

salvation comes through Jesus Christ, it does not follow that there must be personal, self-conscious faith for salvation to take place. God in his grace, it is argued, may save some people by the merits of his Son, without their ever having heard of his Son. So is it not legitimate to ask whether the books of the Johannine corpus leave room for salvation “through means other than specific faith in Christ?”

So yes, the question may be asked. Indeed, in today’s climate, it *must* be asked. Still, in some ways it is perverse. It is a little like the questions teenagers sometimes ask: “Is there anything in the Bible to stop me from doing X?” “What’s wrong with Y?” Once again, the questions must be asked, and answered. But at best, such questions are remarkably immature. They try to get the Bible to answer things which, strictly speaking, are not quite on the Bible’s agenda. Worse, they focus on something just slightly skewed. As compared with the teen’s question, surely the Bible’s focus is on how to please God, what are our most important priorities, and the like—not what we can get away with. Similarly, there can be little doubt that the Bible’s focus is on the plan of salvation God has provided. Men and women can be reconciled to their Maker through the death of the Son he sent into the world. Men and women must repent and put their faith in him. The gospel must be preached everywhere, and will draw people together from every tribe and language and people and nation. Strictly speaking, it does not focus an enormous amount of attention on the question as to whether some might be saved even if they do not consciously trust Christ, or if so, how many such a group might comprise. So I am being asked if the Bible, in one of its corpora, allows space for such a view.

SBJT: Does the Johannine corpus leave room for salvation through means other than specific faith in Christ?

D. A. Carson: In some ways, this question is remarkably perverse.

I understand why it must be asked, of course: not for a moment am I suggesting that there is perversity in the editor, who put the question to me. It has to be asked because today there are increasingly strident voices that argue that although all

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It is a bit like trying to disprove a negative proposition. Moreover, this particular vision of the “anonymous Christian” (the expression is Karl Rahner’s) is on the face of it remarkably insulting to devout believers of other faiths. Most devout Hindus or Muslims that I know would not like to be informed that they are really “anonymous Christians,” anymore than devout Christians want to be told that they are “anonymous Buddhists.”

Certainly the Johannine corpus includes many passages that insist on some kind of exclusion. One thinks, for instance, of Thomas’ question and Jesus’ answer. Thomas protests, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answers, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:5, 6). But the critic might well respond that this sort of text does not really address the crucial question. For both sides of this particular debate agree that people gain salvation solely through Jesus Christ: no one comes to the Father except through him. But does this passage, they ask, necessarily exclude those who may be saved by him who have nevertheless not self-consciously reposed their faith in him, because they have never had the privilege of hearing about him?

At one level, of course, the critics are right: *formally*, John 14:6 does not address that question. Nevertheless the Gospel of John so repeatedly insists that *faith in Jesus* is the condition of salvation that the drift of this book is all in one direction. God gave his Son so that “whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). Again: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from

death to life” (5:24). And this is the fruit of God loving the world and sending his Son into the world (3:16,17): in other words, the mission of the Son into the world is to result in people believing in him and experiencing eternal life. The Son’s mission is never cast as providing eternal life for certain people whether they have believed in him or not. If the Gospel of John does not *formally* exclude such a possibility, it is only because it does not set out to address that particular question. Its direction does not encourage speculation along that front.

First John is more focused yet. As in the Fourth Gospel, there is an emphasis on the cross as the place where sin was dealt with, and therefore as the ground on which people approach God (2:2, 4:10). Potentially, that ground is sufficient for the whole world (2:2). At the same time, 1 John is patently clear that the whole world is not saved. When this epistle describes who is “in” and who is “out,” it deploys a number of criteria, what Robert Law famously called “the tests of life.” Law’s category has its problems, but these need not concern us. Law detected three “tests”: Genuine Christians (a) love other Christians, (b) do what Christ says, and (c) believe the truth, in particular the truth about who Jesus is.

It is this latter category that is most applicable to the topic at hand, precisely because it is worded in several ways. In 1 John 2:23, we are told, “No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” The critic may respond, “Yes, but this text does not specifically deal with the person who does not *deny* the Son, yet who has not specifically *acknowledged* the Son, either. That person may not even have heard of the Son.” Formally, of course, that is

correct—though on the face of it, it flies in the face of the tenor of the book. Moreover, 1 John 4:2-3 is even stronger: “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does *not acknowledge* Jesus is not from God.” Formally, this excludes those who *do not acknowledge* who Jesus is. Doubtless someone may argue that this is merely a rhetorical way of saying that such people *deny* who Jesus is. But if the critic is allowed to appeal to the larger rhetoric of the document, so may I—and I insist that the rhetoric of the document aligns who is “in” with certain faith-content and certain performance-in-life—even while insisting that the *ground* of acceptance before God is the atonement. The only reason one wants to appeal to the most pedantic reading is because that is the kind of pedantry the critics deploy to avoid what the text says in, say, John 14:6. If we respond with the same level of pedantry, citing 1 John 4:2-3, the text is against them.

The same sort of polarization between who is “in” and who is “out” is found in the Apocalypse, though there, of course, the imagery is very different. In the massive vision of Revelation 4-5, no one is found who is worthy to approach the throne of God and open the seals of the scroll in his right hand (5:3). In the symbolism of the vision, this means that no one was found worthy to bring to pass all God’s purposes for blessing and judgment. John weeps at the news, until an interpreting elder reassures him: the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is also the Lamb, who emerges from the center of the throne of God, has prevailed, and he alone brings to pass God’s purposes. As the book progresses, a massive dualism controls the dramatic apocalyptic symbolism. Either

one bears the mark of the beast and is thereby spared the beast’s wrath, but faces the wrath of the Lamb, or one bears the mark of the Lamb and is thereby spared the Lamb’s wrath, but faces the wrath of the beast (Rev 13-14). Implicitly, the question becomes, whose wrath do you want to face? Everyone bears one mark or the other. Attempts by some writers to define “the eternal gospel” in Revelation 14:6 as a generic appeal to the God of creation or the like, without reference to the Lamb and his death which are so central to the unfolding drama of this book, are desperate expedients deployed to support a lost cause. Specifically, this appeal argues that the content of “the eternal gospel” in 14:6 is simply to “Fear God and give him glory” (14:7). But by this stage in the church’s history, “gospel” is a word so bound up with the good news of Jesus this is an extraordinarily ahistorical reading—the more so in a book in which the Lamb, both slaughtered and reigning—is the One who alone has brought about God’s purposes for redemption and judgment. It is better by far to understand 14:7 and its exhortation to fear God to be the warning added to (but not identified with) “the eternal gospel” (14:6) that has already been explained.

So does the Johannine corpus “leave room for salvation through means other than specific faith in Christ”? Certainly not on its most obvious reading.