

NO OTHER NAME: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized

by John Sanders

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A REVIEW BY EDWARD FUDGE

In this comprehensive biblical, theological and historical study, Sanders addresses head-on a question we all encounter but often hesitate to answer: what of those who die without hearing the good news of Jesus Christ? The query is statistically significant, since it involves "the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived" (p. 16). It is also fairly new, says Sanders, who notes both the lack of anxiety by the first-century church about the fate of those beyond their evangelistic reach (p. 202), and later Christendom's apparent presumption (until 15th and 16th century explorations discovered nations formerly unknown) that the gospel already had gone to the entire human race (p. 19).

Sanders scrutinizes and rejects the universalist answer that all people will be saved, but commendably avoids the easy temptation to dismiss it without an even-handed analysis (pp. 81-124).

Interestingly, most evangelicals today expect God to save many who die without personal exposure to the gospel of Jesus Christ. That number includes faithful Jews and Gentiles born *before* Jesus, who (like Christian believers) will be saved through faith in God, by virtue of Christ's atonement, even though (unlike Christian believers) they died without knowing about it. For them, Christ's death was *ontologically* necessary (they could not be saved without it), but not *epistemologically* necessary (they did not have to know about it to enjoy its benefits.)

What is more, Sanders points out, most evangelicals today (though not during earlier Christian centuries) confidently expect the salvation of all who die as infants and young children, who comprise at least half of the unevangelized born after Jesus. Sanders presents an intriguing historical summary of Christian thinking about infant salvation, concluding that no view lacks difficulty and that the issue needs more serious reflection (pp. 287-305).

Even narrowed to responsible adults, however, the haunting question lingers. Does God judge them all "A.D." even though they are "informationally B.C." (p. 11)? Sanders acknowledges that most evangelical will answer "Yes": those who live *after* Christ's atoning sacrifice must personally hear of it and accept it by faith to benefit from it on the Day of Judgment. He labels this the "restrictivist" view, and (as with all viewpoints presented here) summarizes its key biblical texts, arrays its theological concerns, then critiques its conclusions (pp. 37-79).

But other evangelicals harbor a "wider hope." Like their restrictivist brethren, "wider hope" advocates also insist "that salvation is offered only through the work of Christ, that it is a complete work of God's free grace, that it is appropriated only by faith, and that the Bible is the final authority for faith and practice" (p. 32).

Proponents of the "wider hope" reach that conclusion by a variety of routes. Some follow the

suggestion of Aquinas, that God will send the gospel message (by human or other means) to all people of faith, or at least to those who would believe the gospel if they heard it (pp. 151-164). Others suggest that every person who comes to death without having heard the gospel will encounter it at that moment and have occasion to decide (pp. 164-167). Still others propose a post-mortem presentation of the gospel, a concept Sanders labels "eschatological evangelization" (pp. 177-214). Neither scenario involves a "second chance," Sanders notes, but rather a first opportunity to hear the gospel and to respond to it in faith.

However, the most prevalent expression of the "wider hope" today (and, in Sanders' analysis, the form most supportable by Scripture) is a rationale he terms "inclusivism." This understanding also insists on the necessity of a personal act of faith in God in order to appropriate the grace that Christ brought, but with one important distinction. Inclusivists believe that people who never hear the good news about Jesus Christ can exercise saving trust in God as revealed to them by general revelation, and ultimately enjoy the eternal benefit of Christ's indispensable atonement -- although they remain bereft of assurance, hope and countless other spiritual blessings throughout this life. Sanders marshals an impressive array of biblical texts from both OT and NT (pp. 217-224) as well as theological considerations (pp. 224-263) which seem to support this view. He also responds to the objection that this understanding devalues the need for missions, meanwhile raising additional thoughtful questions about evangelistic motivation, the benefits of the gospel for life on earth, and the character of God (pp. 283-286).

As for errata and criticisms: the proofreader missed a duplicative "the" (p. 292, line 19); I missed what OT Jews learned about God from pagans (p. 242); and Peter might be surprised to know what Sanders thinks he learned at Cornelius' house (p. 222-223). It remains for Wesleyans such as Sanders and Calvinists such as Neal Punt (pp. 29, 228, 278, 302) to collaborate on this critical issue, either transcending traditional conceptual boundaries or at least utilizing them in service of a greater cause.

Sanders has given us an impressive example of evangelical scholarship at its best. *No Other Name* demonstrates the sort of humility, honesty and thoroughness that should typify the work product of all who claim Scripture as their final authority, and certainly of all who expect a respectful hearing from a world that does not share their evangelical assumptions.

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