

WHO CAN BE SAVED?
A REVIEW ESSAY

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Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004. 511pp. Paper, \$27.00.

Introduction

We can all thank Terrance Tiessen for his remarkable clarity and perceptive ability to ask the right questions (see esp. 12–17).¹ In this introduction I will summarize the major contours of the argument, interacting with the specifics in the body of this review. Tiessen’s presentation is rendered disarmingly persuasive by several strengths of the book. First, Tiessen is everywhere clear and easy to understand. Second, along the way Tiessen affirms many cardinal doctrines, such as original sin, and he claims that he is not denying a text such as John 14:6 because the salvation he is proposing is through Christ. Third, Tiessen frequently makes reference to the emotionally troubling nature of the view that those who never hear the gospel through no fault of their own are lost.

Tiessen affirms that all salvation is through Christ by proposing that just as Old Covenant believers were saved apart from faith in Jesus, so those who have never heard can be saved if they respond to general revelation by glorifying God and giving thanks to him. In addition, God might give “nonuniversally normative divine revelation” to some who never hear, and the Spirit could quicken these hearts such that they respond to the light they are given. Since Tiessen holds that faith in Christ is necessary, he posits that those who are “saved” this way—apart from knowing Jesus in this life—will respond to him in faith when they do meet him. Here the idea of “universal at death encounters with Christ” is put forward, and Tiessen argues that one’s response to Jesus at the moment of death will be in line with the way one responded to him, or would have responded to him, during one’s life. Those who consciously reject Christ are without

¹Since this is a review essay of Tiessen’s volume, when quoting or referring to *Who Can Be Saved?* I will put page numbers in parentheses throughout the essay.

excuse, but Tiessen holds that those who do not hear of Christ are not condemned for not having believed in the one of whom they did not hear. With this overview before us, we turn to a fuller survey of Tiessen's argument.

Chapters 1–3: Destination, Possibilities, History

The argument for “accessibilism” comes in two parts, which are preceded by three orienting chapters. In Part 1, which begins with chapter 4, he asks “How Does God Save People?” Part 2 takes up the question “How Do the Religions Fit into God's Purposes in the World?”

In the first chapter, “Where Are We Going?” Tiessen lays out the argument of the book in 30 Theses. These theses present the whole of the book's argument, and they reappear as superscriptions to the chapters in which they are developed. Chapter 2, “What Are the Options?” seeks to define the various views regarding who can be saved. Tiessen presents the options as follows: (1) **Ecclesiocentrism** holds that “only those who hear the gospel can be saved” (32); (2) **Agnosticism** represents those who “do not think that Scripture clearly indicates that none of the unevangelized are ever saved”² (33); (3) **Accessibilism** is distinguished from agnosticism because it holds “that there is biblical reason to be *hopeful* (not simply agnostic)³ about the possibility of salvation for those who do not hear the gospel. . . . [Accessibilists] posit that God makes salvation *accessible* to people who do not receive the gospel” (33); (4) **Religious Instrumentalism** is distinguished from Accessibilism in that it holds that “God's salvation is available *through* non-Christian religions” (34). Both Religious Instrumentalists and Accessibilists are Inclusivists, and the difference between the two lies in the fact that “accessibilists believe that God may save people who are members of other religions, but

²See the recent argument for this position presented by R. Todd Mangum, “Is There a Reformed Way to Get the Benefits of the Atonement to ‘Those Who Have Never Heard?’” *JETS* 47 (2004): 121–36.

³Mangum, however, states that he is hopeful in his agnosticism (*ibid.*, 135).

religious instrumentalists believe that God has raised up those religions as his instruments in salvation” (34).⁴ **(5) Relativism** holds that all religions are “more or less equally true and valid as paths to salvation” (34).

This way of framing the issues is presented as a nuanced improvement upon the typical categories of “Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism.” A helpful chart on page 35 summarizes the distinctives of each position. There are several things this way of framing the issues accomplishes for Tiessen’s case. Accessibilism is hereby presented as the sane “middle way” between the far right of Ecclesiocentrism and the incoherent liberalism of relativism. This styles Accessibilism as a way to hold onto Scripture⁵ while being sensibly nuanced. This will probably give Accessibilism wide appeal. It seems that the common perception, though, is not that the Bible presents Accessibilism. Could it be that all the animosity toward Christianity in our culture for its supposed “intolerance” is actually undeserved? Could it be that it is not Christianity that is exclusive but mistaken Christians? Will adopting Tiessen’s perspective deliver us from the reproach of being narrow and harsh?

Chapter 3 asks, “Is Accessibilism a New Idea?” Quotes from Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria seem to indicate their openness to the salvation of those who never heard the gospel. Tiessen’s doctoral dissertation addressed *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, and he summarizes his earlier research concluding that Irenaeus “assumed the gospel had been taken throughout the world by the apostles.” Tiessen believes that Irenaeus “would have been optimistic about the salvation of the unevangelized” (50). With all respect for Tiessen’s detailed knowledge of Irenaeus’s writings, we must ask how far this kind of supposition about what someone “would have concluded” can take us. Human beings think in surprising and

⁴Because Accessibilism is a form of Inclusivism, I will sometimes refer to it as “Accessibilistic Inclusivism,” and when I use “Inclusivism,” all strands of it—including Accessibilism—are in view. Accessibilism has its nuances, but no mistake should be made here, Tiessen acknowledges that his Accessibilism is a form of Inclusivism.

⁵Tiessen states, “I affirm the unique authority of Scripture as the means by which we know truth about God, ourselves and the world” (17).

unpredictable ways, with the result that we often make faulty assumptions about the logical ends of positions others hold. It may just as well be the case that had Irenaeus been confronted with the multitudes of the unevangelized (if Tiessen is correct that he did not know about them), and had someone pointed out the logical direction in which his theology was leaning (as Tiessen does in his dissertation), Irenaeus would have rejected what Tiessen concludes. Or, he might have changed his mind about the things that pointed in the inclusive direction. Tiessen himself recognizes that many reject inclusivism because they think it cuts the nerve of missionary endeavors (if God can save apart from the gospel, why sacrifice to take it to them?), and Tiessen rejects those implications and argues against them. Irenaeus might have responded similarly to the suggestion that his statements lead down the path to Accessibilistic Inclusivism.

Luther is judged to be “at least agnostic” (56–57), and quotations from Zwingli indicate his agreement with Tiessen’s position (57). Section 10.3 of the Westminster Confession, which appears verbatim in the Baptist Confession of 1689, reads, “Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.” Tiessen cites W. G. T. Shedd, who wrote that “this is commonly understood to refer not merely, or mainly, to idiots and insane persons, but to such of the pagan world as God pleases to regenerate without the use of the written revelation” (59). The word “incapable,” however, seems to point to a lack of cognitive ability rather than to a lack of opportunity. Until the minutes of the Westminster Assembly become available (probably sometime in the next few years), the question will remain open as to what the framers of the Confession meant by this statement.

Richard Baxter is quoted in support of accessibilism, and then Tiessen cites Gerald McDermott, who holds that while Jonathan Edwards “never consciously embraced inclusivism” his “thought contained elements that might eventually have led him to it” (60). My objections to the suggestion of what Irenaeus “would have concluded” apply to this judgment regarding

Edwards.⁶ Others, e.g., John Wesley, are quoted in support of accessibilism, but the aim of these scattered examples is to establish Accessibilism as a legitimate option (48). It seems to me that Tiessen overreaches when he suggests, “there is no consensus among evangelicals on the state of the unevangelized” (69). The animosity of the secular culture bears witness to their perception of Christianity as a straight and narrow way that does not “tolerate” other religions and has the audacity to make absolute truth claims. We can probably find figures in the history of the church who espoused just about everything we could hope to legitimate, but the real issue is whether or not the Bible supports this proposal.

Part 1: How Does God Save People?

Chapter 4 opens Tiessen’s discussion of how God saves people by asking, “Who Needs to Be Saved?” Tiessen is straightforwardly evangelical in answering simply, “Everyone,” affirming original sin. Chapter 5 asks, “Whom Is God Trying to Save?” Here Tiessen maintains that Jesus is the world’s only Savior; all salvation is accomplished by the death of Christ on the cross and applied by the Holy Spirit.

Tiessen suggests that texts that have been used to argue for Exclusivism, such as John 8:24⁷ and Acts 4:12,⁸ are statements made to people who are actually receiving the revelation of Jesus. Thus, he writes,

The phrase ‘you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he’ (Jn 8:24) suggests that Jesus has an exclusive role in the forgiveness of sins, and it implies that this forgiveness is experienced only by those who believe that he is Yahweh. . . . it is important that we remind ourselves that *Jesus made the statement specifically to people to whom he was revealing his*

⁶For objections to McDermott’s conclusions, see Greg D. Gilbert, “The Nations Will Worship: Jonathan Edwards and the Salvation of the Heathen,” *TrinJ* 23 (2002), 53–72; and Gerald R. McDermott’s, “Response to Gilbert: ‘The Nations Will Worship: Jonathan Edwards and the Salvation of the Heathen,’” *TrinJ* 23 (2002), 77–80.

⁷“Unless you believe that I Am, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁸“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which it is necessary for us to be saved” (Acts 4:12).

identity. It is critical that we not overextend such statements to the unevangelized, who are, by definition, without such revelation (84–85, emphasis added).

The first problem with this statement is that it seems to overlook the way that John might have intended this statement to function in the context of his Gospel, which is written so that its readers might come to faith (20:31). Here Tiessen overemphasizes the historical context of the statement to the point that its literary context plays no role in his interpretation. What did John intend his audience to conclude when he depicted Jesus making such an assertion? The literary context in which Luke deploys the words of Acts 4:12 is likewise overlooked as Tiessen appeals only to the historical situation in which Peter spoke the words of the verse (85). Would Luke and John have wanted to limit the significance of these statements to the historical situation in which they were spoken? The failure to consider literary context strikes me as a surprising display of hermeneutical naivete.

Another problem with this line of argumentation is that it seems to suggest that the Bible is primarily concerned with a small number of people in a small section of the globe. Tiessen does not say that the biblical authors never considered the fact that many were left unevangelized, but he argued earlier that Irenaeus assumed the apostles had taken the gospel to the whole world. He seems to imply that the biblical authors do not consider the possibility that many were left unevangelized. Perhaps if they had taken this into account, they would not have made Exclusivistic statements.⁹ Tiessen seems to suggest that the biblical authors never considered the question of those who would die without hearing the gospel. When we look at the

⁹In the context of another argument, Tiessen writes (275): “In the meantime, Paul considered his missionary task complete because believing communities had been established in the regions that he had visited. . . . Eckhard Schnabel asserts that the early Christians ‘would not have thought in terms of presenting the Good News to every individual in all the regions of the earth.’” I am not sure Tiessen has fairly represented Schnabel’s position. Schnabel writes (*Early Christian Mission* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004], 443–44): “The basic missionary strategy was simple: the early Christian missionary wanted to reach as many people as possible with the message of Jesus and convince them of the truth of his teaching and of the significance of his life, death and resurrection . . .”

texts, however, from Moses¹⁰ to John¹¹ the Biblical authors are not only aware of other nations of the world, they address the role the nations play in God's plan for his world, announcing that some from the nations will be saved¹² while others of the nations will be judged.¹³ Robert Alter has noted that the attempt to account for all the nations of the earth found in Genesis 10 is "unprecedented in the ancient Near East," suggesting that the Bible is uniquely universal in scope.¹⁴ Moses even calls on his contemporaries to consider their privileged place as the only nation in history to whom God has revealed himself (Deut 4:32–40). The fact that they are the only nation to be treated this way by Yahweh is made known to them that they might feel the weight of their privileged position, indeed, how loved they are by God (Deut 7:7). The Israelites are not to respond to this revelation by being troubled that Yahweh has shown special favor to them, any more than a man's wife should be troubled by the fact that she is the only woman to whom her husband gives flowers. Rather, the Israelites are to respond to this by understanding the nature of mercy and keeping the incomparably good law they have been given (Deut 4:5–8). The suggestion that the biblical authors never considered the fact that many would die who had never heard God's promises does not stand up to scrutiny.

The question, "To Whom Does God Reveal Himself?" is addressed in chapter 6. This chapter asserts that through "nonuniversally normative divine revelation," which is contrasted with "universally normative covenantal revelation" and defined as "specific revelation given to an individual for a limited time and purpose" (120), God is "ceaselessly at work making himself

¹⁰For instance, Moses tells Israel of its elect status among the nations in Deuteronomy 7:6–8.

¹¹See the comprehensive account of the resurrected who appear before the throne to be judged in Revelation 20:11–15.

¹²See, e.g., Isaiah 2:1–5 where the nations stream to Zion.

¹³See, e.g., the oracles against the nations in Isaiah 13–23.

¹⁴Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 54, in the introductory note.

known to all people” (122). Tiessen writes, “numerous accounts of such instances have come out of China in recent years, from very credible witnesses” (121). My only observation here is that this is not a category that arises from exegesis of biblical texts but one that derives from subjective testimony.

“By What Standard Are People Judged?” is the question for chapter 7. Tiessen argues that “God holds people accountable only for the revelation that has been made available to them” (125). One difference between accessibilists and ecclesiocentrists, according to Tiessen, is that “accessibilists believe that *everyone receives* potentially saving revelation; ecclesiocentrists believe that *some people do not receive* saving revelation, yet that these people are still justly condemned to hell for rejecting the insufficient revelation that they do receive” (125). Calling general revelation “insufficient” does not reflect the perspective that general revelation might be all that God owes to people. Further, Tiessen suggests that responding appropriately to God’s general revelation by honoring him as God and giving thanks to him (cf. Rom 1:21) might be sufficient for salvation (128, 141). In this case, Tiessen seems to indicate that general revelation would be sufficient.

Millard Erickson is quoted on the point that “there may be those who respond positively, but Paul makes no mention of them” (141). But Paul explicitly states that no one has responded positively to general revelation near the conclusion of this section of Romans: “there is none righteous, not even one, there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God” (Rom 3:10–11). The attempt to argue that Paul leaves room for a positive response to general revelation seems to overlook the way that Romans 1:18–23 functions in the broader context of Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–3:20. Tiessen does not discuss the function of Romans 1:18–23 in its literary context of the first three chapters of Romans.¹⁵

¹⁵As a general comment on Tiessen’s method of biblical interpretation, he often quotes what others say about texts and then exploits the direction of the those comments rather than building his case directly on the words of the biblical text.

Tiessen also posits a distinction between “culpable and inculpable ignorance” (126–36). Here he argues that the ground of people’s condemnation “can only be the revelation that they have received; it *cannot* be the revelation that they have *not* received” (127). In conjunction with this Tiessen argues that “God holds us accountable only for . . . those actions that we do contrary to the witness of our own conscience” (130). Paul seems to agree, and he seems to think that no one will be excused on the basis of inculpable ignorance since the nations who do not have the law (special revelation) show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, with their consciences alternately accusing and defending them (Rom 2:14–15). Tiessen writes, “Only people aware of Jesus have no excuse”¹⁶ (134), but Paul wrote that what is perceived from creation is enough to render all people without excuse (Rom 1:20). Not only that, Paul says that those who sin apart from the law will be judged apart from the law (Rom 2:12).

The idea that people are only condemned by the revelation that they have received could also be called into question by texts that indicate that those with more revelation will receive greater judgment (e.g., Matt 11:21–24). These texts indicate that judgment for those with less revelation might be less severe, but it is judgment nonetheless. Sodom and Gomorrah clearly had no awareness of Jesus, but the cities were destroyed anyway. Apparently general revelation was enough for “the judge of all the earth” to “do right” in raining down fire from heaven on them (cf. Gen 18:25).

Chapter 8 moves from the issue of the standard by which people are judged to ask, “Can People Be Saved If They Only Have General Revelation?” Cornelius is repeatedly cited as an

¹⁶Tiessen buttresses this assertion by quoting John 15:22, so that the quote continues, “as Jesus told his disciples: ‘If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin: but now they have no excuse for their sin.’” Leon Morris, however, gives better insight into what this text means: “Jesus does not mean, of course, that the Jews would have been sinless had he not appeared. But he does mean that the sin of rejecting God as he really is would not have been imputed to them had they not had the revelation of God that was made through him” (*The Gospel according to John*, rev. ed., NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 604). The true light, Jesus, came into the world and shone on those who rejected him and exposed the depth of their sin. This does not imply that they would not have been condemned had he not shone on them.

example of one who might have responded appropriately to general revelation, especially in light of Peter's comment that God accepts "anyone in every nation who fears him and does what is right" (Acts 10:35) (143, cf. also 147, 152). What might be overlooked—though Tiessen does concede it on p. 149—is that Cornelius has been in contact with Jews. Moreover, he appears to believe the special revelation the Jews received in the OT, for he gives alms to the Jews and prays to God (Acts 10:2). The statement that God accepts those who fear him and do what is right in Acts 10:35 is not a statement about abstract pagans in places without special revelation, but about gentiles who respond in faith to the gospel (see esp. Acts 10:43, "everyone who believes in him [Jesus]"). This is a statement about racial inclusion—those who are not Jews can be saved. But this is not evidence that those who have not heard and believed the gospel might be included. It seems that "doing what is right" in Acts 10:35 is defined as "believing in Jesus" in 10:43.

Also in chapter 8 is a section on "Extrabiblical Instances of People with No Evidence of Special Revelation Who Have Shown Remarkable Faith." It should be noted that this title employs a rather vague definition of the word "faith." As Tiessen uses the term, faith means something like "a desire to know the truth about God." We should note that this is not how the Bible presents saving faith. Saving faith in the Bible is explicit trust in the promises of God (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:20–25; Gal 3:16; Heb 7:6; 11:8–9). By definition, therefore, one can only have saving faith if one has heard the promises of God and believed in them. There can be no saving faith apart from special revelation.

In the section under consideration Tiessen gives several examples of people who critiqued their own indigenous religions and insisted that there must be something better (145–47). Tiessen then writes, "In all of the above instances, the gospel eventually reached these people in whose hearts the Spirit of God had been at work beforehand, but the critical question is what to make of people like them who are never reached with the good news" (147). This question is followed by the story of a grandson who insisted that if his grandfather, who was a spiritual seeker, had lived to hear the gospel he would have believed. Tiessen writes, "it seems

very unlikely to me that people who clearly *would have believed* had they heard the gospel will be damned because they did not hear” (147). This kind of argument has a certain degree of emotional appeal, and it is exciting to hear of people who were unsatisfied with the religion they knew and rejoiced to have all their religious longings met when they heard of salvation in Christ. But are we really in position to say how someone “would have responded” had he heard the gospel? Aside from personal experiences of sharing the gospel with people who at first seem very responsive to the gospel only to turn away from Christ once they come face to face with something they do not appreciate about the demands of faith, we have the parable of the sower in which some soil initially produces fruit only to have that fruit wither and die (Luke 8:6–7, 12–14 and parallels). This parable corresponds to the accounts of people who initially respond very well to Jesus only to reject him as soon as he says something they do not like (see the account of Jesus in Nazareth, Luke 4:16–22 warm reception, followed by rejection in 4:23–30). It is impossible to predict how “spiritual seekers” will respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is precarious to formulate our theology on the basis of what they “would have done” had the gospel gotten to them.

Tiessen also suggests that

a realistic assessment of the situation of the peoples of the world in regard to divine revelation must take into account. . . . the work of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out ‘upon all flesh’ (Acts 2:17), and who operates in a special way in and through those whom he indwells in new covenant blessing, but whose work is not restricted to the church (150–51).

Acts 2:17 seems to be quoted here to indicate that the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon all people everywhere, but this turns out not to be the case when we examine the context of the statement in the book of Acts. As Luke depicts Peter quoting Joel 2 in Acts 2, “all flesh” seems to refer primarily to old and young, male and female Israelites (see the rest of Acts 2:17, and Joel 2:28–30). In Joel 2:28, “your sons and daughters” is controlled by the reference to “my people” in 2:27, so that in Joel “all flesh” appears to mean “all Israel.” All Israel is also the context of Acts 2 (cf. 2:5), but these words do foreshadow the pouring out of the Spirit upon the Samaritans

in Acts 8 and the gentiles in Acts 10. There is no suggestion, however, that the Spirit has also been poured out upon those all over the world where the gospel has not gone. In fact, the Samaritans in Acts 8 and the gentiles in Acts 10 do not receive the Spirit until *after* the gospel is proclaimed to them. Further, when Jesus predicts the coming of the Spirit in Acts 1:8, the immediate result will be the disciples bearing witness to him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Tiessen claims that the work of the Spirit “is not restricted to the church,” but Acts opens with a reference to what Jesus “began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). The narrative seems to indicate that what the disciples do and teach in Acts by the power of the Spirit is what Jesus is continuing to do and teach. This would explain the many references to things being done in Jesus’ name—these things are done by and for Jesus by the power of his Spirit, which he has given to his witnesses. There is no indication in the Bible that the Spirit ever operates in a salvific way apart from the gospel, and there are many indications that the Spirit only works in a saving way in conjunction with the word of Christ (see, e.g., John 6:63; 14:26; 15:26; 16:12–14).¹⁷

In Chapter 9 Tiessen takes up the question, “What About the Saved Who Did Not Believe in Jesus?” This question again reveals a lack of precision regarding the nature of saving faith. Earlier in the volume Tiessen had written, “we acknowledge that people who lived before Jesus were saved by grace through faith, though not through faith *in Jesus*. They did not know about Jesus, and so they were not obligated to believe in him. When that knowledge came to them, of course, their obligation changed” (128). Tiessen expands on this as he argues thesis 9, which states in part, “From the experience of Old Testament believers, we can assert that God may save people today who do not hear the gospel” (165). The major flaw here is the assumption that *since those who lived before the incarnation did not know that Jesus would be the Messiah, their faith*

¹⁷This statement is made from our vantage point in salvation history. Prior to the coming of Jesus, the Spirit ministered in conjunction with the promises of God that he either revealed directly (e.g., Gen 12:1–3) or gave through prophets (e.g., Neh 9:30). See further James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: A Study of the Ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments* (NACSBT; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006).

was therefore not in God and his promises. I would argue that inasmuch as God had made promises, those who were saved were saved by faith in those promises. In my view, Genesis 3:15 is the first promise that God will overcome evil through a coming Redeemer. On this understanding, no OT saint—not even Adam—is saved apart from explicit trust in the promise of God to raise up a Redeemer, the Seed of the woman.¹⁸ As we proceed along the Bible’s salvation historical timeline the content of saving faith increases, but saving faith is always a settled conviction that God will make good on the promises he has made. Tiessen suggests that OT believers were saved apart from knowing Christ, and he takes this as evidence that people can be saved today apart from the knowledge of Christ. A more accurate account of the salvation of Old Covenant believers makes plain that they were saved by faith in God and his promises.¹⁹ The fact that an Old Covenant believer did not know the precise details about Messiah Jesus is no evidence that Old Covenant believers were not saved by believing that God would one day keep his promises to raise up an anointed leader whom we now know to be the Lord Messiah, the Warrior King Jesus. If one is going to believe and be saved, one must know *what it is* that God has said and done. Saving faith is not some nebulous desire to know truth, nor is it an ability to critique false religions for the sham they are. Saving faith is explicit trust in what God has said and done.

There are many texts in the Bible which address the fact that access to the knowledge of God is not freely distributed to all people everywhere (see e.g. Matt 11:25–27; 13:10–11; Eph 3:4–10). Again, the awareness of this truth is not given to create emotional dilemmas for those

¹⁸Stephen G. Dempster (*Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003], 68) writes, “there is genealogical hope, a promise imbedded in the curse on the serpent, the so-called *Protoevangelium* (3:15). . . . For the first words after the divine judgment are words of hope. Adam names his wife ‘Eve’. . . . As von Rad (1976: 96) recognized, this is a genuine act of faith on the part of the man.”

¹⁹The promise that God will be with Joshua must be believed (Josh 1:5–9). Isaiah’s announcement of a shoot from the stump of Jesse is meant to give hope that God will keep this promise. See also Prov 3:1–6; Isa 7:9; Hab 2:4.

who receive access to the knowledge of God. God reveals himself when, where, and to whom he pleases by his own free mercy. The fact that he does not show this mercy to all should make those who receive it acutely conscious of the nature of mercy, which is not given to all people. If mercy were given to all people, its gracious, free, stunning power would be diffused. God wants people to glorify him for his mercy (Rom 9:22–23; 15:8–9), not take it for granted as something that everyone receives.

Tiessen is clearly not impressed with this method that I am suggesting God has used to make his mercy precious. To be clear, I am suggesting that God wants Israel and the church to recognize how precious they are to him, how loved they are. This seems to be the point of revealing to them that they are elect. So, Moses calls on Israel to recognize their unique place in the world in Deuteronomy 4:32–40, then he tells them that in choosing them Yahweh has *set his love on them* in 7:6–8. Similarly, Paul writes, “he chose us in him . . . *In love* he predestined us” (Eph 1:4–5, emphasis added). With this, the argument of Romans 9–11 is intended to force the realization that God has not chosen his elect on the basis of their deeds (9:11), nor on the basis of the exercise of their will or their best efforts (9:16). Rather, God’s choice arose from his free mercy (9:16, 18). To ignore this understanding of election is to reject the idea that God can choose to demonstrate astonishing love to whomever he pleases (cf. Exod 33:19, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy”). Confusion regarding the doctrine of election is confusion regarding the nature of God’s love.²⁰

Tiessen shows his failure to appreciate the way that God has made mercy precious precisely by making it scarce when he writes,

It is extraordinary that Israel’s role as a witness to the nations was a passive one, if in fact God could not save people without such human missionary activity. . . . It requires us to believe that God’s redemptive program was extremely limited in extent under the old covenant and that God chose for salvation no one outside the relatively small covenant

²⁰See further D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2000).

community, except for a few others who came into contact with them. This is not impossible but it seems implausible (355–56).

This objection is not based on exegesis of texts, but on what Tiessen finds to be plausible regarding what God has done. Would not a better theological method allow the Bible to adjudicate what is plausible or implausible?

Chapter 9 also expositis Tiessen’s tenth thesis, which states in part, “some people are saved who have not yet become Christians” (165). As Tiessen presents it, being “saved” is equivalent to “being justified” and “becoming a Christian” seems to mean “understanding full-blown Christology.” Thus, Tiessen suggests that “people such as Cornelius, Nathanael, ‘probably’ John’s two disciples and others are included by Edwards in the four categories of people without explicit knowledge of Christ who might, nevertheless, be saved” (193). The question, however, is not, How much must one understand about Jesus to be saved? But rather, Does the person trust God’s spoken word of promise? Cornelius trusted Peter’s proclamation. Nathanael believed what the OT said of the coming Messiah. And John’s two disciples believed his testimony regarding Jesus.

Tiessen also defends thesis 11 in chapter 9. Part of this thesis reads, “the faith of Abraham still saves, and we can acknowledge that some Jews may be believers (with an old covenant faith) and hence be saved, although they are not Christians. This is only true, however, of Jews who do not know the real identity of Jesus and who have not knowingly rejected the Messiah” (165). This is problematic first because it affirms that some people who have actually heard the gospel presented and rejected it might nevertheless be saved.²¹ Second, who but God is

²¹Other statements in the volume that are as troubling as this one include the assertion, “We dare not assume to know what a particular individual believes because he or she is a Muslim, a Jew, a Hindu, or a Buddhist” (354). A bit later Tiessen writes, “We must contextualize the faith so that converts and potential converts are able to follow Christ in all areas of their lives but without disrupting their cultural background in ways not necessitated by their new Christian faith” (356). These statements seem to downplay the way that knowing God in Christ produces a radical reorientation of world-view and lifestyle, one that cannot be compatible with other religious systems or cultural ways of life—even in “Bible-belt” cultures that have been influenced by the gospel. The demand to take up the cross and follow Christ, to take every thought captive to the knowledge of Christ, to do all by faith for the glory of God will not and

in a position to discern whether someone has “knowingly rejected the Messiah”? At the end of the book of Acts we see Paul in Rome seeking to persuade his Jewish contemporaries that Jesus is the Messiah (28:17–23). We read that some were convinced while others disbelieved (28:24). Tiessen argues that “centuries of anti-semitism” have made Jews reticent to accept a gospel proclaimed by a largely gentile church. If this argument works, why not argue that centuries of expecting a conquering Messiah would make it so that Jews who reject Paul have not “rejected Jesus himself” (200)? While it is true that a rejection of a misperception of the gospel might not be a rejection of the gospel, believing in a sovereign God allows us to be confident that those he intends to save will hear a presentation of the gospel that they will find compelling. The Bible gives us no grounds for concluding that those who reject the gospel might nevertheless be saved (Matt 10:32–33 and parallels; Acts 13:46; 2 Thess 2:10–12).²²

I am in agreement with Tiessen’s conclusion regarding infants who die in chapter 10: “Scripture is silent concerning the election of infants who die, and so we can express confidence in God’s justice and hopefulness concerning God’s grace, but we cannot be definite about the situation of any individual. We must leave this matter in the hands of the God whom we love and trust” (213). In my judgment, we must also leave the matter of those who never hear the gospel in the hands of the God we love and trust, but Tiessen’s book argues that we can go farther than that.

In the rest of chapter 10 Tiessen defends thesis 13, which suggests that those who were “saved” without knowing Jesus during their lives will meet him at the moment of death and respond to him as they would have had they encountered him during their lives. Tiessen insists

can not be accommodated to other religious perspectives or human culture. To be a friend of the world is to be an enemy of God (James 4:4). One is either for Christ or against him; there is no third way.

²²Cf. Tiessen’s words on 269: “We have to be very careful not to assume that those who have rejected messengers of the gospel, or who have rejected the *particular* message they actually heard, have rejected Jesus.” But Jesus did say, “The one who receives you receives me” (Matt 10:40), “If they persecuted me they will also persecute you” (John 15:20), and “You will know them by their fruits” (Matt 7:16).

that he is not proposing “postmortem evangelism” (217), but he nevertheless suggests that “those whom God has graciously brought into saving relationship with himself during their lives, without giving them knowledge of the incarnation of the Son, need to know the Son in the process of coming to know the Father” (217). Thus, Tiessen proposes that “universal at-death encounters with Christ allows one to confess that faith in Jesus Christ is necessary, while not overemphasizing the need-to-know information about Christ before death” (217–18). Tiessen writes, “Admittedly, however, the proposal that we all meet Christ at death moves us beyond Scripture’s explicit teaching into the speculative” (218). We may add that the notion that people on this side of the cross can be saved apart from explicit faith in Jesus Christ is not only speculative but affirms what several texts deny (John 5:23; 17:3; 1 John 2:23).

Tiessen seeks to fend off such a charge by arguing that these texts address those who reject Jesus when they are confronted with him, while they say nothing about those who never hear of him. John 5:23 and 17:3 may not be open to this objection, but he does not discuss them at length. Tiessen writes, “John 3 is very explicit about the fate of those who see the light in Jesus and reject it because they prefer darkness. It says nothing, however, about those on whom that light has not shone” (128). The assumption here is that since John 3 does not explicitly say “the light shines on all men,” the text cannot be read to mean that those who have not embraced the light are condemned since the light has not shone on all men (cf. John 3:18–21). This is an argument from the silence of John 3 regarding those on whom the light has shone, but it seems to contradict John 1:9, which I think should be translated, “The true light, which *shines on* all men, was coming into the world.”²³ Statements such as this and the one in Colossians 1:23, “the

²³ φωτίζω is generally translated “enlightens” (ESV, NAS) or “gives light” (NIV), but a more contextual understanding of the use of the word in John’s Gospel can be gained when we read this statement as introducing the theme of Jesus as the light of the world in John’s Gospel (many hold that the prologue introduces major themes in John, and for Jesus as the light of the world in John, see 3:19–21; 8:12, etc.). John is not saying that Jesus came as the true light that somehow enables the perceptive capacities of all people, whether they are aware of his existence or not. John is saying that Jesus comes into the world and shines on all people, and, as 3:19–21 and the dialogue in chapter 8 show, the light of his presence reveals whether people love or hate

gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven,” do not indicate that Paul and John are ignorant of the fact that not everyone has heard the gospel—Paul knows the gospel has not gone to Spain and he wants to take it there (Rom 15:20, 24, 28). These texts indicate that all—Jews and Gentiles—have heard and can be saved by the gospel. The apostles do not make recourse to Accessibilistic Inclusivism when they consider these places “where Christ has not been named” (Rom 15:20). Rather, they make recourse to new missionary endeavors to precisely those places, or they write books that can be taken there (John 20:31).

Tiessen writes on 291: “What I am not able to assert, on the basis of Scripture, is that *none* of the elect are to be found among the unevangelized.” But Exclusivists would also reject the assertion that “none of the elect are to be found among the unevangelized.” In fact, it is the presence of the elect among the unevangelized that gives confidence to missionaries that wherever the gospel is proclaimed it will bear fruit (Matt 9:37–38 and parallels; John 4:35; Rom 1:13).

Tiessen asserts, “we are unable to say with certainty that all of those people who died without hearing the gospel are now eternally lost” (223), but we can say with certainty that there is one mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5), and we can say that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom 10:13, note that 10:9 involves confessing that Jesus is Lord). In view of the texts that speak of “greater judgment” (e.g., Matt 11:21–24) for those who receive greater revelation, there would seem to be some room for speculation about a less severe final state. But the Bible gives us no texts that suggest that people who have not trusted in God’s promises might nevertheless be saved. This is not knowledge that should cause us to question God’s justice, but knowledge that should humble us that he has shown to us the mercy of allowing us to hear what he has said and done.

the light (cf. also 1:10–14). For other places where φωτίζω is used in this way in the NT, see 1 Cor 4:5; Rev 18:1; 21:23; 22:5. For places where φωτίζω seems to mean “enlighten” in the sense of “enable capacities” see Eph 1:18; Heb 6:2; 10:32.

Tiessen is suggesting that there is a third category of people—people who have not heard and so cannot trust, but nor have they rejected, and so they cannot be judged (see his discussion on 264). I do not think that this category of people is to be found on the pages of Scripture, and it is not because the biblical authors lack of awareness of those who have not heard. The OT develops a conflict between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman.²⁴ The seed of the serpent are all non-Israelites, and the seed of the woman are the descendants of Abraham. Those who are by birth seed of the serpent can be saved from God’s wrath if they submit themselves to God’s purposes and join themselves to the seed of the woman (see Psalm 87). The Canaanites, Perizzites, Hittites, Assyrians, Ninevites, Babylonians, Edomites and all the rest in the OT have surely never heard the promises of God. This does not deliver them from culpability. The only hope for any of these people—as the cases of Rahab, Naaman, and other non-Israelites in the OT show—is for them to have the knowledge of what Yahweh has said and done imparted to them and then respond to that knowledge in faith. If they respond in faith to what God has done and said, they can be saved. But the Bible gives no indication that there are seed of the serpent who become seed of the woman even though they have no contact with the special revelation given to Israel (cf. this with Tiessen’s 9th chapter). This contrast between the people of God and their enemies is slightly modified in the NT, with the emissaries of Jesus being sent out to make disciples of the nations—nations that were formerly enemies of the nation of Israel. In the description of the end of the age, it seems that John has included among those who lament the fall of Babylon in Revelation 18 those who never heard the gospel. These enemies of God’s people who have prostituted themselves to the great whore Babylon are judged and condemned with the bitch goddess they worshiped.

In chapter 11 Tiessen asks, “Who Is Able to Believe?” Here Tiessen notes that “it seems patently unjust that those who are not given the ability to believe are condemned for not doing

²⁴The term “seed” is a collective singular that can and does refer to both an individual and a group of people. See, for example, the way that Paul says that Jesus is the only seed in Gal 3:16, while the incorporation of believers into Christ makes them all “seed” in Gal 3:28.

so” (232), and he elaborates that “the *strength* of this divine disapproval is difficult to understand if these people were absolutely incapable of repentance and faith” (233). In response to this I would note²⁵ that the point at issue is not human ability but justice itself. It seems that when God judges he does not take into account *ability* to do right and wrong because it is right and wrong that is at issue not ability. The Bible regularly asserts that people are responsible for their actions even though God has sovereignly ordained them (Acts 2:23; Rom 3:5–8, etc.). If God’s assessments are based on an objective analysis of the rightness or wrongness of what has been done, then the question of whether someone had the ability to do otherwise is not the issue. We can also note that people do have the physical ability to do what is right, though they lack the desire to do so.

Tiessen resolves this problem by positing that “it may be that God gives everyone sufficient grace to enable them to believe in him but that he only draws and persuades effectively the elect” (239, italics removed). My main objection to this argument for “universally sufficient enabling grace” is that Tiessen does not cite a single text of Scripture to support it (cf. pp. 239–41). Tiessen seeks to remedy this deficiency in “Appendix 3: Scriptural Support for the Concept of Universally Sufficient Enabling Grace” (493–97), but there he confesses, “By way of specific biblical teaching, one is hard put to cite texts specifically indicating a universal distribution of grace to all people that enables them to respond to divine revelation in a responsible way” (494).²⁶ We can thank Tiessen for his honesty, but the lack of textual support does not keep him from arguing that “first, there are biblical passages that provide an implicit ground for this deduction and, second, there are no biblical passages that negate it” (494). Implications of

²⁵Following an argument made by Jonathan Edwards in *The Freedom of the Will* (see part IV, sect. 1) in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998 reprint of the 1834 ed.), 1:59–60.

²⁶I want to observe that on the traditional reading, general revelation renders all without excuse (Rom 1:20) and is sufficient to maintain human responsibility, so that we do not need a suggestion that has no biblical support—universally sufficient enabling grace—to hold that all people “respond to divine revelation in a responsible way” (494).

biblical texts abound, and those that do not contradict other biblical teaching may be valid.

Tiessen notes that several texts have been cited to refute the idea he is suggesting (John 3:3–5; 6:44; Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 2:1–2, 4–5, and there are others), and to counter these texts he proposes “that another distinction needs to be made *within the ‘inner call’* between an enablement that makes people duly responsible for their failure to respond to the call of divine revelation and an enablement that makes the call efficacious” (495). This is not a distinction that derives from an exegetical analysis of the text. Rather, this distinction is made because Tiessen needs it to sustain his theological case, which appears to argue against what the biblical texts indicate. Are we in a position to suggest that something other than the regenerating empowerment of the Spirit (see John 3:3, 5; 6:63; Eph 2:4–5) is available to counter the human inability taught in John 3:3–5; 6:44; Romans 8:7; 1 Corinthians 2:14; and Ephesians 2:1–2, 4–5?

In chapter 12 Tiessen asks, “Why Should We Send Missionaries?” This chapter argues that evangelism is necessary even for Inclusivists. Tiessen writes, “Although God may be saving people beyond the reach of the church’s gospel proclamation, he desires for them a fullness of life, here and now, that is impossible apart from full knowledge of Christ’s blessings and life in a community of followers of Jesus” (259). Tiessen is correct to point out that evangelism is not an option because of “the necessity of obedience to Christ’s command,” the compulsion that comes from the love of Christ, and “our ultimate goal in life to glorify God” (278). It seems to me that we should be careful to evaluate theological positions primarily on the basis of their conformity to Scripture.²⁷ We may suppose many things about how a particular theological position may influence praxis. It might be that most of our suppositions arise as much from our own prejudices, fears, whims, and blindspots as they do from the actual evidence. The biblical authors do address the wayward praxis of those whose theology is deficient or wrong, but in these accounts the sinful behaviors are generally not predicted as what will result from the theological

²⁷My comments in this section are influenced by the fact that some are inclined to argue against a Calvinistic understanding of Scripture because of its perceived impact on evangelism.

tendency of, say, Paul's opponents in Corinth. Rather, Paul's opponents in Corinth *are living wrongly*, and Paul diagnoses the diseased theology from his perception of the symptoms. He then connects the dots between wrong belief and wrong practice. Thus, it seems to me that those of us who are opponents of Inclusivism would be following Paul's model if we were to first perceive that Inclusivists are not evangelistic and then explain that failure to evangelize as a logical corollary of Inclusivistic theology. The strongest arguments for or against Inclusivism will be biblical, theological, and logical.

Arguing that any position should be rejected because of its perceived effect upon evangelistic or missionary zeal can result in a pragmatism that will falsely assume that if certain behaviors are in place true theology supports them. So in my view we should critique theological positions for not being evangelistic only when they begin to say that evangelism is unnecessary—as the Corinthians apparently had begun to say that sexual purity was unnecessary (cf. 1 Cor 6:12–20).²⁸ Tiessen may in fact lay the groundwork for the conclusion that evangelism is unnecessary when he suggests that when conversing with adherents of other religions, we should recognize “that the member of another religion *may* be personally in saving relationship to God” (441). This does not seem to have been Paul's approach at Athens (Acts 17:16–31).

Tiessen asserts that “Romans 10:14–15 ought not to be cited as clearly excluding all the unevangelized from salvation on the ground that the conditions of hearing the gospel have not been met. Paul was not addressing that issue at all” (269). Tiessen argues regarding Romans 10:14–17, “The conclusion has often been drawn that no one can be saved unless this gospel is heard from missionaries and is believed. . . . this use of the text distorts it from its context in Paul's letter” (265). Tiessen claims, “Paul is not making a statement about whether [Israel] would have been guilty of unbelief if they had not heard the gospel. The point is that they *did*

²⁸It is interesting, however, that Tiessen critiques a view with which he disagrees because he thinks it will have a negative impact on evangelistic fervor. Speaking of a certain approach to other religions he does not agree with, he writes, “It is more likely to be demotivating of evangelism than accessibilism is, and it may minimize the newness of the gospel” (307).

hear it and so they were guilty” (268). It is true that in Romans 10:18–19 Paul asks whether all Israel has heard and affirms that they have, but it seems that Tiessen has not adequately accounted for the argument of 10:14–17. Paul’s line of thought develops as follows:

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (10:13)

“How then shall they call upon whom they have not believed?” (10:14a)

This can be stated positively: People call upon one they trust will deliver them.

“But how will they believe in whom they have not heard?” (10:14b)

This can be stated positively: People do not trust one of whom they have never heard.

“But how will they hear without a preacher?” (10:14c)

This can be stated positively: Preachers make people aware of things, such as the gospel, of which they previously had no knowledge.

Verse 15 deals with the preachers being sent, and verse 16 acknowledges that not all who hear believe. And then verse 17 concludes this portion of Paul’s argument:

“So then faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Messiah.”

The fact that Paul then applies this logic to the question of whether or not Israel has heard in verses 18–21 does not empty these statements of their meaning. Paul has used rhetorical questions to assert that people cannot call upon one they do not trust (10:13–14a), that people cannot trust one of whom they have not heard (10:14b), and that they will not hear unless someone preaches to them (10:14c). Preachers must be sent (10:15), but their message will not be universally received (10:16). Nevertheless, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Messiah” (10:17). One cannot confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead (10:9) unless one has been made aware of those realities. Paul states that confessing that Jesus is Lord and believing that God raised him from the dead results in salvation, and he offers no other means whereby people can be saved.²⁹

²⁹Todd Mangum makes much of the fact that Psalm 19:4 (MT 19:5, LXX 18:5) is cited in Rom 10:18, and he suggests that “Romans 10:18 sanctions speculation, at least, as to whether a ‘wider hope’ may be warranted” (“A Reformed Way,” 129). He then argues that general revelation could only be rightly interpreted if the Holy Spirit were to enable. But as noted above,

Tiessen asserts, “*Nowhere* has Scripture stated that God will not save anyone whom we do not reach with the gospel” (293). This may be technically true, but we do have texts such as 1 Corinthians 1:21, “For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching.” Here Paul seems to say that God has chosen to set things up such that people must have what God has said and done proclaimed to them if they are going to be saved. Romans 10:14–17 seems to say this as well, unless we gloss over the argument and limit its force to the conclusion that “Israel is without excuse . . . because they *have heard* the gospel but have not believed it” (269). Against this way of treating the text see the brief exposition of Romans 10:14–17 above.

Tiessen claims, “To insist that Romans 10:14–15 teaches an exclusive instrumentality of the preached gospel in God’s saving program would require one to deny that saving faith is ever elicited by the many instances of God’s direct encounter with individuals” (268). Even if Tiessen is referring here to such instances as God revealing himself to Abraham (e.g., Gen 12:1–3), we could argue that Abraham’s saving faith was placed in the promises that God made to him and not merely by the encounter abstractly considered (Gen 15:6). Tiessen does not seem to have biblical instances of God’s self-revelation in mind, however, for he goes on to say, “Ecclesiocentrists would likely see those instances as pre-evangelistic, but I see no reason to

there is no indication in the Bible that the Holy Spirit ever works apart from the ministry of Jesus and/or the word of God. As for the possibility that the citation of Psalm 19:4 in Romans 10:18 might sanction speculation regarding a wider hope, we must observe that Paul has already stated his view of the efficacy of general revelation in Rom 1:18–23. Again, that section comprised part of the argument that every mouth is stopped and no one will be justified by works, an argument which begins in 1:18 and continues to its conclusion in 3:19–20. Further, it is difficult to see how “the word of Messiah” (10:17) can be communicated through the general revelation alluded to in Ps 19:4, so I do not think that Paul is indicating that “Christ is preached in the skies.” It seems that Paul is either returning to his conclusion from 1:18–23 that all are without excuse because of what creation makes known about God, resuming that briefly before turning to Israel, those who are without excuse as a result of special revelation. Another possibility would be that Paul is setting up his affirmation that all Israel has heard (which becomes explicit in 10:19) with a reference to Israel’s enlightened ability to know God through general revelation (10:18) because of the fact that Moses (10:19) and Isaiah (10:20–21) have proclaimed special revelation to them. On Psalm 19, see James K. Hoffmeier, “‘The Heavens Declare the Glory of God’: The Limits of General Revelation,” *TJ* 21 (2000), 17–24.

insist that saving faith could not be elicited by the Holy Spirit in these cases, even if God may later bring knowledge of the gospel to these people. We know only of those to whom this has happened; others, who may never have gotten the gospel, are necessarily unknown to us” (268). This seems to urge the denial of what Romans 10:14–15 teaches in order to make room for what God might have done for people who might exist. But once again we must observe that according to the Bible saving faith is not a strong interest in things that are vaguely spiritual but explicit trust in what God has promised and accomplished. It would seem, then, that Romans 10:14b, “But how shall they believe in whom they have not heard?” indicates that saving faith is impossible apart from the knowledge of what God has done in Christ.

Tiessen asserts, “Paul never speculated about what would happen to those to whom that gospel was not preached” (277). But is this not what drives Paul’s argument in a text such as Romans 1:18–23? If Paul had not considered the question of those who had never heard, why would he feel the need to assert that there is enough to be discerned about God from the created order to render all people without excuse (Rom 1:20)? Tom Schreiner has pointed out to me that Ephesians 2:11–12 also speaks to this issue, for in that passage Paul describes Gentiles before the gospel came to them as those who were without God and without hope.

Tiessen sets forth what he sees as the heart of the issue when he writes: “We must realize that the point of accessibilism is not to undermine the uniqueness of the gospel or to diminish the necessity of its proclamation; *it is to vindicate God’s justice toward people who have not heard the gospel*” (283–84, emphasis added). Paul set forth his vindication of the justice of God toward people who have not heard the gospel in Romans 1:18–23, and Paul’s version is not Accessibilism.

Part 2: How Do the Religions Fit into God’s Purposes in the World?

The second part of *Who Can Be Saved?* begins in chapter 13 when Tiessen takes up the question, “How Do Religions Come into Being?” Tiessen distinguishes between religion and theology, states that religion includes belief, feeling, and ethics, and proposes that “religions

come into being as ambiguous responses to divine revelation” (298–99). Most troubling about this definition of religion is that Tiessen lumps Christianity together with the other world religions and claims that it too is an “ambiguous response to divine revelation” (see 315–16). In this it seems to me that Tiessen fails to distinguish between “the faith once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3), the church that Jesus himself is building (Matt 16:18), which Paul calls “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15), and the mistaken and wrong actions of fallen Christians.

Tiessen fails to distinguish between “the faith” and its faithless practitioners when he writes, “There are certainly good and positive things that have resulted from the religions, but we must also recall the evils of temple prostitution, human sacrifice, caste systems, satanic worship, cannibalism and other such departures from God’s norms—including the Christian justification of slavery and racism at times in history” (311–12). It is one thing for a religion to command human sacrifice, prostitution, caste systems, or slavery, but it is quite another thing for wicked practitioners of a religion to use religion to justify their sinful behaviors. Other religions inculcate these abuses through their wicked laws, but Christianity no more dictates slavery than it dictated the crusades.

Tiessen fails to see this distinction between the faith and its followers again when he writes, “Sadly, the demons can also be at work within biblical covenantal religion, as is evident in Christ’s warnings to the churches in Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira (Rev 2:8–15)” (313). Satan and his minions can perhaps deceive individual Christians—even Christians whose role it is to shepherd large numbers of other Christians—but I would argue that for demons to “be at work within biblical covenantal religion” would be for the demons to have been at work in the revelation of Christianity in the writing of the Bible! Over these things the forces of hell will not prevail—Jesus will build his church and the gates of hell will not stand against it, and the inspiration of the Bible by the power of the Holy Spirit safeguards it against corruption. We must distinguish between the sinful actions of Christians, whose regeneration has not eradicated their depravity, and the pure and true faith we confess.

Tiessen writes, “The Old Testament clearly attests that some institutionalized and well-intentioned religious practices—in spite of the fact that they had been specifically commanded by God—not only were self-serving, but were an outright abomination to God (1 Sam 15:22–23; Is 1:10–15; Amos 5:21–27; Mic 6:6–8)” (316). It seems that Tiessen has missed the point of the prophetic critique. The prophets in these instances are not calling their contemporaries to reject the worthless and corrupt practices Moses commanded. Rather, the prophets are saying that *when doing what Moses commanded is motivated by anything other than love for Yahweh and faith in his promise that perfunctory obedience is worthless and corrupt*. The point is not that they should no longer sacrifice, but that they should no longer sacrifice if their hearts are far from Yahweh, for he can tell when he is only being given lip-service (Isa 29:13–14). God is not correcting himself—which is what is implied if we hold that God’s commands later became an abomination to him. He is calling the Israelites back to what Moses commanded: total commitment to Yahweh shown in obedience to the law (Deut 6:4–6; 11:8).

Tiessen continues, “There was a Jewish zeal for the Mosaic law that sometimes represented a human attempt to earn salvation (Mt 23:1–37; Lk 11:37–52), and *the same is true of many of the ascetic practices, pilgrimages, prayer and meditation that different religions, including Christianity, enjoin on their followers*” (316, emphasis added). Because Tiessen fails to distinguish between what the Bible enjoins on Christians and what mistaken Christians enjoin on other Christians—and the import of this distinction cannot be understated—the claim that “Christianity” “enjoins upon its followers” “a human attempt to earn salvation” is tantamount to saying that Christianity is actually a legalistic religion. Because Tiessen does not distinguish between what the Bible commands and what legalistic Christians command, this implies that the Bible might be a legalistic book with erroneous statements that will actually mislead people into “a human attempt to earn salvation.” Is the Bible totally true and trustworthy? Is it an infallible guide in all matters of faith and practice? From the failure to distinguish between Christianity—which is a religion that is *revealed in and by the Bible*—and the corruptions of Christianity introduced by fallible human beings, Tiessen’s statements might lead to negative judgements as

to whether the Bible might lead someone into legalism or worse. This impression is strengthened when Tiessen later writes, “Christianity is an ambiguous phenomenon, with purely human and even demonic influence *in its construction*, expressing both appropriation and suppression of God’s truth *in its beliefs, attitudes and practices*” (386, emphasis added). Does the failure to distinguish between *what the Bible says* and *what mistaken Christians believe, do, and say* leave open the possibility that Tiessen thinks that there are places where the Bible is wrong, misleading, and possibly even demonic? This is hopefully not what Tiessen intends to communicate, but what he has written could lead to such conclusions.

Tiessen does not argue for but asserts the notion that “God appropriated divine names and religious forms” (322), apparently with no consideration of the possibility that the direction of influence could have gone the other way. Rather than the true God appropriating elements “from contemporary culture without endorsing the religion” modeling “accommodation and assimilation without syncretism” (322), it might be that the corresponding elements in the false religions are demonic appropriations of the divine reality (cf. 1 Cor 8:4; 2 Cor 11:14).

Conclusion

Negatively stated: “The one who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him” (John 5:23). Positively stated: Eternal life is knowing God and Jesus the Messiah (John 17:3). And yet Tiessen argues that one can have a saving knowledge of God even if one does not know Jesus. Tiessen is willing to propose what the Bible does not say, and he is willing to introduce new theological categories to sustain his argument. His “universal at death encounters with Christ” (216–18) and his “universally sufficient enabling grace” (239–41) are examples of a willingness to introduce theological categories for which there is no biblical evidence. This suggests that in order to make sense of the Bible we must add new theological ideas to the ones the Bible teaches. This is to be distinguished from allowing one passage to influence our reading of another passage. Nor is what Tiessen does akin to using words the Bible does not use, such as “Trinity” and “inerrancy,” to describe realities to which the Bible clearly bears witness (e.g., Ps

12:6; Matt 28:19). We can also distinguish between what Tiessen does and the way that background historical or cultural information can inform our understanding of various passages. Whereas it is acceptable in Christian theology to use words the Bible does not use to describe truths the Bible teaches, it is not legitimate to add theological concepts to those articulated in the Bible. If we allow that process, where does it end?

Some final comments are in order about the references to “discomfort” among evangelicals “about the teaching that everyone who does not hear the gospel about Jesus will be damned” (125).³⁰ Emotionalism may have great appeal in evangelicalism, but we must base our theology on the Bible not on our feelings. These observations tell us more about how deeply evangelicals have imbibed the spirit of the age than they tell us about sound doctrine. We may also ask how much is really gained from accommodation to emotionalism if we are going to maintain basic theological commitments. Tiessen seeks a way to offer hope to people in whose cultures there is a “very high regard for ancestors” (134–35), but he later writes, “*we cannot assure our hearers that any of their ancestors were saved*” (139). Is Accessibilism really any help to those whose concern for their ancestors is keeping them from Christ if we cannot guarantee the destiny of the ancestors?

In my estimation, Accessibilistic Inclusivism is based on extra-biblical considerations, demands that unbiblical theological categories be introduced, denies what the Bible affirms (e.g., that all are without excuse because of general revelation), and affirms what the Bible denies (that people can be saved apart from conscious faith in the promises of God, and now that the Messiah has come, in Jesus the Messiah). Let us take every thought captive to the knowledge of Christ, and let us take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

³⁰Cf. the similar expression regarding “implications” that “have troubled many Christians” (141).