly represent "God as a cruel and arbitrary deity."[10]

The viewpoints of these "evangelical pluralists" (or to use their own terminology, "inclusivists") need to be critically examined, because they are calling for a radical departure from beliefs that for centuries Christians have held to be biblical. If they are correct, the message we have been believing and preaching has been seriously flawed. If they are incorrect, however, they are teetering upon a dangerous precipice from which we must call them to retreat. Sanders's book, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, particularly beckons critique, for four reasons: (1) it was one of the first recent representatives of the inclusivists in evangelicalism, thus it gave rise to considerable discussion; (2) it is large, thus it has the appearance of scholarship and precision; (3) Sanders continues to teach at an evangelical institution where he freely propagates his view;[11] and (4) Sanders continues to publish his inclusivist viewpoint.[12] The remainder of this paper, therefore, consists of a review and critique of John Sanders's *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*.[13]

A Critical Analysis

Sanders's book is a major expansion upon the theme of his earlier essay, "Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?"[14] Like a growing number of evangelicals, Sanders is concerned to find a "viable third" option to "the two extremes commonly thought to be the only options on the theological market" (4) concerning the destiny of the unevangelized. Neither restrictivism nor universalism are tolerable to Sanders, for, as he sees it, the former claims "that there is absolutely no hope for the unevangelized" and the latter tends toward pluralism (4). These "two ends of the spectrum" (131) serve as a foil and motivation for Sanders. He attempts to position himself between the "two extremes" by adopting inclusivism (215).[15]

Sanders divides his book into three parts. Part one consists of the first chapter, in which the author formulates the issue under question. Here he addresses the legitimacy of the question and its growing popularity in evangelicalism. Part Two consists of two chapters. Each one addresses what Sanders calls "two extremes"—restrictivism and universalism.[16] Part Three includes four chapters in which the author considers a variety of views ranging "between these two ends of the spectrum" (131). Having found restrictivism and universalism "incompatible with the key premises of God's universal salvific will and the finality of Jesus" (131), he defends "wider-hope theories"

(136). He surveys three "wider-hope" views and favors the third. First, somehow God makes sure that the unevangelized have an opportunity to be saved before they die whether by means of human agents who bring the gospel to honest God-seekers, by an encounter with Christ at the moment of death, or by God's judging them on "the basis of how they would have responded had they heard the gospel" (so-called "middle knowledge," 151). Second, the unevangelized will have an opportunity after death "to hear about Christ and to accept or reject him" (177). Third, "appropriation of salvific grace is mediated through general revelation and God's providential workings in human history" (215).

Concerning the rightness of addressing the question of the destiny of the unevangelized, Sanders rejects advice not to seek a definitive answer to a question that the Bible does not specifically address. Instead, Sanders chooses to "speculate" (his term) about the question, because he is convinced that "If we did not speculate about subjects not directly revealed in the Bible we would have very little theology; we would have no doctrine of the Trinity, no doctrine of Jesus having a human and divine nature in hypostatic union," (17, 136f). This exaggeration launches his speculative theological quest. It is commendable for Christians to "theologize" and not "adopt an agnostic stance before we have made a thorough investigation" (18), just as it is right to provide answers to detractors of Christianity, even concerning the issue of the destiny of the unevangelized. However, theological structures must be built upon the solid foundation of biblical exegesis. Though it is both necessary and proper to attempt to fit texts into a comprehensive and intelligible system, what is inadmissible is to do this without permitting the text of scripture to speak for itself. Sanders not only fails to do biblical exegesis with sensitivity to context, his "control beliefs" (his term) misguide his efforts. His prior commitment to belief in a God who is "bound by time and history of the world" and who does not yet know the future functions as the compass for his theological navigation that arrives at conclusions which without dispute diminish the tension that evangelicals encounter with burgeoning religious pluralism.[17]

Sanders's primary motivation for writing his book clearly sets his whole agenda. His disagreement with restrictivism (especially associated with "Calvinistic predestinarians," 111) and his more mild dislike for universalism urge him to uncover "a theologically sound alternative" (4), one that better represents "the loving, saving God we find in Scripture—the God who was crucified for all sinners" (281).[18]

With this brief overview of *No Other Name* in mind, the remainder of this critique will examine Sanders's work under three categories: (1) a "process-theist" view of God; (2) a step into pluralism; and (3) a failure to do biblical theology.

A "Process-Theist" View of God

Sanders correctly points out that God's character is at issue in the whole question concerning the destiny of the unevangelized. He rejects what he calls "the evangelical view" (which he also dubs restrictivism, 4), because such a view "seriously puts" his own "conception of God in jeopardy" (6). This is so because, Sanders says, "the God I see presented in the Bible has great love for all humanity" (6), and restrictivism maintains that "God does little in the way of seeking the re-

demption of the great majority of human beings" (6) but instead claims "all the unevangelized are automatically damned to hell" (4, 6). He also rejects universalism because it also "reflects a distortion of the biblical God" (6). One only discovers Sanders's argument against universalism well into the book, and then one reads, "The major difficulty with the universalist, Calvinist [read restrictivist], and atheist views is their concept of God" (112); they believe "that God does not take risks, that he can guarantee outcomes even if he grants freedom to some creatures" (111). He rejects the God of the restrictivist for the same reason he dislikes the universalist's God—because he has a plan that assures his victory.

So, Sanders indicates both his disagreement with and misunderstanding of restrictivism. Throughout the book Sanders virtually equates restrictivism with Calvinism (witness the three leading defenders he identifies: Augustine, Calvin, and R. C. Sproul [51-59]). Though it may be granted that most evangelicals are "restrictivists," only a minority would identify themselves as Calvinists. Though Sanders spurns the traditional view, Calvinism is his real target, for he portrays restrictivism as if it were "necessitarianism."

Sanders distorts the traditional view and repudiates it. He sketches a caricature of it (or fabricates a "straw man") and rejects what he sees, claiming that it affirms "that the majority of the human race is automatically a *massa damnata*" (3). According to Sanders, the traditional view affirms "there is absolutely no hope for the unevangelized," for "God automatically" (6) and "indiscriminately" (7) "damns all the unevangelized to hell" (6). This pejorative and theologically irresponsible language is scattered throughout the book (cf., e.g., 3, 4, 6f, 16, 71, 118, 137, 218). Neither responsible traditionalists nor Calvinists affirm that events are determined by causal necessity or that any human beings are condemned against their will.[19]

Sanders largely blames John Hick's move to pluralism on "traditional theology" because it "presents a harsh and exclusive God who condemns most of the human race to hell as a matter of course" (118). Not only does Sanders portray the God of the traditional view as vindictive and arbitrary, he thinks traditionalists themselves have usurped divine authority, as "those who would automatically damn the unevangelized" (137, cf. 285).[20] If this is restrictivism or Calvinism, it ought to be rejected, for such a view of God's relationship to the unevangelized is certainly intolerable. Such a view exaggerates one dimension of biblical evidence to the exclusion of the other, precisely the opposite error that Sanders commits. The God of the Bible is no puppeteer, nor are humans automatons who follow a preprogrammed sequence of motions or choices.

If Sanders's caricature of "restrictivism's God" is defective, so is his own concept of God. If God is not "an absolute dictator whose every whim is satisfied" (112), neither is God "the 'defenseless superior power'" who "takes risks and leaves himself open to being despised, rejected, and crucified" (112).[21] With his view of God, Sanders has ventured outside the boundaries of evangelicalism. He has taken a giant stride into the land of "process theism"[22] despite the fact that he and his "openness" friends protest such a charge.[23] He carves out a deity patterned after the likeness of humans, one who is limited by time and history. This deity changes as he interacts with creation, and his actions are ulti-

mately contingent upon human choices. Though he is superior to his creatures, he so shares his powers with them to create or to destroy that his intentions are frequently frustrated. Hence, though his deity knows all there is to know about the world at present (he is "omnicompetent") the future is contingent and uncertain; he cannot know the future, because he is in partnership with his creatures in "creating the future" (165-80, 174-78).[24]

Sanders cuts the line of tension that biblical evidence strings between two poles: the Creator's absolute sovereignty and the creature's moral responsibility and free agency.[25] By assuming, without demonstration, his definition of human "freedom" (that God cannot guarantee the outcome of any human action) he believes that God desires to redeem every human being, but his will is entirely contingent upon the "*ex nihilo*" response (176) of his creatures.[26] Thus, even though "God desires to save every human being who has ever lived" (32), he is powerless to do so, for he is the "superior defenseless power" who refuses to "force his love upon his subjects even if that means he must allow them to spurn him eternally" (110).

Sanders opts to press "beyond what is written" (cf. 1 Co 4:6) to "make sense" out of the mystery of God's providence. He chooses to ignore Moses who says, "the secret things belong to the Lord our God" (Dt 29:29). By dismissing one strand of biblical evidence, he turns to reductionism to explain what the scriptures simply assume—compatibilism. Because Sanders refuses to confess, "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Ps 115:3),[27] he defies biblical evidence by excising one complete strand of biblical teaching. He accepts God's urgent pleas for human repentance, but rejects God's absolute sovereign right to determine the destiny of his creatures. Sanders domesticates God. But God has revealed himself in such a way that he will not be tamed by his creatures. The mystery of his providence defies human ingenuity and logic (cf. Dt 29:29). This does not make it illogical; rather this is precisely one of the essential differences between Creator and creature. He is God and we are not! It is only in holding firmly to both strands of biblical evidence simultaneously that one will truly submit before God who is the untamed benevolent Sovereign.

A Step into Pluralism

His refusal to affirm, without contradiction, the biblical tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility provides the assumption upon which Sanders frames the question he seeks to answer concerning the destiny of the unevangelized. He identifies two biblical axioms from which the whole debate concerning the unevangelized originates: (1) expressions of God's universal salvific will (e.g., 1 Ti 2:3-4) and (2) the particularity and finality of salvation in Jesus Christ alone (e.g., Ac 4:12; see 25ff). Sanders states, "The attempt to hold both axioms together creates the problem of how God can genuinely desire all human beings to partake of salvation and yet claim that salvation is exclusively offered only in the person of Jesus Christ, of whom most of the human race has been ignorant" (25). Just as he snaps the line of tension between God's sovereignty and human freedom, Sanders presses "beyond what is written" as he "speculates" (his term, 17) how these two propositions can be simultaneously upheld. He imposes his own definitions upon the expressions of the two axioms. With reference to God's uni-

versal salvific will, he simply assumes without demonstration that God's universal salvific will extends to "each and every human being who has ever lived" (30, 32, 286). Concerning the second proposition, he flirts with pluralism, so that at the end of his argument he cannot meaningfully affirm "that salvation is exclusively offered only in the person of Jesus Christ" (25). His treatment of both propositions deserves unpacking.

A Questioning of God's Justice

Sanders is correct when he says that, "a genuine appeal to the authority of Scripture does not consist in merely citing a list of verses and then concluding that one's position has been proved" (33). This observation indicts his own method of doing theology, however, for when he defines what he means by "God's universal salvific will," he simply assumes that "all" in passages such as John 12:32, 1 Timothy 2:3-6 and 2 Peter 3:9 or "world" in texts such as John 3:16 (27) must refer to "each and every human being who has ever lived" (30, 32, 286). He rejects Calvin's view (*Institutes*, 3.24.16) and simply asserts his own, deciding "this is not the place to debate" the different interpretations (30). Sensing the need for some measure of support for his own view, but refusing to grant exegetical bases, Sanders appeals to popular opinion. The fact that relatively few today accept Augustine's or Calvin's explanations of passages such as 1 Timothy 2:3-6 is enough for Sanders to proceed as if truth were established by an opinion poll (30).[28]

In place of finding a solid exegetical basis for his assertions, Sanders lets his assumptions shape how he holds together the two theological axioms. Two crucial assumptions, given no exegetical basis, inform his viewpoint: (1) For God to be just, every individual on earth must be counted deserving of accessibility to God's saving grace (216ff) and (2) Christ's death establishes a kind of neutrality in all humanity so that now the only basis upon which God can condemn anyone is their existential response to revelation whether it be the gospel or simply general revelation (cf. 208, 217, 235).

Concerning the first of these two assumptions, Sanders claims to be overwhelmed by God's magnanimous salvation (216), but what truly astonishes him are the enormous numbers of peoples who have never heard the gospel of Christ.[29] Sanders contends that to believe that "God is not obligated to send the gospel message to the vast majority of the unevangelized because they do not seek him strikes me as incompatible with the assertion that God truly desires to save everyone" (172). So Sanders reasons that God would be unjust to condemn the unevangelized unless he gives them sufficient knowledge to save them.[30] He grossly distorts God's love as revealed in the biblical story.

Sanders's argument assumes that "restrictivists" believe that the unevangelized are condemned for not believing the gospel which they have never heard. In response, Sanders believes that a God who would condemn anyone without making salvation accessible to them is harsh and unloving (106).[31]

As to the second assumption, dealing with the basis of divine condemnation, the author takes one strand of biblical evidence and exploits it while neglecting other biblical evidence. His belief that Christ's death "objectively provides for the salvation of every human being" (216) amounts to a denial of substitutionary

death—Christ died for everyone in general but for no one in particular.[32] As he would have it, Christ's death so removes God's wrath from every individual that no sin will condemn them except one, a conscious rejection of the gospel for those who have heard it or of general revelation for those who have received this alone. However, Sanders completely ignores passages such as Ephesians 5:3-6 that explicitly affirm that God's wrath comes upon disobedient people for obscene speech, immorality, impurity, greediness, etc. (cf. Ro 1:18-32).

For Sanders, God can only be just if he makes salvation equally accessible to each and every human being who has ever lived. Otherwise, what kind of God is he who gives ample knowledge to the unevangelized to make them accountable to him but withholds knowledge that is able to bring salvation to them ?(233) Sanders reasons, "Once one is confronted with the words and person of Jesus, one no longer has any excuse" (180). Yet, "the warnings about judgment based on one's response to Christ are not applicable to the unevangelized. They are addressed only to those who know about Christ" (180). The unevangelized "can be saved or lost depending on their response to the general revelation. . . . Those who form a trusting relationship with God are saved, while those who turn their backs on the truths found in general revelation are heading for damnation" (233). He fails to take Paul seriously when he says that, quite aside from hearing the gospel, God has revealed himself in creation so that humanity is universally "without excuse" (Ro 1:20), and not one seeks the God who has disclosed himself to them (Ro 3:11); they all suppress the truth in wickedness (Ro 1:18).[33] This leads to Sanders's treatment of the second proposition—the particularity and finality of salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

An Unwarranted Dichotomy

Sanders steps into pluralism when he so modifies the second proposition (the particularity and finality of Jesus Christ) that he can no longer meaningfully affirm that salvation is "exclusively offered" to humanity in Jesus Christ (25). He distinguishes between "epistemological necessity of knowing about Jesus" and "ontological necessity of Christ for salvation" (62, 215). He means that no one can be saved apart from Christ's redemptive work ("ontological necessity"), but one can be saved without knowledge of Christ (215). This is *philosophical sophistry*; he separates what the scriptures do not divide. Sanders appeals to Acts 4:12 and John 14:6 to support his case. His appeal is seriously flawed, for he detaches both passages from their contexts by asking them his systematic theological question: "What do they say about the destiny of the unevangelized?" Finding that Acts 4:12 does not address the "destiny of the unevangelized *per se*" (62) and that John 14:6 "is silent about the unevangelized" (64), Sanders concludes that "they do not teach that all must hear of Christ or be forever lost" (64).

Making much of the fact that "no other name" signifies "no other authority," he conveniently ignores the fact that, coming at the close of Peter's address before the Sanhedrin, Acts 4:12 clearly infers the "epistemological necessity" of belief in this one called Jesus whom God raised from the dead in fulfillment of scripture. It is irresponsible to treat Acts 4:12 as if it were an encyclopedic entry detached from its salvation history context. Salvation comes to people where the gospel is proclaimed, for

the "name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" demands human acknowledgment as Peter makes clear—"then know this" (4:10).

John 14:6 also inseparably ties "ontological necessity" and "epistemological necessity." Jesus' claim—"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"—is his response to an epistemological question that John undoubtedly expects his readers to ask with Thomas, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (14:5). Against Sanders, the apostle John designs his narrative to clarify that knowledge of Christ is universally indispensable for salvation. John's Gospel underscores this "epistemological necessity" in 17:3—"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Because Sanders rejects the need to hear the gospel of Christ in order to receive salvation, he tries to draw a distinction between "believers" and "Christians." "Believers" are "all those who are saved because they have faith in God"; a "Christian" is "a believer who knows about and participates in the work of Jesus Christ" (224f). Both "groups are saved by the name of Jesus, but only the latter are informed about that name" (230). Though Sanders acknowledges that "saving faith certainly involves knowledge," he forces a false disjunction upon the biblical data by asking, "Is cognitive information the most important element in saving faith, or is a person's attitude the decisive factor?" (225). Scripture requires both, without giving greater weight to one or the other. But being prejudiced against the evidence by his question, Sanders presses headlong toward pluralism, to draw "inclusivist lines"[34] that seek commonalities between Christianity and other religions. He alleges that commonalities prove "God is at work redemptively" among people who have never heard the gospel (248) and that "God has not been sitting idly by waiting for human missionaries to bring the gospel to these peoples" (249).[35] Since "God cannot save those he would like to save if indeed it is true that there is salvation only where the gospel is preached and accepted" (61, 258; citing Pinnock), he does not so restrict saving grace. Sanders contends that "the source of salvific water is the same for all people, it comes to various people through different channels" (226). To many it comes through the proclamation of the gospel, but to multitudes more his saving grace may be received through general revelation and in connection even with their non-Christian worship (233-49). Hence, Sanders's sophistry neutralizes his affirmation of the non-negotiability of the proposition: "salvation is exclusively offered only in the person of Jesus Christ" (25).

Sanders attempts to find support for his distinction between "believer" and "Christian" from early church fathers to argue that the pagan's god is "the *same* God" the Christian worships (240). He even appeals to Acts 17 for support[36] when he claims Paul's preaching to the Areopagus was a success in that those who were believers became Christians" (247). His support comes only by twisting Luke's words, for scripture says that "some men joined him [Paul] and believed" (Ac 17:34). They did not become believers until they trusted in the one whom God raised from the dead (cf. 17:31). Responsible interpretation of the New Testament requires one to acknowledge the categories "believer" and "Christian," but these acceptable categories do not derive from distinctions between people who receive only general revelation and those who

receive the gospel of Christ. The categories originate from God's providential placement of individual believers along the salvation-historical axis in relation to Christ's redemptive act. This crucial observation raises the third major line of criticism.

A Failure to Do Biblical Theology

Sanders's theological method illustrates well the peril of doing systematic theology without first doing the arduous work of biblical theology. Rather than allow the biblical text to define its own categories, Sanders demands that the biblical categories take the shape of his own preconceptions. Hence he imposes his categories—"believer" and "Christian."

Sanders gives little evidence of redemptive-historical understanding when interpreting scripture. He attempts to support his pluralistic inclusivism from Paul's defense of the inclusion of the Gentiles as recipients of the gospel. Sanders claims, "I think it can be reasonably argued that the construction of a wider-hope position parallels Paul's attempt to extend salvation to the Gentiles even though there was little explicit teaching about that in the Old Testament" (137). He "flattens" the redemptive-historical contours of scripture. He fails to acknowledge that the particularism of the Old Testament was God's redemptive design in preparation for and anticipation of the New Testament's inclusion of the Gentiles.

Though he acknowledges that the main purpose of the Cornelius story was to convince the apostolic church of God's inclusion of the Gentiles in the scope of salvation (66), this redemptive-historical dimension plays no substantive role in Sanders's discussion. He fails to recognize that for Paul the particularism of the Old Testament and the inclusivism of the New correspond to the promise/fulfillment relationship of old and new revelation.[37]

Because Sanders fails to approach scripture with a sense for the contours of the Bible's storyline, he neither understands the Old Testament's restrictivism with its limited inclusion of Gentiles (218-21) nor the New Testament's unrestrained inclusion of the Gentiles (221-24) with its insistence upon the just condemnation of all humanity and the universal hopelessness of mankind apart from receiving the gospel of Christ. These tendencies are illustrated by his treatment of Acts 10 and Romans 10:9ff.[38]

First, because he has falsely equates the New Testament's inclusion of the Gentiles with his own pluralistic inclusivism, Sanders identifies Cornelius as "the Gentile of most interest to inclusivists" (222) because he is "an example of an unevangelized person being saved" (265). Contrary to popular interpretation, Sanders is right to affirm that Cornelius, who was a God-fearer, was a believer before Peter preached the gospel to him (66).[39] He is also correct not to let Peter's words—"through which you and your household will be saved" (Ac 11:14)—dissuade him from this conclusion.[40] Still, he makes a fatal mistake. Because Cornelius was a "God-fearer" or a "believer" and became a "Christian" upon receiving the gospel, Sanders assumes that Luke's narrative supports his own inclusivist or pluralist categories—"believer" and "Christian." Hence, he cannot understand Robert Gundry's argument that "'Luke and Peter are not talking about heathen people deficient of special revelation, but about God-fearers, Gentiles who know and follow the special revelation of God in the Old Testament. . . . They do not sup-

port the possibility of salvation for the unevangelized'" (266). Gundry's point completely eludes Sanders, who responds, "Gundry seems to suggest that Cornelius was not saved until Peter told him about Christ. . . . If, on the other hand, he believes that Cornelius was saved before Peter came, he pulls the rug out from under his basic argument, since that is the very point inclusivists wish to make" (266). Obviously, the point at issue is not when Cornelius first believed unto salvation but that when he believed he was not restricted to general revelation. What Sanders ignores is the fact that Cornelius was a "God-fearer," a "believer," precisely because he had been a recipient of God's special revelation through his contacts with the Jews. Clearly Luke's categories of "believer" and "Christian" turn upon one's relationship to the epochal advent of Christ, not upon whether one receives only general versus special revelation.

The second example of Sanders's faulty interpretation of scripture is his treatment of Romans 10:9ff. He rejects claims "that Paul asserted the necessity of knowing about Christ for salvation when he said that ' if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved'" (67). He contends,

> But logically this means nothing more than that confession of Christ is *one* sure way to experience salvation: Paul does not say anything about what will happen to those who do not confess Christ because they have never heard of Christ. The text is logically similar to the conditional statement "If it rains, then the sidewalk will be wet." If the condition is fulfilled (if it rains), then the consequent will follow (the sidewalk will be wet). But we cannot with certainty say, "If it is not raining, the sidewalk will not be wet." Someone may turn on a sprinkler, or there may be a pile of melting snow nearby—any number of things besides rain might make the sidewalk wet. (67)

Sanders fails to recognize that, in Romans, Paul has already demonstrated that there is no other way by which anyone can receive deliverance from God's wrath; all are equally condemned, for all are under sin (Ro 3:9). The apostle has ruled out both the "sprinkler" (God's self-revelation in creation, Ro 1:18ff.) and the "melting snow" (God's self-revelation in the Law, Ro 2:1ff, 17ff; 3:19-20; 7:7-25).[41] Therefore, Paul's logic in Romans 10:9ff ("if . . . then") is not to be disputed. With his axioms already in place, Paul's words of Romans 10:9ff. can hardly be interpreted to mean simply "that confession of Christ is one sure way to experience salvation" (67). True, in this context "Paul does not say anything about what will happen to those who do not confess Christ because they have never heard of Christ" (67). But it must be understood from the course of his argument that apart from confessing Christ as Lord and believing that God has raised him from the dead there is no salvation for anyone, whether evangelized or unevangelized.

In neither of John Sanders's books does he make any attempt to account for Paul's ironclad reasoning in Romans 10:13-15 which does address the question about the destiny of those who never hear the gospel. A few years ago, at a conference I attended, John Sanders and Clark Pinnock held a forum to dialogue with critics of their views on the unevangelized. They were confronted with Paul's tightly reasoned argument in Romans 10:13-15. They refused either to acknowledge its appeal to them to renounce their views or to address the text by explaining how they can

hold their views in light of this text. Paul reasons,

> For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, will they call upon one in whom they do not believe? And how will they believe one whom they have not heard? And how will they hear apart from a preacher? And how will they preach except they be sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news."

How much clearer could the text be? Paul, the great apostle to the unevangelized, is completely convinced that none will call upon the Lord to save them unless they believe the gospel which they hear preached to them by a preacher who is sent to them to bear God's good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul's reasoning cuts the ground from under Sanders's inclusivist view of the gospel.

Conclusion

No Other Name provides the occasion for all of us to recognize how crucial even-handed treatment of the Bible's storyline is to the life and mission of the church. One's conception and expression of the nature of God is foundational to all beliefs. It is imperative that we affirm with biblical proportions both God's love and holiness, his mercy and justice, his grace and wrath, his personality and transcendence. Likewise, we must affirm without equivocation both the Creator's absolute sovereignty and the creature's moral responsibility. We must insist on both. We must be compatibilists. To deny the former, as Sanders does, is to press toward process theism. To deny or diminish the latter is to move toward fatalism or necessitarianism, neither of which is Christian. But our God is neither the "defenseless superior power" nor a mechanistic and impersonal deity. He is the untamed benevolent Sovereign whose providence over all creation is confessedly a mystery that transcends both our creaturely understanding and "the things revealed" (cf. Dt 29:29).

To the degree that we fail to acknowledge and maintain vigorously the full proportion of the gospel concerning who God is we will err in both our responsibility to evangelize the nations and in our posture toward the unevangelized. If we diminish human responsbility and distort God's transcendence, we sin by becoming passive concerning evangelism and heartless toward the unevangelized. If we exaggerate human freedom and denigrate divine sovereignty, we sin by inclining toward self-sufficiency in proclaiming the gospel and toward frenzied impatience with God concerning the destiny of the unevangelized.

It is from the latter error that Sanders leads an assault against God, against our God, against the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He endeavors to domesticate God. In defiance of scripture's rebuke—"But who are you, O man, to talk back to God" (Ro 9:20)—Sanders questions God's justice in condemning the unevangelized. Whether or not humans are evangelized has nothing to do with their just condemnation. Christ did not come into the world to render its condemnation just and right (Jn 3:17); God's self-disclosure in creation has left humanity without excuse (Ro 1:20). Nor is it the mission of the church to proclaim Christ to all humanity in order to provide just cause for their condemnation, though it is true that the gospel entails condemnation for "those who are perishing" (2 Co 2:15). Our mission is to proclaim the gospel indiscriminately wherever humans are found

and to trust our sovereign God that through our preaching he will bring salvation to all his chosen ones (2 Ti 2:10).

We are commissioned to proclaim to all nations with great urgency, "Repent, or perish!" as we adopt God's posture toward the death of the wicked expressed by the prophets (Eze 33:11). Yet, at the same time we must not become frantic, as if the millions whom we have not yet reached somehow escape God's sovereign plan and design. Are we not told that God has a day planned for the wicked (Pr 16:4)? Belief that God's sovereignty encompasses the destiny of each one must never lead to passivity or neglect of God's appointed means.[42] Though we may never reach every individual with the good news of Jesus Christ, with regard to those within our spheres of influence we incur culpability if we fail to warn them concerning God's wrath (cf. Eze 3:18; 33:7-9; cf. Ac 20:26-27; 1 Ti 4:16).

ENDNOTES

[1]See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 13ff. for distinctions in the way the term "pluralism" may be used.

[2]Lesslie Newbigen states, "It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralistic society—not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished" (*The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 1).

[3]For a discussion of ideological pluralism, see Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 19ff.

[4]Alvin J. Schmidt, *The Menace of Multiculturalism: Trojan Horse in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

[5]John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 4.

[6]See Ibid., 6-7.

[7]Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 152.

[8] Sanders, *No Other Name*, 6.

[9]For a superb discussion of pluralism's dogma of "victimization," see Charles J. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

[10]Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 19. Take note how cleverly these "evangelical pluralists" (my term) have shaped the whole discussion of the unevangelized with politically correct terminology that paints the "exclusivists" in menacing colors, while they craftily select the warm-sounding term, "inclusivist," to represent their allegedly loving and kind position. This is akin to the social pluralists who set themselves over against the "anti-abortion" advocates with the politically correct designation, "pro-choice."

[11]John Sanders teaches at Oak Hills Bible College in Bemidji, Minnesota.

[12]See John Sanders, ed., *What about Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995). Sanders wrote the chapter on "Inclusivism," 21-55.

[13]This critique appeared in a slightly different form as "'To Go Beyond What Is Written': An Exercise in Speculative Theology," *Contra Mundum* 5 (1992) 49-56.

[14]*The Evangelical Quarterly* 60 (1988) 241-59.

[15]Clark Pinnock, who has published numerous essays on the destiny of the unevangelized, introduces the book and

shortly after *No Other Name* was released, Pinnock followed suit with his own book, *A Wideness In God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*. Sanders thinks much like Pinnock, which is evident by comparing Sanders's *No Other Name* with Pinnock's *A Wideness In God's Mercy*.

[16]Note the familiar pluralist tactic of labeling the disliked view "extreme."

[17]Sanders, "God As Personal," in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 174.

[18]That Sanders rejects the traditional view and is more favorably disposed toward universalism is verified by his own words: "When people are asked to choose between the extremes of the harsh, unloving God of restrictivism and the loving God of universalism, it is not difficult to understand why universalism seems so attractive" (106). Sanders's four other stated motives are all fruits or outcomes that he hopes to achieve among his readers: to offer a theodicy that will curb the "modern flow toward pluralism" (6, 4); to suggest "good reasons to pursue missionary activity even if salvation is not out of the reach of the unevangelized" (7); to strengthen the "theological muscle" of people who already hold to an inclusivist viewpoint (7); and to provide a taxonomy and bibliography of views on the subject (7).

[19]The author misrepresents the traditional view when he says, "There are many who reject the restrictivist contention that evangelism and missions are meaningless unless all the unevangelized are necessarily damned to hell" (71).

[20]This is a common theme among Sanders's allies in his cause. Pinnock states, "Theological liberalism reacts sharply and correctly to…the orthodox tradition and…its representatives [who] have presented God as a cruel and arbitrary deity" (*A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 19). See Carson's critique, *The Gagging of God*, 290-91.

[21]D. A. Carson aptly addresses such a view of the crucifixion: "If the initiative had been entirely with the conspirators, and God simply came in at the last minute to wrest triumph from the jaws of impending defeat, then the cross was not his plan, his purpose, the very reason why he had sent his Son into the world—and that is unthinkable. If on the other hand God was so orchestrating events that all the human agents were nonresponsible puppets, then it is foolishness to talk of conspiracy, or even of sin—in which case there is no sin for Christ to remove by his death, so why should he have to die? God was sovereignly at work in the death of Jesus; human beings were evil in putting Jesus to death, even as they accomplished the Father's will; and God himself was entirely good. Christians who may deny compatibilism [which Sanders explicitly does, "God As Personal," 172] on front after front become compatibilists (knowing or otherwise) when they think about the cross. There is no alternative, except to deny the faith" (*How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990] 212).

[22]Sanders joins Pinnock in his departure from Christian theism. Cf. Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," in *Predestination and Freewill: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986) 143-62.

[23]See Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994). I concur with D. A. Carson's assessment of this book when he states, "I have to say, with regret, that this book is the most consistently inadequate treatment of both Scripture and historical theology dealing with the doctrine of God that I have ever seen from the hands of serious evangelical writers" (*The Gagging of God*, 225, fn 74).

[24]Of course, at the root of Sanders's view of God is the issue of human freedom. He asks, "Can God make free creatures and guarantee they will never sin? No! That would involve a contradiction, since one aspect of freedom (defined as the ability either to do something or not--libertarian) is the impossibility of guaranteeing the outcome" (*No Other Name*, 111). Without demonstrating a moment's reflection upon biblical evidence that does not fit his scheme, Sanders assumes *a priori* that "human freedom" must entail absolute power to the contrary.

[25]D. A. Carson expresses compatibilism lucidly. "The Bible as a whole, and sometimes in specific texts, presupposes or teaches that

both of the following propositions are true: 1. God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated. 2. Human beings are morally responsible creatures—they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent" (*How Long O Lord?* 201).

[26]Sanders objects that universalists (e.g., Ferré, Hick, Robinson) are inconsistent in their view of human freedom and divine omnipotence because they cannot demonstrate how God can ultimately reconcile all free creatures if they remain free creatures forever. He argues, "And if, as they suggest, human freedom entails the possibility that individuals will continue to fall from grace and return to hell in the afterlife, how can it be guaranteed that there will ever come a time when all people will cease to turn away from God and hell will be done away with?" (113) He presumes, of course, his own definition of freedom—absolute power to the contrary. The question must be put to Sanders: If human freedom necessarily entails absolute power to the contrary, can humans ever stop having absolute power to the contrary after the present life is ended? Would not humans continue to have the power to frustrate God's will? If absolute power to the contrary is what makes humans moral creatures, then God can never deprive them of this capacity. With such a view of human freedom, the possibility of apostasy must always be present, even in the eternal kingdom. Of course, this empties biblical concepts of "eternal life" and "salvation" of meaning and significance.

[27]Sanders caricatures the God of universalists and Calvinists as "an absolute dictator whose every whim is satisfied" (112). Not liking what he caricatures, he discards the Calvinists' God.

[28]Sanders refuses anyone else an *ad hominem* argument. For example, in response to the charge that "inclusivists" sell the truth to get non-evangelical admiration, he says, "Aside from the questionable nature of the accusation, the fact remains that the psychological origin of a belief is irrelevant to its truth or falsity" (23, fn 24). Against charges that "inclusivism" diminishes the need to evangelize, he responds, "I think it is important to note that an argument from utility does not necessarily establish truth" (283). Sanders fails to reflect any sensitivity to the fact that the context of each passage restricts "all" to mean "all peoples without distinction" not "every individual without exception." For example, 1 Timothy 2:4 is defined by verses one and two. In 2:1 Paul hardly exhorts Timothy to intercede for "each and every human being who has ever lived." Verse two clarifies that our prayers are to encompass people of all walks of life, particularly kings and rulers. Likewise, God's desire to redeem and Christ's substitutionary death encompasses all peoples without distinction (2:4). Paul's mention of his Gentile mission (2:7) reinforces this interpretation.

[29]For an excellent rebuttal of such an approach, see Benjamin B. Warfield, "God's Immeasurable Love," in *The Saviour of the World* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing, 1972) 69-87.

[30]He cites Dale Moody approvingly, who asks, "'But what kind of God is he who gives man enough knowledge to damn him but not enough to save him?'" (233) See Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 59.

[31]Against restrictivists and Calvinists Sanders asks, "Is there something deficient about God's distributive justice—that is to say, does God not extend justice to all human beings in the sense of providing an opportunity of salvation for all? If humans have a fatal disease, and if God is in fact omnipotent and has taken care to provide the medicine to cure the disease through his Son Jesus Christ, then why can he not provide it to all?" (71) Sanders discloses his failure to understand the depth of human depravity and the justice of God's condemning sentence upon all humanity when he says that some restrictivists argue "both that the unevangelized are justly condemned for rejecting the light of general revelation and that even a total acceptance of that revelation would still be insufficient for salvation. This is like my telling my daughter that I am angry with her for not washing the dishes and then acknowledging that I would still be angry with her even if she had washed them. By this logic, the unevangelized are truly damned if they do and

damned if they don't" (69).

[32]Sanders reasons, "If the redemption procured by Jesus objectively provides for the salvation of every human being, and if God intends this salvation to be genuinely universal, then it must be possible for every individual who has ever lived personally to receive that salvation regardless of the historical era, geographic region, or cultural setting in which these people have lived" (216).

[33]For Sanders's understanding of Paul's argument in Romans 1-3, see his "Inclusivism," in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* 46ff.

[34]The expression belongs to Harvey Conn, "Do Other Religions Save?" in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 199.

[35]This is further evidence of Sanders's problem with God's sovereignty over human actions. Van Til eloquently points out the type of error Sanders makes: "Synergism takes for granted that there can be no truly personal relation between God and man unless the absoluteness of God be denied in proportion that the freedom of man is maintained. Synergism assumes that an act of man cannot be truly personal unless such an act be impersonal. By that we mean that according to synergism, a personal act of man cannot at the same time but in a different sense, be a personal act of God. Synergism assumes that either man or God acts personally at a certain time, and at a certain place, but they cannot act personally simultaneously at the same point of contact" (*A Survey of Christian Epistemology* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.] 68). Because Sanders refuses to believe that everything that happens in this world takes place in keeping with God's purpose and design (Eph 1:11), he fails to understand that even the movements of humans to evangelize some or to fail (for any reason) to evangelize other peoples carries out God's intentions. To confess this truth, contrary to Sanders, does not "automatically damn" the unevangelized to hell, nor does it excuse passivity and callousness toward those who are perishing.

[36]Sanders treats Acts 17:22 irresponsibly. He turns Paul's words to the Athenians ("I see that in every way you are very religious;" Ac 17:22) to his own advantage by failing to understand Luke's use of the expression in Acts 17:18 and 25:19. He says, "In recording Paul's message, Luke had no qualms about using the same term to describe the Christian faith" (246). Sanders fails to point out that Luke puts the expression on the lips of people who were hardly friends of Christianity—Athenians and Festus.

[37]Cf. Machen's argument against "liberalism" of his day. See *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1923) 17ff.

[38]Sanders himself identifies these two passages as very crucial in his case (64-68).

[39]Cf. e.g., James Buchanan's comments on Cornelius: "It was necessary for himself that he should now believe the truth as it is in Jesus; it was no longer true that God would send a deliverer—the Deliverer had already come; and from the time of his advent it became necessary to believe and acknowledge that ' Jesus is the Christ.' Had he died before Christ's advent, or even after his advent, but before he had any sufficient information on the subject, he might have been saved as Abraham was, and all the faithful children of Abraham were, by the faith of what God had promised to the fathers; but had he rejected Christ, or refused to believe in him, when he had been fully informed of all that he did and taught, his unbelief would have been fatal, not only because it rejected the Saviour, but also because it indicated the absence of that spirit of faith in the true meaning of the Old Testament itself, which, wherever it existed, was invariably found to embrace the Gospel when it was first proclaimed. There was an affinity betwixt the faith of a spiritual Jew or proselyte, and the faith of the New Testament, in virtue of which the one led on to the other, and found in it, not a new creed, but the completion, the perfecting of the old one" (*The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit* [1843; rpt. London: Banner of Truth, 1966] 178).

[40]Sanders's explanation of "salvation" in Acts 11:14 falls considerably short of the New Testament concept. Briefly, "salvation" is in the future tense in Acts 11:14, which accents the eschatological focus of salvation (cf., e.g., 1 Co 15:1-2; 1 Ti 4:16; Jas 1:21; 5:20; etc.). It neither indicates that Cornelius had not been a recipient of salvation nor that once he became a Christian he "received the

fuller blessing" (Sanders, 66).

[41]Cf. Sanders's discussion of Paul's teaching in Romans in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* 46ff. Sanders's conclusions concerning Romans 3 reflect a facile grasp of the text. He says, "Others object that Paul says in Romans 3 that all are sinners and so any hope for the unevangelized is ruled out. But if Paul means to say there that all those mentioned in the first two chapters are outside the boundaries of salvation, then a serious problem arises. If Paul means that no Jews and no Gentiles were saved before Christ, then obviously not even people such as David and Abraham were saved . . . I find it interesting that people are so willing to use Romans 1-3 to rule out hope for the unevangelized (since they are all sinners) but unwilling to accept the conclusion that since Paul has included the entire human race in his argument, any hope for premessianic Jews has also been eliminated" (49).

[42]Sanders has a legitimate gripe against Lorraine Boettner, who says "those who are providentially placed in the pagan darkness of western China can no more accept Christ as Savior than they can accept the radio, the airplane, or the Copernican system of astronomy, things concerning which they are totally ignorant. When God places people in such conditions we may be sure that He has no more intention that they shall be saved than He has that the soil of northern Siberia, which is frozen all the year round, shall produce crops of wheat. Had he intended otherwise He would have supplied the means leading to the designed end" (cited by Sanders, *No Other Name*, 51; *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 120). This is really quite terrible! Thanks be to God that William Carey never took such a view, though with all his heart he believed in the God who elected unconditionally whom he would save.