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Abstract Review of *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (2001), by John Sanders; and *What about Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (1995), by Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders.

JOSEPH SMITH AND THE PROBLEM OF THE UNEVANGELIZED

David L. Paulsen and Brent Alvord

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One of the puzzles challenging the loyal follower of Christ is how to make sense of the scriptural assertion that there is “none other name under heaven [save Jesus Christ] given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Faithful Christians have no reservations in recognizing Christ as their sole source of salvation, yet how are they to make sense of the fate of the myriad souls who have lived and died on this earth never hearing the name of Christ nor having adequate opportunity to accept his salvific gift? Do they suffer eternally? Are they forever excluded from the joy of eternal life with God? This question has troubled Christian thinkers for centuries. In his book *The Logic of God Incarnate*, Thomas Morris, former professor of philosophy at Notre Dame, explains the difficulty (which he calls a “scandal”) this way:

Review of John Sanders. *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001. xviii + 315 pp., with index. \$28.00.

Review of Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders. *What about Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995. 168 pp., with index. \$14.00.

The scandal . . . arises with a simple set of questions asked of the Christian theologian who claims that it is only through the life and death of God incarnated in Jesus Christ that all can be saved and reconciled to God: How can the many humans who lived and died before the time of Christ be saved through him? They surely cannot be held accountable for responding appropriately to something of which they could have no knowledge. Furthermore, what about all the people who have lived since the time of Christ in cultures with different religious traditions, untouched by the Christian gospel? . . . How could a just God set up a particular condition of salvation, the highest end of human life possible, which was and is inaccessible to most people? Is not the love of God better understood as universal, rather than as limited to a mediation through the one particular individual, Jesus of Nazareth? Is it not a moral as well as a religious scandal to claim otherwise?¹

Stephen Davis, a professor of philosophy at Claremont's McKenna College, has expressed similar perplexity. In a recent issue of *Modern Theology*, he put the problem this way:

Suppose there was a woman named Oohku who lived from 370–320 B.C. in the interior of Borneo. Obviously, she never heard of Jesus Christ or the Judeo-Christian God; she was never baptized, nor did she ever make any institutional or psychological commitment to Christ or to the Christian church. She *couldn't* have done these things; she was simply born in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Is it right for God to condemn this woman to eternal hell just because she was never able to come to God through Christ? Of course not. . . . God is just and loving.²

1. Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 174–75. Morris is not sure how to resolve the “scandal,” although he offers several solutions, including universalism (p. 176) and inclusivism (p. 177).

2. Stephen T. Davis, “Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant,” *Modern Theology* 6/2 (January 1990): 176. Davis cautiously explores postmortem evangelization as a possible answer to the question.

The problem that Morris and Davis state can be expressed in terms of an inconsistent triad, a set of three premises, the conjunction of any two of which apparently entails the falsity of the third:

1. God is almighty, perfectly loving and just, and desires that all his children be saved.
2. Salvation comes only in and through one's personal acceptance of Christ's substitutionary atonement for their sins.
3. Vast numbers of God's children have lived and died without hearing of Christ or without having had a fair chance to personally accept his atonement.

Premise 3 seems indisputable,³ forcing us, it seems, to give up either premise 1 or 2, both of which seem warranted on biblical authority. So how are we to resolve the inconsistent triad?

John Sanders⁴ acquaints us with the major Christian answers to this question, including his own answer, in two illuminating books, the first of which he authored and the second of which he edited and coauthored.

In *No Other Name*, Sanders provides a prodigiously researched, well-organized, and clear presentation and critique of the main contemporary and historical answers to the question. In *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* Sanders and two others (Gabriel Fackre and Ronald Nash)⁵ explain and defend their personal answers

3. Some deny this, however, claiming that every person at the moment of death has a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, who provides them an opportunity to accept his gift of salvation. Most adherents of this view, appropriately known as the "final-option theory," are today found in the Roman Catholic tradition.

4. John Sanders is a research professor of philosophy and religion in the Department of Bible and Religion at Huntington University. Dr. Sanders was most recently the Extraordinary Fellow at the University of Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion. He earned his ThD in systematic and philosophical theology from the University of South Africa. Sanders has authored or edited three books that have been listed in the top twenty of *Christianity Today* magazine's book-of-the-year awards.

5. Gabriel Fackre is Abbot Professor of Christian Theology Emeritus at Andover Newton Theological School, the oldest seminary chair in America. He is the author of thirty books in the fields of theology and ethics and past president of the American Theological Society. Ronald Nash is a professor of philosophy and theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. He previously spent twenty-seven years as a professor of philosophy and as head of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Western Kentucky University. Nash is the author or editor of more than twenty books.

to the question in a lively three-way debate. Sanders defends inclusivism, Fackre argues for the postmortem evangelization of the dead (a position he calls “divine perseverance”), and Nash represents the restrictivist camp. Each author also provides a critical response to each of the others’ positions. In this review, we consider the two books together, focusing on the comprehensive study of Christian responses in *No Other Name* and treating the personal positions defended by the authors in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* in conjunction with their appearance in the general study. A major defect of both books—especially *No Other Name*, which purports to be a comprehensive treatment of all the principal responses to the problem—is their failure to mention perspectives specific to doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We will remedy this defect a bit as we review Sanders’s books. In our concluding section, we will thoroughly address the views presented in these books in the light of LDS theology, examining possible common ground while accentuating the unique ways in which modern-day revelation sheds light on the fate of the unevangelized.

No Other Name is divided into three main parts. In part one, Sanders provides a clear explanation of the book’s basic question. In part two, he explores two positions at opposite ends of the soteriology spectrum: restrictivism (Nash’s stance in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*), which affirms that only those who hear of and accept Christ in this life will be saved; and universalism, which affirms that everyone will be saved. Part three covers three “wider-hope” views, each of which holds that while salvation may not be universally achieved, it is nonetheless universally accessible. These three wider-hope views are universal evangelization before death, universal evangelization after death (Fackre’s stance in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*), and universally accessible salvation apart from evangelization—otherwise known as inclusivism (Sanders’s stance in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*). For each of these five positions, Sanders explains the underlying theological rationale, sets out key biblical proof texts, identifies leading proponents of the position, and provides a historical bibliography. He provides a biblical

and theological critique of each position, and he ends the book with his general conclusions and an appendix that summarizes Christian views on the salvation or damnation of infants.

With this abstract in mind, we now move into a more detailed summary of *No Other Name*, relating the main strands of thought and, where appropriate, emphasizing Fackre's, Nash's, and Sanders's positions in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*

Examination of *No Other Name* and *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*

Formulation of the Problem

Sanders begins *No Other Name* by asking the fundamental question: if God is all-loving and all-powerful and desires all his children to be saved, and Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life,” and “no man cometh unto the Father, but by [him]” (John 14:6), then why do relatively so few people have the chance to hear of Christ and the gospel in this life? Some Christian thinkers respond with “reverent agnosticism” (*No Other Name*, p. 18), denying that God has revealed sufficient information for us to adequately answer the question. Sanders disagrees, affirming that the Bible contains enough information “for the construction of a biblically satisfying and theologically sound answer” (*No Other Name*, p. 17). He admits that such a theological construction requires inference but sees this as both necessary and beneficial. If no speculation ever existed, he argues, we would have very little doctrine and even less theology. Many ideas we now consider doctrine have not been explicitly stated in scripture but have been derived through the reasoning of the church fathers and others who used the tools of speculative theology (*No Other Name*, p. 17).

Sanders then proceeds to explain more fully the “two theological axioms” that give rise to the inconsistent triad, otherwise called the soteriological problem of evil. The first axiom affirms that God genuinely desires the salvation of all persons; the second, that God decrees that salvation can come only in and through Jesus Christ (*No Other Name*, p. 25). Given that most of the human race has remained

ignorant of Christ, these two axioms give rise to a significant contradiction. Sanders clarifies the second axiom by distinguishing two ways of understanding the necessity of Christ for salvation: “All the views surveyed in this book affirm the ontological necessity of Jesus for salvation but sharply disagree regarding the nature and timing of epistemological necessity” (*No Other Name*, p. 30). That is, all views affirm that without the atoning work of Christ there is no salvation, but they disagree as to whether (and, if so, when) conscious awareness or acceptance of Christ’s salvific work is needed. This disagreement, Sanders says, is the fundamental dividing line between many of the views discussed in *No Other Name*.

Next, Sanders introduces the very important concept of what he calls “control beliefs”:

The question of the [fate of the] unevangelized intersects with such vital issues as the nature of God (his love and power), the problem of evil, and election and damnation. The views we take on such subjects are of immense importance because they serve as “control beliefs” that guide and control the way we investigate and interpret evidence on other topics. They form the boundaries within which answers are possible. (*No Other Name*, p. 31)

It is no small fact that our understanding of God governs how we interpret scripture, events in our lives, and the world, including our stance on the fate of the unevangelized.⁶ With the issue thus clarified,

6. For instance, Sanders says, traditional evangelical theology affirms “Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone. These affirmations delineate 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.” Of his personal control beliefs, he writes: “My treatment of the materials in this work is also influenced by my belief in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus for the sins of every human being, my understanding of sin as rebellion against God that affects every area of our lives, my belief that God desires to redeem every human being who has ever lived, and my belief that an ‘act of faith’ is necessary for appropriating salvation into our lives. One final guiding belief is that although the Bible is the authoritative norm for theology, it must nevertheless be interpreted” (*No Other Name*, 32).

Sanders proceeds to outline and examine the principal answers to the question.

The Two Extremes—Restrictivism and Universalism

Restrictivism and universalism are indeed on opposite ends of the soteriology spectrum. Restrictivism affirms that few are saved; universalism asserts that all are saved. Restrictivists base their position on four categories of biblical proof texts: (1) texts that affirm the particularity and exclusiveness of salvation in Jesus Christ; (2) texts that illustrate the sinfulness of humanity and the hopelessness of life without Jesus; (3) texts that speak of the importance of hearing the gospel and repenting; and (4) texts that speak of the “narrowness of the true path” (*No Other Name*, pp. 38–41, quotation at p. 41).

Sanders identifies six theological control beliefs that direct restrictivist thinking. The “first and most important control belief . . . is the principle that Jesus is the only savior and that there is no way to possess saving faith other than to know him” (*No Other Name*, p. 42). Saving faith requires knowledge of “special revelation”—in other words, knowledge of Christ and his atonement. The natural question, then, becomes the amount, or specifically the content, of this “special revelation.” Here much disagreement arises, and Sanders ably outlines those disagreements, both historical and contemporary. A corollary restrictivist control belief is that general revelation does *not* provide a means to salvation (*No Other Name*, p. 45), with “general revelation” meaning the awareness given through creation and providence to every person of God’s existence and his spiritual and moral standards and expectations. While Latter-day Saints are not accustomed to using the term *general revelation*, they would undoubtedly agree that God, through the “Light of Christ,” enlightens the entire human family, inclining them to belief in a divine reality, enabling them to distinguish between good and evil, and disposing them to choose rightly. They would also likely agree that while this universal knowledge is not sufficient for salvation, the revelatory process is nonetheless a gradual step-by-step process where light cleaveth unto greater

light (see D&C 88:40) and personal accountability is proportionate to the light possessed at the moment of choice.

The third restrictivist control belief is “that the ‘act of faith’ must occur before a person dies—that is to say, there is no entertainment of the possibility of evangelization after death” (*No Other Name*, p. 46). Death seals our destinies.

Fourth, restrictivists hold that the unevangelized deserve condemnation, for “every unevangelized person rejects Jesus Christ implicitly when he or she sins against the truth” (*No Other Name*, p. 47) because Jesus is this truth against which they are sinning. The dispensation of general revelation serves to condemn but not save. If this is indeed the case, Sanders says (and rightly in our judgment) this raises concerns about the justice of God.

The fifth theological consideration is found in the implications of restrictivism for missionary work. “Belief that all the unevangelized are lost” provides great, if not the only reasonable, “motivation for missionary endeavors” (*No Other Name*, p. 48).

Last is the doctrine of limited atonement (*No Other Name*, p. 50), which affirms that Christ did not die for all human beings but merely for those select few whose salvation was predestined before the foundations of the earth by and through God’s sovereign will. Thus, no need to worry about the salvation of people such the aborigine or early Chinese Gentiles—they were simply not “chosen.” Given the immense scriptural witness of God’s perfect love, many Christians, including John Sanders and Latter-day Saints, find the doctrine of limited atonement totally unpersuasive.⁷ Sanders then adds his negative assessment of restrictivism, introduces us to its leading defenders (including Augustine and Calvin), and ends the chapter with a historical bibliography.

In *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* Nash defends a restrictivist position but in a methodologically odd way. Rather than making a constructive case for restrictivism or even attempting a

7. Indeed, the doctrine of limited atonement is repudiated by our third Article of Faith, which states: “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, *all mankind* may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.”

full and clear statement of it, Nash uses his allotted space to further rebut Fackre's (postmortem evangelization) and Sanders's (inclusivism) stances. Nash does, however, forewarn the reader of his unusual methodological approach.⁸ Apparently, he expects his readers to hold the same assumption he does—that the scriptures by their very nature teach restrictivism and, therefore, any other interpretation must shoulder the burden of proof. Thus Nash claims his “disproof” of the other positions proves his own by default. We agree with Sanders and Fackre that Nash begs the question.

On the opposite pole from restrictivism is universalism, which affirms the necessity of salvation in Jesus Christ but nonetheless maintains that “all human beings will ultimately be reconciled to God, that none will be eternally damned.” This is the only way, proponents say, to “harmonize God's universal salvific will with the plight of the unevangelized” (*No Other Name*, p. 81). Supportive theological arguments center on God's universal atonement, his universal salvific will, and his sovereign love and power (*No Other Name*, p. 89). God has both the ability and the desire to save all people; therefore, he saves all people.

There are, however, divisions within universalism, one of which concerns human freedom. One camp claims that God overrides human freedom in saving all persons; the other side claims that all persons will eventually *freely* choose salvation in Christ. Another division separates universalists into restorationists (those who believe in a remedial hell out of which the unevangelized may choose to come)

8. Nash writes “Several features of my presentation may puzzle some readers. Some may think that the content and organization of this chapter fail adequately to present a case for restrictivism. That is, they may wonder why I do not spend more of my space laying out a detailed, constructive case for restrictivism. A proper answer to this misunderstanding involves an analogy between my overall argument for restrictivism and the kinds of argument Christians offer in support of such doctrines or theological positions as creation *ex nihilo*, the Trinity and Calvinism. The set of reasons that Christians believe in the Trinity usually begins with a number of well-known passages of Scripture, such as Matthew 28:19–20. But our trinitarianism is also inseparable from the total unacceptability of the other options that are out there. Historically, once Christians rejected unitarianism, modalism and the host of other alternatives that they found incompatible with Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity began to take shape. A similar situation exists with respect to this debate” (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 109).

and ultrauniversalists (those who hold no version of hell, asserting that all will be saved immediately) (*No Other Name*, p. 92).

Sanders next focuses on the doctrine of God's persistence: the feeling that "since God's love cannot be limited by our earthly time, there will be countless eons in the afterlife in which he might finally achieve his plan of universal redemption. We cannot escape God's persistent love in time or space" (*No Other Name*, p. 93).

Last is the universalist view that "God's justice must be understood as an expression of his love. Love is the central attribute in the nature of God. It must not be subsumed or even placed alongside his justice as it has been in traditional theology" (*No Other Name*, p. 94). Eternal punishment for finite sins seems unjustly disproportionate. Thus the traditional view and purpose of hell as a place of eternal punishment is displaced with a more "remedial and pedagogical place of transformation" (*No Other Name*, p. 96). This fits nicely with some LDS teachings about the postmortal life, though, like C. S. Lewis, Latter-day Saints allow for the possibility that there may be "rebels to the end." Among the leading defenders of universalism are Origen, Charles Chauncy, and John A. T. Robinson.

Before Sanders outlines the historical bibliography, he includes a brief evaluation of a subset of universalist believers: the radical pluralists who no longer hold to the particularity and finality of salvation in Christ. Rather, "they believe that all religions are valid and none may truthfully claim supremacy" (*No Other Name*, p. 115). Sanders disagrees with radical pluralism on the grounds of its rejection of the particularity and finality of salvation through Christ and because of its reduction of biblical authority (*No Other Name*, pp. 115–23).

"Wider-hope" Theories

With the two extremes—restrictivism and universalism—clearly delineated and critiqued, Sanders moves on to discuss "wider-hope" theories, which affirm that while salvation may not be universally achieved, it is nonetheless universally *accessible*.

All of these [wider-hope] positions . . . affirm that God, in grace, grants every individual a genuine opportunity to participate in the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus, that no human being is excluded from the possibility of benefiting from salvific grace. The views differ regarding the nature and timing of the opportunity for salvation—specifically, on the issues of whether people must be aware that their salvation is in Jesus Christ and whether the opportunity for salvation is given only before physical death or also after death. (*No Other Name*, p. 131)

Before addressing specific wider-hope theories, Sanders presents a brief general introduction to the section in which he submits that the “motivation for developing theories that explore universally accessible salvation in relation to the unevangelized rests solidly on the major themes of the Scriptures” (*No Other Name*, p. 136).

Sanders cites examples and parables that he says teach this universal accessibility, concluding “that we should boldly uphold universally accessible salvation,” even though “the specific contours of this belief remain an open question in the church” (*No Other Name*, p. 137). He focuses principally on three wider-hope views: universal evangelization before death, eschatological evangelization (Fackre’s position in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*), and inclusivism (Sanders’s view).

Those who believe in universal evangelization *before* death affirm one of three alternative positions: (1) all who seek God will find him in this life; (2) all people who have not heard the gospel will have that opportunity at the moment of dying; or (3) God will judge the unevangelized by how they would have responded had they heard the gospel message (middle knowledge). According to Sanders,

These three views have two control beliefs in common. First, they maintain that in order to be saved, people must be evangelized and accept the gospel or at least be judged by God on the basis of how they would have responded had they heard. There is no salvation apart from a response to the

preaching of the cross. Second, they agree that a person's final destiny is sealed at death. There is no opportunity to accept Christ after death. (*No Other Name*, p. 151)

Sanders offers an informative historical bibliography of each of these views. In his evaluation, he rejects the assumption that underlies all three views: the need for individual awareness and acceptance of Christ's redemptive work. Sanders does acknowledge that these positions find a middle ground between the extremes of restrictivism and universalism, attempting to allow maximum freedom on the part of the individual while remaining true to the framework of a perfectly loving and perfectly just God. Nevertheless, as Sanders disapprovingly explains, these views, especially the final-option theory and the middle knowledge-based views, center most of the responsibility for an individual's salvation on God's sole initiative.

The next wider-hope theory that Sanders explains and evaluates is of particular interest to Latter-day Saints. He calls it "eschatological evangelization." This position affirms that the unevangelized will be evangelized and have the opportunity to receive the gospel after this life. This view, too, attempts to mediate between universalism and restrictivism while allowing for God's justice and love and our human freedom and accountability.

The key supportive biblical texts for this view fall into three categories: texts that preach the need for explicit knowledge of Christ for salvation, texts that teach that condemnation will occur only after explicit rejection of Christ (which cannot come until one has such a knowledge to reject), and texts that speak of Christ's descent into hell and gospel teaching in the world of the spirits. The main theological considerations include the insufficiency of general revelation for salvation and the idea that our eternal salvific destinies are not sealed at death.

Critics, mainly restrictivists, "oppose the contention that the only reason anyone will be condemned to hell is for explicitly rejecting Jesus Christ" (*No Other Name*, p. 208). They reject the stance that our salvific destiny is not sealed at death, and finally, they argue that "the theory of postmortem evangelism takes the wind out of the sails of

missions” (*No Other Name*, p. 209). The magnitude of the LDS missionary effort shows the latter argument to be flatly false. And latter-day revelation repudiates the first two objections, neither of which seems to have much by way of biblical support.

Latter-day Saints may be surprised to discover that many prominent Christian thinkers, beginning with the early church fathers, spoke of Christ’s postmortal visit to the world of spirits. In his historical bibliography, Sanders reports:

Many of the early Church Fathers taught the release of souls in hell via the descent of Christ. . . . The list includes some of the greatest names in the history of the church: Melito, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, . . . Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ephraem, perhaps Jerome and Hilary, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus. (*No Other Name*, p. 211)

Sanders further reports that “the twentieth century has witnessed a tremendous proliferation of belief in eschatological evangelization among theologians and biblical commentators from diverse traditions” (p. 213). His twentieth-century bibliography alone is nearly two pages long (*No Other Name*, pp. 213–14). Here is a rich repository waiting to be mined by Latter-day Saint scholars.

Latter-day Saints will likely find Gabriel Fackre’s theological case for eschatological evangelization helpful and illuminating. He begins by discussing the attributes of God, explaining “that the power of God is, mysteriously, the way of the cross, the ‘weakness of God.’ The ultimate power is not machismo but the divine vulnerability. . . . God’s love is *patient* and *persistent*. It outlasts us. It is a ‘weakness’ that is stronger than our rebellion. God’s weakness is a powerful powerlessness, a victorious vulnerability” (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 78). By this he highlights the power of God as a necessarily conjoined attribute with the love of God, his justice, and his mercy. All these attributes must work together perfectly and be mediated in such a way that God remains perfect.

Fackre's argument draws out the implications of a very appealing model of God. Of course we want to say that God eternally persists in his attempt to gather his children—does it not seem that he loves us too much to do otherwise, indeed, with an infinite love that does not draw a temporal line in eternity? So it seems, then, that God's perfect balance of love and justice not only allows him to be persistent in his evangelization effort through eternity, but it demands him to be such, for no souls can be held accountable (i.e., condemned) for knowledge they did not have but did need. Thus, by God's grace, all have the opportunity in this life or the next to accept that same grace that will save them.

The second tier of Fackre's argument is scriptural—including exegesis of the usual biblical proof texts for the stance (1 Peter 3:19–20 and 4:6) and the story of God's covenant with Noah. Exegetically it is no surprise that he interprets these scriptures (and a few others) as referring to Christ's evangelism beyond the grave (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, pp. 81–86). Further, though, Fackre speaks of what he calls the Noahic covenant, or the rainbow promise:

In Judaism, the rainbow promise has reference to the light given to those outside God's special saving covenant with the Jewish people. That is, God will judge human beings—Christians included—by the response they make to the universal hints of what is true and good and holy given from Noah's time on. (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 90)

Although this speaks of the belief in reference to Judaism, Fackre claims we have the same notion (though “understood and applied differently”) in Christianity: that “God gives to ‘all flesh’ an awareness of basic moral and spiritual standards and expectations” (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 90). What is known as “special revelation” (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 90) is requisite to salvation, that is, an explicit knowledge of Christ and his gospel. However, general revelation is given to humankind (again, compare the LDS notion of the Light of Christ) through the Noahic covenant to lead our minds to God, prepare our souls to accept the gospel when the opportunity

arises, and allow us to live the sort of life wherein we can still find a substantial amount of peace and happiness—even if Christ’s gospel is not specifically known and understood by an individual. Thus, “in human affairs, we are saved by the grace of Christ from the miseries of this world [if we obey the *general* revelation]. In divine affairs, we are saved by the grace of Christ from our sin and guilt before God [if we obey the *special* revelation]” (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 92).

The final theory that Sanders presents within the wider-hope theologies is his own position, called inclusivism, which maintains “that some of those who never hear the gospel of Christ may nevertheless attain salvation before they die if they respond in faith to the revelation they do have” (*No Other Name*, p. 215). Inclusivists believe that the work of Christ is indeed an ontological necessity but not an epistemic necessity for salvation. They maintain the finality and particularity of Christ, but they claim that God’s grace can be mediated through general revelation. Inclusivists give no chance for salvation after death, placing the weight of salvation on this life and the faith one gains during life.

Sanders divides inclusivist biblical texts into two categories: those that focus on “God’s extension of grace to all who believe in him” and those that focus on “God’s attitude toward and relationship with the Gentiles outside the covenant with Israel” (*No Other Name*, pp. 217, 218). Most inclusivists also emphasize (though much more than Fackre) the Noahic covenant, saying, “For *assurance*, no doubt, knowledge is required, but for grace it is not so much knowledge as a right attitude towards God that matters” (*No Other Name*, p. 225, emphasis in original). This brings us to Sanders’s theological considerations.

Inclusivists support their position with five main arguments. The first point, probably the most controversial and important, has to do with the distinction between believers and Christians—or rather the minuteness of the distinction. As is probably apparent by now, inclusivists place great emphasis on faith, claiming that the distinction between believers and Christians is small because “the object of our faith (God) and the action of our faith (trust) are identical” (*No Other*

Name, p. 227). It is this faith that motivates one to obey to the best of one's knowledge. It is this obedience to what one understands to be God's will that saves, not the mere assent to certain propositions.

The second theological control belief supporting inclusivism is a belief in the salvific efficacy of general revelation. The last three control beliefs are closely interrelated. They are (1) a belief in the work of the triune God in effecting salvation, (2) the cosmic work of Christ, and (3) the implications of the existence of other religions. That is, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all have specific roles in carrying out evangelical, salvific efforts here on earth, and we should not place any limits in our minds as to what they can and consistently do perform on behalf of the world's and individuals' salvation. This includes—and this is the fifth theological consideration—the possibility of God's influence being directly felt in other, non-Christian religions. Finally, Sanders leaves his discussion of inclusivism with a brief evaluation, an extensive historical bibliography, and a list of leading defenders (including himself).

In *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* Sanders presents a fuller defense of his inclusivist position. He buttresses his position with what he calls God's "radical" love. This is merely the fact that God desires to save all people and that "God's love is quite different from human love in that he shows love to sinners where we would not," as is apparent in many parables and stories of Jesus's forgiveness (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 26). This leads directly to the claim that God includes before he excludes in judgment: "judgment is precisely for forgiveness—not a settling of scores" (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 30). Hence "the great reversal" (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 33), as Sanders calls it, in which God's "ways are not our ways because God loves his enemies, forgives sinners and humbles himself by inviting riffraff to divine parties. God includes all in grace before there is an exclusion in judgment" (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 35). Sanders summarizes his inclusivistic position as follows:

The Father reaches out to the unevangelized through both the Son and the Spirit via general revelation, conscience and human culture. God does not leave himself without witness to

any people. Salvation for the unevangelized is made possible only by the redemptive work of Jesus, but God applies that work even to those who are ignorant of the atonement. God does this if people respond in trusting faith to the revelation they have. In other words, unevangelized persons may be saved on the basis of Christ's work if they respond in faith to the God who created them. (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 36)

This is the inclusivists' "faith principle," the *how* of inclusivism. God is actually able to save the unevangelized by recognizing and rewarding a person's faith and trust in some divine being or power, whether Christian or not. It is the salvation of premessianic believers and unbaptized children that justifies this reasoning (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, pp. 36–45).

The Fate of the Unevangelized in Light of LDS Theology

Like the many other facets of the restored gospel that so brightly illuminate the beauty of God's plan of salvation, the doctrine of salvation for the dead powerfully illustrates the perfect mercy and loving justice of Deity. In one of the most exulting passages found in scripture, the Prophet Joseph Smith expresses the exciting prospects of the unfolding work for the dead. In language saturated with joy, he exclaims:

Now, what do we hear in the gospel which we have received? A voice of gladness! A voice of mercy from heaven; and a voice of truth out of the earth; *glad tidings for the dead*; a voice of gladness for the living and the dead; glad tidings of great joy. . . .

. . . Let your hearts rejoice, and be exceedingly glad. Let the earth break forth into singing. Let the dead speak forth anthems of eternal praise to the King Immanuel, who hath ordained, before the world was, that which would enable us to redeem them out of their prison; for the prisoners shall go free. (D&C 128:19, 22)

Indeed, Latter-day Saint revelation on the fate of the unevangelized brings comforting clarity and a deeper appreciation for the equity and charity of God to an issue that otherwise challenges one's belief in the universality of God's love toward his children of all times and locations. We are comforted to know that God, in his infinite wisdom, anticipated the predicament of many of his children who would never hear the glad tidings of the gospel while in mortality and prepared a way "before the world was" of equitably solving the problem in perfect love and justice. Truly, then, "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34), as all have equal access to his salvific gift through his plan of perfect foresight.

As we begin to explore the Latter-day Saint position on the fate of the unevangelized, let us first put forth three preliminaries. First, as Latter-day Saints, we do not believe our views on the issue to be just one more human interpretation of the relevant biblical texts. No human interpretation, no matter how sincerely and carefully crafted, is ultimately compelling. Rather, we believe our view is based on direct revelation given by our risen Lord to modern prophets. Thus, divine disclosure from the Word, not a scholarly exegesis of the word, stands as the uncompromising foundation of our beliefs. Second, although postmortem evangelization is clearly the centerpiece of our Latter-day Saint answer to the fate of the unevangelized, it is not the whole story. Indeed, fully understood, our view could be seen as a comprehensive synthesis of all the major Christian responses to the question, affirming important strands of universalism, inclusivism, and restrictivism, all of which coalesce in the doctrine of postmortem evangelization. Third, what makes this synthesis of otherwise inconsistent ideas possible is our doctrine of degrees of salvation or glory. The standard Christian dichotomy of heaven and hell makes it difficult to justly judge each individual according to personal circumstances. The three kingdoms, or degrees, of glory as described in Doctrine and Covenants 76 provide a fuller, more just framework in which man can be made more accountable for his own actions and receive his award accordingly.

With these three preliminaries noted, let us look more fully at preliminary number two—that the Latter-day Saint view is a compre-

hensive synthesis of all the major Christian responses—identifying the universalistic, inclusivistic, and restrictivistic insights that find support in latter-day revelation.

Latter-day Saint Revelation and Universalism

Despite Christian awareness of God’s love for each of us, it may still be surprising for some to learn how deeply and broadly that love is manifest in his salvific work. The apostle John declared: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that *the world* through him might be saved” (John 3:16–17, emphasis added). And save *the world* he did; not just the elect. Latter-day Saint revelation affirms that the redemptive work of Christ is universally efficacious in at least four ways, each of which will be treated immediately below.

First, Christ saved the entire human family from permanent bodily death. As the apostle Paul explained, “For as in Adam *all* die, even so in Christ shall *all* be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22, emphasis added). The Book of Mormon prophet Amulek is even more explicit: “The day cometh that *all* shall rise from the dead and stand before God, and be judged according to their works. . . . Now, this restoration shall come to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous” (Alma 11:41, 44). Numerous other revelations affirm that, through the gracious love of Christ, each of us will be raised with a glorious, incorruptible body.⁹

Second, latter-day revelation is explicit that all children who die before the age of accountability will be saved in the celestial kingdom. As Mormon explained to Moroni: “And the word of the Lord came to me by the power of the Holy Ghost, saying: Listen to the words of Christ, your Redeemer, your Lord and your God. Behold, I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance; the whole need no

9. For example, 2 Nephi 9:22; Jacob 6:9; Alma 40:4–10; 3 Nephi 26:4–5; D&C 29:26; 76:15–85; 88:14–32.

physician, but they that are sick; wherefore, little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin. . . . But little children are alive in Christ, even from the foundation of the world” (Moroni 8:7–8, 12). Further, as revealed to Joseph Smith, “And I also beheld that all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven” (D&C 137:10).

Third, the gospel proclaims universal salvation from the second death (permanent separation from God) and, fourth, declares that salvation is in a kingdom of glory. Both of these points are found in the revelation now recorded as section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants and will be handled together. Here the risen Lord disclosed that through his atonement, all, except sons of perdition, will ultimately be saved or delivered *from* the second death and will be saved *in* a kingdom of glory. “And this is the gospel, the glad tidings . . . that he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness; *That through him all might be saved . . . except those sons of perdition who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him*” (D&C 76:40–43).

Therefore, in at least the four ways just mentioned, Christ’s redemptive work is universally efficacious. Major strands of universalism then find support in latter-day revelation.

Latter-day Saint Revelation and Inclusivism

Latter-day Saint revelation also significantly supports several inclusivistic insights, including the following: (1) God desires the salvation of all his children and invites every one of them to come unto him (2 Nephi 26:33; Alma 5:33); (2) God endows all his children with the Light of Christ,¹⁰ which enables them to distinguish between good and

10. The religious teaching that all people (regardless of the time of their birth in relation to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Savior Jesus Christ) are able to access the inspiration of heaven can be found throughout Christian history. One such example is found in Trumbower’s statement that even, “according to Justin Martyr (ca. 150 CE), Abraham, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others had had a share of the Logos, which was later fully embodied in Christ.” See Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous*

evil and, without overriding their agency, inclines them toward God; (3) in addition, God reveals gospel light to every people—“all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8; see 2 Nephi 29:12); and (4) God will base his salvific judgment on how faithfully human beings adhere to the light he sees fit to give them (D&C 82:3; Alma 39:6).

1. *God’s Inclusivistic Salvific Purpose.* In the Book of Moses, God revealed that his ultimate purpose is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). In the Book of Mormon, Nephi explained: God “inviteth . . . all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33).

2. *The Light of Christ.* Moroni wrote: “The Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil. . . . And now, my brethren, seeing that ye know the light by which ye may judge, which light is the light of Christ, see that ye do not judge wrongfully” (Moroni 7:16–18). In a revelation to Joseph Smith, the Lord taught, “The Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world. . . . Every one that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father” (D&C 84:46–47). The Lord, in a later revelation, further discussed the Light of Christ: “the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings; Which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space” (D&C 88:11–12).

3. *Special Revelation to Non-Christians.* The Book of Mormon makes clear that God does not confine his special revelation to Christians. Alma once expressed with great passion his fervent desire to bring all persons to Christ, saying, “O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people!” But, the promptings of the spirit gave him some pause:

But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me.

I ought not to harrow up in my desires, the firm decree of a just God, for I know that he granteth unto men *according to their desire*, whether it be unto death or unto life; . . . whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction.

Yea, and I know that good and evil have come before all men; he that knoweth not good from evil is blameless; but he that knoweth good and evil, to him it is given *according to his desires*, whether he desireth good or evil, life or death, joy or remorse of conscience.

Now, seeing that I know these things . . .

Why should I desire that I were an angel, that I could speak unto all the ends of the earth?

For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true. (Alma 29:1, 3–8)

In a statement issued in 1978, the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ officially endorsed the doctrine that God gives special revelation to individuals not only outside the Latter-day Saint faith, but to those outside Christendom as well:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.

The Hebrew prophets prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, who should provide salvation for all mankind who believe in the gospel.

Consistent with these truths, we believe that God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation, either in this life or in the life to come. . . .

Our message therefore is one of special love and concern for the eternal welfare of all men and women, regardless of religious belief, race, or nationality, knowing that we are truly brothers and sisters because we are sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father.¹¹

4. *Judged according to One's Faithfulness.* Although those who do not hear of Christ or have a chance to accept the fulness of the gospel in this life will have that chance later, their faith and faithfulness to whatever light they are granted and receive in this life will profoundly and salvifically impact their status and their receptivity to the fulness of the gospel in the life to come. To those inclined to procrastinate, the Book of Mormon prophet Amulek warned: "This life is the time for men to prepare to meet God. . . . Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis [death], that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world" (Alma 34:32, 34). With the help of God, the spirit, nature, and disposition we develop in this life will indeed carry over and constitute who we are in the next. Commenting on Amulek's words, Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert Millet write: "Men and women will not have an immediate reversal of attitude at the time of death. If they have desired evil things; if they have sold their souls for attention and applause and acclaim; if they have craved carnal pleasures alone—if their lives have followed this course, they need not expect to inherit spirituality in the world to come."¹² Our responses to Christ in the life

11. Spencer W. Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner, and Marion G. Romney, Statement of the First Presidency, February 1978, as given in Robert L. Millet, *The Mormon Faith: A New Look at Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 203–4.

12. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 3:256.

to come will likely mirror our responses to the light God grants us here.

LDS Revelation and Restrictivism

Restrictivism also finds support in modern-day revelation. The exclusivistic conditions for salvation in the celestial kingdom are set out clearly in the Doctrine and Covenants:

They are they who *received* the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial, being buried in the water in his name, and this according to the commandment which he has given—

That by keeping the commandments they might be washed and cleansed from all their sins, and receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power;

And who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true.

They are they who are the church of the Firstborn.

They are they into whose hands the Father hath given all things—

They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory; . . .

Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God—

Wherefore, all things are theirs, whether life or death, or things present, or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

And they shall overcome all things.

Wherefore, let no man glory in man, but rather let him glory in God, who shall subdue all enemies under his feet.

These shall dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever. . . .

These are they who are just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood. (D&C 76:51–56, 58–62, 69)

Thus, Latter-day Saints firmly accept that “strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life” (Matthew 7:14). As Latter-day Saints, we diligently preach that every individual who has or will ever live on the earth must receive the necessary ordinances of salvation and exaltation, which stand as checkpoints incapable of circumnavigation along the narrow way to God. Only by receiving the necessary ordinances and endeavoring to keep the commandments of God shall we at last come “unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13) and become worthy forever to dwell with God. Given the restrictivistic conditions to permit one to abide with God in the celestial kingdom, how equitable and gracious is God’s love in ensuring that every person, either on this or the other side of the veil, has the chance to satisfy these conditions.

On 21 January 1836, in the temple in Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph received a vision of the celestial kingdom in which he saw his deceased and unbaptized brother Alvin (see D&C 137:5–6). When Joseph marveled at this, God revealed to him that

All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God;

Also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom;

For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts. (D&C 137:7–9)

On 27 March 1836 the Kirtland Temple was dedicated. The dedication was marked by many spiritual manifestations to the Saints, but the most significant of these occurred one week later, on 3 April, when the risen Lord appeared to Joseph and Oliver Cowdery and accepted the temple. The Lord’s visit was followed by that of several heavenly

messengers, including the prophet Elijah (see D&C 110), whose coming had been prophesied anciently by Malachi and in 1823 by Moroni. Elijah restored priesthood keys and authority that enabled priesthood holders to perform sacred sacraments, including performing marriages, sealing family members together, and completing vicarious ordinances for the dead, all of which would be binding in heaven.¹³

This doctrine seems to have been one of the most popular of those revealed during the Nauvoo period. The picture we receive from the journals, diaries, and sermons of the day is one of unfettered enthusiasm. A journal entry by Elder Wilford Woodruff is illustrative of the enthusiasm and peace that the doctrine brought the beleaguered yet faithful Saints:

I remember well the first time I read the revelation given through the Prophet Joseph concerning the redemption of the dead—one of the most glorious principles I had ever become acquainted with on earth. To think that I and these Latter-day Saints could go forth into the waters of baptism and redeem our fathers, our mothers, and those that have gone before us, in the lineage of our father's house, and they come forth and receive a part in the first resurrection! Well might the Prophet say God has fulfilled His promise that in the last days He would raise up saviors upon Mount Zion, and the kingdom should be the Lord's. Never did I read a revelation with greater joy than I did that revelation.¹⁴

On 3 October 1918, President Joseph F. Smith received his grand vision of the redemption of the dead, now known as section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants. While President Smith was contemplating

13. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith notes concerning the visit of Elijah: "It is interesting to know that on the third day of April, 1836, the Jews were celebrating the feast of the Passover, and were leaving the doors of their homes open for the coming of Elijah. On that day Elijah came. . . to the Temple in the village of Kirtland near the banks of Lake Erie, to two humble servants of the Lord who were appointed by divine decree to receive him." Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1949), 84.

14. *Millennial Star* [Liverpool, England], 29 June 1891, 404.

the atonement of Christ and reflecting upon the words in the third and fourth chapters of Peter's first epistle, the Spirit of the Lord rested upon him, and his eyes were opened to a vision of the Savior's work among the spirits of the dead during the interval between Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

Millet affirms that the vision "is central to the theology of the Latter-day Saints because it confirms and expands upon earlier prophetic insights concerning work for the dead; it also introduces doctrinal truths not had in the Church before October of 1918."¹⁵ The vision of the redemption of the dead offers several key insights into Christ's role in missionary work among the departed spirits and the way in which postmortem evangelization is carried on.

To begin, President Smith saw Christ ministering to the "innumerable company of the spirits of the just" (D&C 138:12), an observation in direct affirmation of the popular Christian tradition. In addition, he saw the disembodied Christ preaching "the everlasting gospel" and such doctrines as "the resurrection and the redemption of mankind from the fall" (D&C 138:19) to the spirits of the righteous. Thus the vision teaches that Christ himself was the initiator of the redemptive work beyond the veil and that this work was commenced while his body lay in the tomb.

Furthermore, President Smith's vision provides a revealed and thus authoritative LDS interpretation of both 1 Peter 4:6 and 1 Peter 3:18–20. That "the gospel [was] preached also to them that are dead" is explicitly confirmed by section 138. That Christ "went and preached unto the spirits in prison," however, is a concept that received subsequent clarification in the vision. God revealed that Christ "went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient" (D&C 138:29) and this because "he *could not go* personally, because of their rebellion and transgression" (D&C 138:37). Instead, Christ "organized his forces and appointed messengers . . . and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness" (D&C 138:30). Thus, Christ

15. Robert L. Millet, "The Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," in *Hearken, O Ye People* (Sandy, UT: Randall Book, 1984), 259. This book contains essays from the 1984 Sperry Symposium.

personally visited the righteous spirits and organized their missionary work that was to be conducted among the unrighteous spirits who had remained unrepentant while in the flesh or who had rejected the testimonies of the ancient prophets (see D&C 138:20–21). Nevertheless, the vision still supports the view that Christ preached unto “the spirits in prison” since, as Elder Bruce R. McConkie states, “it is clearly set forth that the whole spirit world, and not only that portion designated as hell, is considered to be a spirit prison.”¹⁶

In addition to the above insights, President Smith saw that after the righteous dead of the current day pass through the veil, they continue their missionary labors in the world of the spirits. Not only did he see the prophets of old assembled in the vast congregation, but he also saw the Prophet Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and his own father (the prophet’s brother Hyrum) as they continued to preach the gospel in the spirit world (see D&C 138:38–57). Thus, the doctrine of salvation for the unevangelized became intimately linked with the strong missionary spirit of the church.

This vision of Joseph F. Smith and the earlier vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith of his brother Alvin were both canonized at the April 1976 general conference of the church. Both dealt with the principle of redemption for the dead. The further hastening of this work was emphasized in a revelation received in June 1978, wherein “every faithful, worthy man in the Church” was authorized to receive the priesthood (D&C Official Declaration 2). Not only did this affect the living, but it also had a great impact on the millions in the spirit world who had been awaiting the full blessings of the priesthood, including those of the temple. This revelation expanded the redemptive work for every man, woman, and child who had arrived at the age of accountability but died before receiving the saving ordinances of the gospel.

Gordon B. Hinckley, whom Latter-day Saints sustain as a living prophet, has inaugurated an era of unprecedented temple building. During his administration as church president, beginning 12 March 1995, 71 new temples have been constructed and dedicated. As of

16. Bruce R. McConkie, “A New Commandment: Save Thyself and Thy Kindred!” *Ensign*, August 1976, 11.

May 2005, there are 119 temples operating worldwide with 10 more announced or under construction. We believe that during Christ's millennial reign on earth we will have access to the names of all those who have accepted the fulness of the gospel in the spirit world. Performance of sacred temple ordinances on their behalf, we believe, will be among the important work to be completed during the millennium and prior to the final judgment. Brigham Young declared:

We are trying to save the living and the dead. The living can have their choice, the dead have not. Millions of them died without the Gospel, without the Priesthood, and without the opportunities that we enjoy. We shall go forth in the name of Israel's God and attend to the ordinances for them.¹⁷ And through the Millennium, the thousand years that the people will love and serve God, we will build temples and officiate therein for those who have slept for hundreds and thousands of years—those who would have received the truth if they had had the opportunity; and we will bring them up, and form the chain entire, back to Adam.¹⁸

Proxy baptisms already performed on behalf of the dead number over two hundred million.¹⁹ This immense labor of love was initiated by our Savior immediately following his crucifixion.

17. One of the many ways that the church facilitates this great work is through family history/genealogy. In fact, "On May 24, 1999, the Church announced a new Web site for family history. The interest and activity on this site was phenomenal in the following seven months. Between May 24 and December 30, the site experienced 2 billion hits. The site also has a free, downloadable version of the Personal Ancestral File software. More than 300,000 people have downloaded the software during the last few months. Literally millions of people across the earth have accessed the site. Daily traffic is running at a rate of 7 million hits per day. More than 5 million names have been uploaded to the file. The file now contains 600 million names in all." (Data from Richard Turley, managing director of the church's Family History Department.) See Merrill J. Bateman, "The Dawn of a New Millennium," in *Speeches, Brigham Young University 1999–2000* (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2000), 127–32.

18. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 404.

19. See Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 5.

The blossoming of the doctrine of the redemption of the dead in this, the dispensation of the fulness of times, is a doctrine of excitement and joy. It reveals the divine foresight, perfect mercy, and incredible breadth of the plan of salvation and its linchpin, Christ's atonement. It seamlessly intertwines two of the major undertakings of the Church of Jesus Christ in our time: the vicarious performance of ordinances in latter-day temples and the worldwide effort of missionaries in bringing the message of the gospel to all people. Although daunting in its scope and weighty in its responsibility, this powerful doctrine becomes, when fully understood, a rousing call to action for all Latter-day Saints: "Brethren, shall we not go on in so great a cause? Go forward and not backward. Courage, brethren; and on, on to the victory!" (D&C 128:22).

Believing that the risen Lord himself has provided clear and definite revelation regarding postmortem evangelization, the correctness of the doctrine and of its related practices is not an open issue for Latter-day Saints. But for those who have yet to accept this modern revelation, it may be helpful for me to address some of the common objections to the doctrine.

Overcoming Objections to the Doctrine of Postmortem Evangelization

In this section, we deal with six objections to postmortem evangelization, none of which seems to be difficult, much less impossible, for Latter-day Saints to overcome. In fact, most of the objections to postmortem evangelization are objections to non-LDS versions of the doctrine that quickly dissolve when applied to LDS doctrine, which so comprehensively unites the best features of all other soteriological viewpoints that it seems to leave little room for objection.

One principal objection to postmortem evangelization is that, apart from the apparent references in 1 Peter, it is extrabiblical. This claim challenges nothing that Latter-day Saints affirm, for as already noted in my first preliminary, we do not base our doctrine on biblical exegesis but on modern revelation.

A second objection, one used against inclusivists and universalists, is that the Bible apparently teaches that we do not need to explicitly reject Christ in order to be damned; hence, to conclude that no one can be damned without hearing the gospel either in this life or the next is unwarranted. Supposedly, the view that we cannot be damned without first hearing the gospel leads to an injunction *against* evangelization—hearing the word is what makes it possible for us to be damned (see Nash’s response to inclusivism in *Those Who Have Never Heard*, pp. 68 and 132). The Latter-day Saint view, however, does not require that we explicitly reject the gospel in order to be damned. The Doctrine and Covenants teaches that those who will inherit the telestial kingdom include “liars, and sorcerers, and adulterers, and whoremongers, and whosoever loves and makes a lie. . . . These are they who are cast down to hell and suffer the wrath of Almighty God” (D&C 76:103, 106). Thus, those who live wickedly according to the light they have received in this life will be damned, whether they receive the fulness of the gospel or not (in fact, there is good reason to think that, if offered the chance, these people will reject the gospel; after all, they have already rejected what light they have been given). If, however, we mean by damnation the state of “outer darkness” that will be experienced by the sons of perdition, then it is indeed true that no one can be damned in this sense without first hearing the gospel, but these individuals will likely be so few that hearing the gospel is not a disadvantage—in fact, hearing the gospel may well motivate us to avoid the sins that could lead us to the telestial kingdom.

A third objection, this one leveled against inclusivists, is that the Bible seems to teach that we must accept Christ in order to be saved; because all have sinned, all those who do not accept Christ will be damned (see Nash’s chapter on restrictivism in *Those Who Have Never Heard*, pp. 107–39). This objection is certainly not fatal for Latter-day Saints because all those who are saved in the strong sense of receiving eternal life in the celestial kingdom do so only by accepting the intercessory atonement of Jesus Christ. Certainly, Christ’s intercession is universal enough to save those who have rejected him in the

telestial kingdom, but in order to be saved in the fullest sense, we must explicitly accept Jesus Christ either in this life or in the next.

Fourth, the Bible seems to teach that we are judged for the actions we perform in *this* life, with death marking the end of our opportunity to repent (*Those Who Have Never Heard*, pp. 133–34).²⁰ Essentially, this objection asserts that postmortem salvation is not only extra-biblical but *contrabiblical*. Those who make this objection focus on scriptures that seem to indicate that our condition in the afterlife will be fixed by our actions in this life alone. Particularly prominent is Luke 16:19–31, which contains the story of Lazarus and the rich man. After this life, Lazarus is carried “into Abraham’s bosom,” which is assumed to be heaven, while the rich man is sent to hell. The two of them are thereafter unable to interact because of a “great gulf” that is fixed between them.²¹ Similarly, 2 Corinthians 5:10 reads: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.” Apparently, we will be judged for what we do while *in the body*, not for what we do after we leave our body. Other scriptures that are used to indicate a similar principle are Matthew 7:13–14, 21–27; 13; John 8:21, 24; Romans 2; and Hebrew 9:27.

None of these scriptures, however, teaches, either explicitly or implicitly, that there will be no evangelization or salvation after death. All that is taught is that we will be judged for the works we have done in this life. Latter-day Saints can and do affirm this point; indeed, this principle is taught much more explicitly in the Book of Mormon than in the Bible: “For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors. . . . Behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed” (Alma 34:32–33). All people will be judged by their deeds in this life, but those who have acted righteously in terms of the light that

20. See G. Frederick Wright, *An Inquiry concerning the Relation of Death to Probation* (Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1882), 50–71.

21. According to Latter-day Saint revelation (D&C 128:26–30), it was this very gulf that was bridged by Christ’s “descent into hell” (Apostle’s Creed).

they have received *still need* the intercessory atonement of Jesus Christ in order to be saved or to receive eternal life. Either in this life or after this life, these people will have the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ and to enter into eternal life, but they will still be judged by the deeds that they performed *in this life*. There is nothing in the LDS doctrine of postmortem evangelization that is contrabiblical.

A fifth objection to postmortem salvation is that it removes all motivation to perform missionary work (see Nash's response to inclusivism in *Those Who Have Never Heard*, p. 68).²² If those who are unevangelized in this life will receive the gospel in the next, why should we bother to share the good news? Certainly, as evidenced by the approximately 60,000 full-time missionaries currently in the field, Latter-day Saints have had no lack of motivation to perform missionary work. Their incentive seems to be that the sooner people receive the fulness of the gospel, the better. In addition, Latter-day Saints understand that salvation involves much more than passively accepting Jesus Christ; it also involves living a Christlike life. Hence, the missionary effort of the Church of Jesus Christ is more than just sharing the good news of Jesus Christ; it also aims to make people more Christlike so that we all might share the joy of gospel living *now*.

A sixth and final objection to postmortem salvation has been posited by John Sanders. Essentially, Sanders asserts that the same cultural-linguistic difficulties that prevent people from understanding and accepting the gospel in this life will prevent them from doing so in the next life (*No Other Name*, pp. 201–2 n. 57). “If God,” he writes, “can enable people to overcome cultural-linguistic problems in the next life, why can he not do it in this one?” (*No Other Name*, p. 202 n. 57). The answer is a resounding *He can!* Currently, over fifty percent of the membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints lives outside the United States, where the church originated. Most live in predominantly Christian countries, but many live in Eastern Asia and Africa. Latter-day Saints have had considerable success evangelizing (where we are allowed to do so) to non-Christian cultures. God “speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3); certainly he has no

22. See Wright, *An Inquiry*, 57–59.

problem—and will have no problem in the next life—reaching the righteous, whatever their culture or language. The day is rapidly approaching in which “every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language, through those who are ordained unto this power, by the administration of the Comforter, shed forth upon them for the revelation of Jesus Christ” (D&C 90:11).

Latter-day Saint doctrine and practice pertaining to the fate of the unevangelized have been established by divine revelation to living prophets. The theological tapestry that emerges from that revelation includes the major strands of universalism, inclusivism, and restrictivism. What holds them all together in a coherent and beautiful pattern is the glad tidings of postmortem evangelization. We know of no objection to this good news that does not dissolve in the light of God’s revelation.

Conclusion

The question of the fate of the unevangelized is, indeed, a very troubling one in the world of mainstream Christianity. Surely, hope is one of the most important messages of the gospel of Jesus Christ; yet many people lose this hope when a loved one who did not know Christ passes away or when they learn of Christ but realize none of their ancestors knew of him. These serious issues have led Christianity’s best thinkers to formulate responses to the question. To anyone interested in understanding (historically, theologically, and scripturally) these responses, we highly recommend both of Sanders’s books.

After working our way through these books, where are we left? Illuminated and stimulated, to be sure. Yet, when all is said and done, one fact saliently stands out to us: biblical revelation, coupled with even the most careful human reasoning, is not sufficient to resolve the question addressed in these books. This seems undeniable, given the multiplicity of plausible but conflicting answers that have been argued now for two millennia with no consensus anywhere in sight. Two options seem most viable for the honest Christian truth seeker: a reverent agnosticism or earnest consideration of Joseph Smith’s claim to new revelation on the subject received directly from God in our day.