

Acts 4:12: No Other Name Under Heaven

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Introduction

'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.' These are words of Peter addressed to the Jewish leaders as recorded in Acts 4:12. This declaration by the apostle to the Jewish authorities, greatly annoyed by his courageous preaching of Jesus as Israel's messiah, has been taken in the history of doctrine to support and justify a restrictive attitude with regard to the possibility of salvation for non-Christians. It has been taken to imply, because Christian salvation comes through faith in Jesus' name alone according to this text, that God's grace is not at work in the world at large and that the hope of eternal life is not a possibility apart from explicit faith in Jesus by persons in this earthly life.¹ I wish to challenge this reading of the text and to argue that Peter's statement does not necessarily have such dire implications. I think it possible to read it in accord with what Paul Knitter calls 'the wider mercy solution' of the replacement model, which posits both the finality of Jesus Christ and the boundless mercy of God for the whole human race.²

Let us inquire then into the meaning and significance of this striking statement by the apostle Peter. It may help us achieve clarity if we ask ourselves what issues the text addresses and what issues it does not address and to ask what is plainly taught in Acts 4:12 and what is not.³

What Acts 4:12 teaches

The text makes three assertions, plainly and strongly. First, Peter insists that Jesus has introduced the long awaited messianic salvation into history (cf. the citation of Ps 118:22 in v 11). He maintains that, through his ministry and work, Jesus has fulfilled and actualised what the Old

Testament prophets had promised and what the whole world has been waiting for. Now at last the herald announced by the prophet Isaiah has arrived, bringing good news to Zion and declaring: 'Behold your God!' Acts 4:12 makes a strong claim about the incomparability of Jesus and the salvation he brings. This is the moment of fulfilment, the advent of the kingdom of God, and salvation in the fullest sense. Truly blessed are the eyes and ears which see and hear these things.⁴

Second, Peter identifies the nature of salvation, as holistic as well as messianic. In the circumstances of the narrative 'salvation' includes physical healing as well as a new relationship with God (v 7, 9). A crippled had been healed in the name of Jesus and come to saving faith. Salvation in this context then is something which restores bodies as well as souls. There is power to save as well as power to heal in Jesus' name, just as there was in Jesus' own Galilean ministry. Salvation, whatever else it means, focuses here on the power to make the lame man walk (3:12, 16).⁵ 'Salvation' in Acts 4:12 is more than vertical justification and more than deliverance from final judgment. Peter is telling people that physical healing is part of salvation.⁶

Third, Peter is adamant that the messianic and holistic salvation which he is referring to is available only through faith in the name of Jesus. ('in the name' is a semitic expression, meaning 'by the authority of.')

Clearly there is a restrictivist element here, a claim to uniqueness and finality. There is no other name with this kind of power to 'save' in the way being described. Salvation in its fullness is available to humankind only because God in the person of his son Jesus provided it.

What Acts 4:12 does not teach

It seems, however, that in their zeal to magnify the finality of Jesus and the unique work which he accomplished for the salvation of the human race, restrictivists distort Peter's meaning. They have used his words to support ideas which lie beyond the scope of the intended teaching. They force the text to address questions which, while conceptually related in our thinking, are not actually contained in Peter's remarks. This is improper. Respect for the authority of the

Bible surely means that we not only observe what the text tells us but also that we respect its silences. Biblical authority means heeding the positive teaching of the Bible and not reading our ideas into it, however precious our opinions are to us.

First, one such question is the eschatological fate of unevangelised people, whether they lived before Christ came or after he arose from death. Although this is a question which weighs heavily on our minds, Acts 4:12 does not say anything about it. The text speaks forcefully about the incomparable power of Jesus' name to save (and heal) those who hear and respond to the goodness but it does not comment on the fate of the heathen. Though it is a question of great importance to us, it is not one on which Acts 4:12 renders a clear judgment. It is not Peter's concern in Acts 4:12 to be limiting the possibilities of eschatological salvation for people; his concern is to be making a ringing affirmation of the incomparable saving power for life today which is available to everyone who hears the good news and places his or her trust in Jesus. It is easy to assume that Acts 4:12 gives a negative answer to the question on our minds ('Can anyone who has not heard the name of Jesus participate in the eschatological kingdom of God?') but in actuality Peter says nothing at all about that. It is wrong to force Peter to say what he declines to say. He is not talking about the unevangelised.

Second, neither does Peter's declaration render a judgment, positive or negative, on another question that interests us a great deal, the status of other religions and any role they may play in God's providence or plan of redemption. Granted, the religion of Judaism, in its confrontation with the preaching of Jesus as messiah in Acts proved to be less than an inadequate vehicle of God's end time salvation; nevertheless, Peter does not say what would hold for Judaism or any other religion in the situation where Christ has not been named. Later passages in Acts, such as 10:35, 14:17 and 17:23, come closer to addressing that issue, but even they do not speak to it directly and decisively. Certainly Acts 4:12 does not address or answer this question.⁸

Let us remember too, that Peter, when he says there is salvation in no other name, would be intending not only such names as Buddha and Krishna but also names of Old Testament worthies like Moses and David as well. His point is that no other name has *ever* had in it the power to do what can be done in Jesus' name only. Only Jesus can bring messianic salvation, even to the point of raising up the cripple. A new era has opened up and Peter is magnifying the name of Jesus and the messianic salvation he has brought. We should not read him as denying that there have been and are lesser instances of saving power at work in the world, where Jesus' name is unknown. We do not have take him to be denying that the Spirit has been active everywhere in the world long before the Christian message reached non-Christian people. What Peter is doing is to magnify the mighty act of God bringing in the kingdom and not discussing comparative religions. We should not generalise his remarks beyond the context of Acts 3-4.

No Exegesis Without Presuppositions

Why is it that people read into texts such as Acts 4:12 meanings which are not there? First, it is due to reader interest. No one is completely objective when they read texts which tackle issues that concern them greatly. They have an interest in the outcome of the interpretation. We do not see reality just as it is but view things through filters of our interests. Thus we come to a text like Acts 4:12 from somewhere, never from nowhere, and that fact influences the results of our interpretation.

Second, and more specifically, we read such a text in the context of a larger understanding of what the Bible says and what Christianity is. A larger framework of interpretation or global pattern impacts our exegesis. That presuppositional framework easily becomes fused with the text and skews its actual meaning. Many, I believe, are reading Acts 4:12 within the matrix of hard-line systematic theology which magnifies God's severity above God's kindness. The text gets caught up into a vortex of competing frameworks and gets manipulated.⁹

As one who interprets Acts 4:12 in a more lenient and less restrictive way, I cannot claim to be free of bias either in my exegesis. Reader interest operates on both sides of such disputes. It is true that I wish to avoid the idea that Acts 4:12 excludes most of the people who have ever lived on God's earth from eschatological salvation. I admit to finding such a notion utterly repugnant but I am far from alone. There has been occurring a change in the hierarchy of Christian truths which involves the recognition that God wills the salvation of everyone. To attribute first place in the hierarchy to the universal salvific will of God means giving a subordinate place to the necessity of such means of salvation as baptism and church membership. Such secondary truths now have to be understood in ways that conform rather than conflict with the primary truth. But I claim the silence of the text in defence of my interpretation of it. It does not imply soteriological restrictivism. Perhaps there are other verses in the New Testament which imply it but Acts 4:12 is not one of them. Putting positively, it seems to me that Peter is telling us of the power of God to save, of a divine power which had been at work before Jesus came in Old Testament times, but which now has now been released into the world with unique eschatological strength. It is not Peter's meaning to deny that God has been at work saving people before now (that would be absurd position for any Jew to take) but to affirm that God is now saving people in a unique, new, messianic way through Jesus. Peter *is* telling us that God's act in Jesus was absolutely decisive; he is *not* telling us to think of it as something discontinuous with his saving work in the history of Israel and indeed (I would add) throughout the entire historical process.¹⁰

According to Acts 4:12 then, Jesus has done a unique work for the human race, the good news of which needs to be preached to the whole world but the uniqueness does not entail restrictivism. Think of the way St John thinks of Jesus as the unique incarnation of the logos which he says nevertheless enlightens everyone (Jn 1:9). I believe Peter also may be thinking in this way. God was at work in ancient Israel before Christ came and people like Abraham got to know God even though they did not yet know Jesus. The Son, through whom all things were made, is constantly at work in the world. The Spirit of

God broods over the whole creation and over history. We should not think of God as absent from the world except where the name of Jesus of Nazareth is pronounced. Although for many evangelicals the finality of Christ spells restrictivism. I believe that a high Christology can also be seen to create space for openness and generosity to all the world's peoples. We do not need to think of the church as the ark of salvation, leaving everyone else in hell, but may think of it as witness to the fullness of salvation which has come into the world through Jesus and even to perform a representative function on behalf of others (cf Genesis 18).¹¹

I am encouraged by the way restrictivists themselves practice leniency in their own interpretations. They find it possible to hope for the salvation of children who die in infancy, even though they cannot call on the name of Jesus and even though the Bible never actually states such a hope clearly.¹² In a similar way, they find it possible to accept the salvation of Old Testament saints who lived before Jesus and could not have called upon his name for salvation. In both cases, they allow large groups of people to enter into eschatological salvation without naming Jesus in this earthly life. Thus they do not always interpret Acts 4:12 strictly themselves. I applaud these qualifications of the application of this text and urge them to extend them. Surely God's goodness implies that God will not expect people to invoke Jesus' name who cannot possibly do so, since they are ignorant of it through no fault of their own. Surely God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him in the ways that they can seek him (Heb 11:6).¹³ I have always been impressed by the view expressed at the Second Vatican Council to the effect that persons who die having sincerely sought after God but not having learned about Jesus will not be automatically condemned in judgment but will be given the opportunity to decide about Jesus then (Lumen Gentium par 16). Acts 4:12 can be intelligibly read in a lenient framework and does not require us to adopt a restrictivist view point. Indeed, later in Acts, I do find Luke saying things that might bear upon this matter: for example, in Acts 10, where Cornelius enjoys a positive relationship with God before he is saved by Christ and is used by God to change Peter's narrow-mindedness, in Acts 14 at Lystra where Paul acknowledges divine revelation and providence in the past

history of the pagan peoples he was dealing with, and in Acts 17 where Paul recognises the Greeks of Athens to be worshipping the unknown God. (Notice that Paul speaks of the unknown God, not of a false god or an idol.) Certainly the other religions, including Judaism, do not have messianic salvation to offer, but that does not mean that God has no dealings at all with non-Christian peoples. On the contrary, through the Holy Spirit (I believe) God has a great deal to do with them. The Spirit who is the very breath of God pervades the whole creation with God's truth and energy and fosters in us a spirit of appreciation not only condemnation of others. I am drawn to Rahner's notion of God communicating himself graciously to every human person and to what Wesleyans call prevenient grace. Faith in the Spirit who ever opens doors of salvation makes us ready for surprises. It should encourage us to watch for the fruit of the Spirit on whatever branches it is found to be blooming.¹⁴

If so, why missions?

One reason why traditional Christians reject the lenient tradition of interpretation even though they see its appeal is the fear that such a view might negate the necessity of world missions. It raises a practical problem for them. I think that there may exist such a danger. Nevertheless, Paul taught that Abraham was justified by his faith, though he never called on the name of Jesus but that did not stop him from thinking it necessary to preach Christ to his descendents. Obviously Paul thought it was crucial that they learn of the fullness of salvation in Jesus now that it has become available. He felt himself to be a debtor to both Jew and Gentile alike to tell them what God had done. Should any of them have responded to God positively out of the light they had already received, then they would need to know the source and nature of that light. They would want to have access to the full measure of God's grace in Jesus and be initiated into the kingdom of God. On the other hand, in the case of those who may have rejected God previously, it is only right that they too should be confronted with a fresh opportunity to respond to Jesus. Who knows but that the proclamation of the fulness of messianic salvation in Jesus' name will awaken them from their slumber and bring them to the knowledge of

eternal life? The concept of the necessity of world missions is admittedly more subtle in a lenient framework of interpretation than the hell fire insurance it is in the restrictivist paradigm but I think a fuller concept of the rationale of missions is a better one and no less necessary.

Conclusion

I conclude that Acts 4:12 makes a strong, definitive, and exclusive claim about the messianic, holistic salvation which Jesus has brought into the world. It is a salvation which is incomparable and without rival and is available only through the name of Jesus. But the text does not say anything which would exclude from eternal salvation most of the people who have lived on the earth until now.¹⁵

In his recent book, fellow evangelical Daniel Strange gives my proposal a fair and generous exposition but concludes in a way that many may find scandalous. As an alternative view, he suggests that God does not love the non-elect and is not moved to save any of them. If they are unevangelised, this is due to God's strange providence. If Asian peoples have lived for millennia without the gospel, it will be their portion not to be saved. (Despite the fact that he cites many Reformed theologians like Edwards and Helm who see room for the kind of position I myself have advanced.) My hope is that the result of his book will be that readers will recoil from hard restrictivism and notice that his refutation of my more lenient proposal is far from compelling.¹⁶

¹ This strict rendering may be associated with an equally narrow interpretation of the ancient axiom: 'Outside the church, there is no salvation,' a formula which goes back to the early fathers. This saying in actual fact did not mean what the later Jansenists thought: 'No grace outside the church' and referred to schismatics not to the unevangelised. See Hans Kung, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 313-19 and Gavin D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology of Religions: A Critical Evaluation* (New York: University Press of America, 1987), 73-85.

- ² Paul F. Knitter, *Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 47-48. For the more lenient approach to this area of concern, Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). This book was cited favourably in *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God's Gift*, a report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England (London: Church House Publishing, 1995), 176. Much more critical is Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Regent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).
- ³ The commentaries on Acts are on the whole disappointing because Acts is a long book to comment on and is often viewed more as a historical than as a theological tract. For whatever reason, commentators do not face up to what Acts 4:12 means theologically in the canonical context. Whether Bruce or Haenchen, Longenecker or Conzelmann, they read the text as proof of the restrictivist paradigm and pass on.
- ⁴ The idea of a new era of salvation opening up for humanity through Jesus is of course fundamental to all the New Testament witnesses including Jesus himself. See (for example) Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).
- ⁵ Michael Green delineates the broad meaning of the concept in his book *The Meaning of Salvation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965). Also John G. Stackhouse, editor, *What Does It Mean to be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).
- ⁶ Despite Millard Erickson, who defines salvation in a very narrow way: *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), chapter 43.
- ⁷ Such issues of interpretation are covered by Irene W. Foulkes, 'Two Semantic Problems in the Translation of Acts 4:5-20', *The Bible Translator* 29 (1978) pp.121-25.
- ⁸ Karl Rahner is right (apart from other aspects of his theory) to make a distinction between religions in the pre-Christian situation and those same religions when the word of the gospel is preached: 'Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions', *Theological Investigations* 5 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966) pp.115-34.

- ⁹ One can compare the hard-line framework of the later Augustine with the more generous scheme of the Greek fathers of the church like Irenaeus: see Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 2-3. Today there is a nearly church wide shift toward recognising the primary importance of God's universal salvific will on the hierarchy of Christian truths which is reflected in this paper. See Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 202.
- ¹⁰ See G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 31.
- ¹¹ See William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 217-23.
- ¹² See Robert P. Lightner, *Heaven For Those Who Can't Believe* (Schaumburg, Ill.: Regular Baptist Press, 1977).
- ¹³ John E. Sanders, 'Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?', *Evangelical Quarterly* 60 (1988), 241-59.
- ¹⁴ Consider the turn to the Spirit in the work of Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000). See also Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), ch 6. Gerald R. McDermott supplies a positive answer to the question in his title, *Can Evangelicals Learn From World Religions? Jesus, Revelation, and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
- ¹⁵ A previous version of this paper appeared in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, edited by William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).
- ¹⁶ Daniel Strange. *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology*. 280-85. 310-19. I was a little puzzled by Gavin D'Costa's remark in the foreword that Strange has issued 'a devastating critique.' (xiii)