

Can Faith in Christ be Attributed?:
“Transdispensationalization” and Dr. Tony Evans

Dr. Tony Evans is arguably the most influential African American evangelical in America, and a brother in Christ. He is influential outside US shores. During a visit to radio station WCJ in San Juan in February 2003, the most popular radio programs were listed on a blackboard, according to a poll of listeners reached during a telephone fund-raiser. Evans’ “The Urban Alternative” program was first. He has published approximately 30 books, many of them by Moody Press (“The name you can trust”). He tackles issues head-on and tries to apply the Gospel with a pastor’s heart. He has had to answer hard questions about the eternal destination of the mentally handicapped, young children and those who have never had the opportunity to hear of Christ.

Since his influence is so great, particularly in the African American community, his modified Christian universalism, taught in the first publication of his book *Totally Saved*, requires a reply¹.

Evans told Glenn Plummer in a TV interview:

If a person believes somebody’s up there that created this [visible creation]...I don’t know who He is but I want to know Him...if that person were to have a heart attack at that moment, God could not condemn him and be just because God says he who seeks shall find, so since God makes that promise, if God doesn’t give him the Gospel or give him a direct revelation then He has to judge him out of another dispensation.²

The African American church as a whole is largely disengaged from global Christian mission, and Dr. Evan’s published views, however well meaning and pastorally motivated, further discourage the black church in her global missions responsibilities. The Black church has enough disincentive to engage global missions without perhaps its most prominent spokesman teaching that, in the final analysis, a person seeking God and who does not consciously reject Christ will be saved. This removes the impetus to reach the 13 million annually who die without hearing of Christ³. Evans defended on TV the views expressed in *Totally Saved*, and has expressly welcomed challenges, such as this paper represents.

Complicating the picture, Evans has assisted evangelical missions such as Wycliffe Bible translators to promote global missions. He encourages African American global missions in the Wycliffe video “The Time is Now: A Call to African American Christians.”

Evans is in the mainstream of evangelicalism at these points concerning salvation:

1. All are born in sin, inheriting the sin of Adam (p. 352, *Totally Saved*)
2. Those who die without Christ will go to Hell (p. 352)
3. Those going to heaven go on the basis of faith in Christ (p. 353)

4. Jesus is the only way to be saved (John 14:6)—“There are no side roads to heaven.”
(p. 353)

Problems begin with his belief that “God’s command to believe is only applicable to those who can heed it,” p. 354. “God would not be just if He held people accountable for that which they cannot do, and for knowledge they do not possess,” p. 355. While logical enough, human logic is not necessarily God’s logic (Is. 55:8; 1 Cor. 1:25), or the highest court. Many have been led into error by holding logic higher, in fact, than the whole counsel of God.

Evans believes that the atonement of Christ pays for original sin, setting the stage for the salvation of those who cannot hear. He maintains that none are today condemned because of Adam’s sin, since the atonement of Christ covered sin for everyone⁴. Rom. 5:18 is one of his proof texts:

Romans 5:17-19 ¹⁷ For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. ¹⁹ For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. NIV

The context of Rom. 5:18 should be considered. This “life,” (v. 18) for Evans, is apparently not eternal life, but the chance at eternal life, if a person does not reject the Christ (some do reject Christ, such as practicing Muslims, he notes). “Life” is equated with “righteousness” in v. 19. So one would have to say that all are not only “justified” by Christ’s death, leading to “life,” but are also made righteous by Christ. This goes far beyond canceling out original sin. But justification is based on faith in Christ (Rom. 3:26). By the same strict application of reason, since “all” (v. 18) is rephrased “the many” (NIV) in v. 19, either all are not “justified” in v. 18, or all are made righteousness in v. 19, a state only attained to through explicit faith in Christ (Rom. 1:17; 3:22; 4:5, 11, 13; 9:30; Phil. 3:9; Heb. 11:7).

As Gary Phillips has noted, based upon this reasoning, we could not even rule out Muslims from being saved, since they in all likelihood have been taught a distorted view of Christ. The content of their notion of Christ may be erroneous. Does God have an obligation to save them as well, since many of them seem to be seeking God?⁵

This teaching would seem to limit the atonement to one category of sin—original sin—otherwise all would automatically be saved because all sins would be forgiven. Sin is what separates us from God. Romans 5:18 must be qualified by other verses, since one verse cannot state everything. The entire discussion of Christ’s work is

qualified in v. 17 by “those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness.” “Reigning in life” (v. 17) is for those *receiving* (“receiving” is active, not passive in the Greek) God’s grace. The “all” of v. 18 refers to those receiving God’s grace. Otherwise you cannot divide between those saved and those not saved—everyone would be righteous. In fact, the “all” (vs. 15,19) does not mean every single person, since historically, all have not even professed Christ. We have no sure information upon their destination, other than scripture. So “those who receive,” “many,” and “all” are interchangeable terms in these verses.

Even if it were granted for the sake of argument that Christ’s atonement covered the imputed sin of Adam upon all humankind, this does not help the condition of the lost. They still have personal sin, which Evans admits--“Because Jesus covered original sin you are now condemned for personal sin combined with rejection of knowledge.” Each person adds sin upon sin to Eve and Adam’s, from early age--and a single sin is sufficient to condemn us, apart from Christ (Rom. 6:23). From the perspective of a father, my children knew from perhaps age two or three when they did something wrong. Original sin may explain the universality of sin, but even if Christ’s sacrifice covered the original sin of all, personal sin is sufficient to condemn everyone. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

If original sin is cancelled, and if the special revelation of the Bible does not reach a person or people group, humans are still judged by God on the basis of natural revelation. This revelation, of course, concerns what can be known about God by nature and the more or less universal moral laws that God imprints upon our conscience.

But Evans considers natural revelation as qualifying some as seekers after God.

Consider a person who doesn’t know anything about Christ, but who responds to the spiritual light God gives him through natural revelation rather than suppressing and denying it. He welcomes the knowledge of God. p. 359

Granted, there are the very wicked (Rom. 1:18-32), and not all fall into this category. Evans apparently believes that only some of those who do not have the gospel “suppress” the knowledge of God contained in general revelation, as described in Romans 1:18. Anyone who is wicked (1:18) suppresses the knowledge of God. The context speaks of gross sins (v.28-31), nevertheless unbelievers are generically identified with wickedness by Paul in 2 Cor. 6:14. Peter preached to an anonymous crowd of Jews to turn “each of you from your wicked ways.” “Now you cannot suppress what you don’t have,” Evans has said⁶. So they aren’t guilty of sin, being the implication. But clearly everyone has exposure to natural revelation both in creation and in moral sense.

The argument of Rom. 2 concerns those who transgress moral law, either the Old Testament Law, or one’s own moral [natural law] precepts. The key truth is: “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the

law will be judged by the law,” Rom. 2:12. Can a person live a life apart from the grace of God such that he never rejects God’s revelation in his or her own conscience? Even those who “do by nature things required by the law” (Rom. 2:14) have consciences that are self-accusing, condemning themselves (Rom. 2:15). Even if the Golden Rule were adopted—doing to another what we would like done to us—a very simple moral code, the adopter would break it before the end of the week, if not by sundown. Natural revelation can help us to appreciate God, but even this revelation is sufficient to judge to condemn us, no matter how much we grow in the awe of God. It appears that Evans does not appreciate how wicked we are apart from Christ.

So a person does not have to consciously reject the Gospel to be found morally guilty, only the moral code that person already has espoused in his heart, not having heard God’s law. Everyone fails to live up to the knowledge of God in nature and in conscience. The verdict from natural revelation goes in the opposite direction to the optimism of Dr. Evans. The bottom line in Romans 1 and 2 is that we are “without excuse,” (Rom. 2:1-2), not that natural revelation qualifies some before God to be given further revelation of Himself.

This would be the end of the argument, but Evans introduces the concept of “transdispensationalism,” dealing with the crucial issue for an evangelical that persons are only saved by personal faith in Jesus Christ. Essentially, transdispensationalism means that God judges someone who has not heard of Jesus Christ, yet who has responded positively to the light received, as would an Old Testament saint possibly would. “God will retroactively count this person as righteous by applying the death of Christ from the dispensation of grace,” p. 361.

Prominent dispensationalists carefully maintain that they do not offer differing ways to be saved among their traditional seven dispensational periods—that underlying each is salvation by grace⁷. Nevertheless, dispensationalists are careful to distinguish one dispensation from another. Salvation by faith in Christ, being of the current dispensation of “grace,” is not new, but attributing faith in Christ to unbelievers, as if they were in the dispensation of “Promise” or “Law,” while still living in the current dispensation of grace, probably is new. Here is a way to be saved today--other than by personal, cognitive and explicit faith in Jesus Christ, and is therefore another gospel.

Evans supports his dispensational hybrid by the example of Abraham. “Abraham believed God and was accounted as righteous, or saved, for believing in God’s promise of a son and a seed (Gen. 15:6),” p. 360. He goes on,

Nobody can get saved without Jesus, because He is the Savior of all men, as we read in 1 Timothy 4:10. Everybody is saved through Christ, even those who lived before Jesus came, because in the mind and heart of God, Jesus was already sacrificed to pay for sin before the world was ever created (see Revelation 13:8). p. 360

With regard to 1 Tim. 4:10 "(and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe." This cannot mean that God saves all, if as Evans maintains, salvation is only by faith in Christ. Of course, because Christ is "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev. 13:8) does not mean that that sacrifice perforce was applied to anyone, apart from faith in Christ. It was simply the foreknowledge of God.

Abraham is a type of the Christian who is saved by faith (Rom. 4:3,16). While God considers Abraham righteous by faith (Rom. 4:13), to say that the same arrangement operates wholesale today to those who seek God ignores the requirements of the New Covenant, through which God now relates to those seeking Him (Heb. 8:8-13). Dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists recognize that Christians today are under the New Covenant. The Old Covenant is "obsolete" (Heb. 8: 13). Personal faith in a (monotheistic) God is no longer the equivalent to personal faith in Christ (James 2:19), as it was for Abraham. "In the past God overlooked such ignorance [as idolatry], but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." (Acts 17:30). Today explicit faith in Christ is required for salvation. This is not attributed faith in Christ, but actual, conscious, cognitive and personal faith in Christ. Nowhere in the New Testament is anyone saved except by personal, conscious and cognitive faith in Christ. Simply seeking God and not explicitly rejecting Christ is insufficient for salvation under the New Covenant. Transdispensationalism is a dangerous teaching.

If **you** confess with **your mouth**, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in **your heart** that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with **your heart** that you believe and are justified, and it is with **your mouth** that you confess and are saved. ¹¹ As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts **in him** will never be put to shame." ¹² For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile-- the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses **all who call on him**, Romans 10:9-12 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word **of Christ**. Romans 10:17 (emphasis mine)

Saving faith has Christ as its conscious content. These are no longer times of "ignorance," except as the church has kept people in ignorance through self-centeredness and ethnocentrism. Globally, Christians give one-tenth of one percent of income to global missions.⁸ That, all by itself, keeps people ignorant.

Scripture is also clear that people do not normally seek God.

As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Romans 3:10-12.

If anyone is seeking God, therefore, it is because God is drawing (John 6:44). God is able to save anyone He is drawing to Himself. But it will be through faith, the explicit content of which is Christ. Many are the accounts of Muslims and others coming to a saving knowledge of Christ through dreams and visions. A relief worker in Afghanistan was surprised how many Afghans had found Christ while recent refugees in Pakistan. “Many had supernatural dreams, where Jesus appeared to them and revealed Himself to be the truth.”⁹ Missionaries have encountered remote people specifically waiting for their message, having been divinely alerted. Unfortunately, many others have died waiting.

Merely seeking God under these New Covenant times isn't sufficient. The Roman centurion Cornelius, who lived after the New Covenant was established by Christ's sacrifice, and who would reasonably fall within this current dispensation of grace, was “devout and God-fearing” (Acts 10:1), as well as “righteous” (Acts 10:22). Although relatively righteous, he still needed to have the Gospel preached to him. In his case God went to extraordinary trouble, sending an angel, and providing a preparatory vision to the reluctant missionary Peter, who then, after God's extraordinary timing, preached the Gospel to Cornelius, his relatives and friends (Acts 10:34-44), who were saved on the spot. God did not consider this God-fearing man, who had apparently not rejected Christ, to be saved.

A clearer example is that of the Ethiopian eunuch, who sought God so diligently that he traveled from the Nile river valley in Egypt all the way up to Jerusalem, presumably alone. Evans uses this event to show that God will give more light to those who seek Him (p. 364). I think this account shows the fallacy of transdispensationalism. The eunuch was returning lost until Philip preached “the good news about Jesus” to him (Acts 8:26-40). It was obvious that the eunuch did not connect Isaiah 53 with Jesus, and so it's doubtful that he had heard of Christ's sacrifice. God had to send an angel and provide a true miracle of timing to accomplish this salvation. It would have been far simpler for God to “transdispensationalize” the eunuch—to attribute faith in Christ to him, than to trouble Philip, who was pulled from a remarkable spiritual awakening in Samaria to evangelize him. Why go to all this trouble if it really didn't matter in the end?

Today if someone is really seeking Christ, there are many avenues—radio, short wave, TV, printed page, even dreams and visions, as well as missionaries. When the Gospel first went out, and Jesus had shut up salvation only to Himself (John 14:6), the vast majority of the world did not have the capacity to respond. Laborers were far more rare than today, when people can hear the Gospel by shortwave, AM and FM radios, television and the 443,000 foreign missionaries.¹⁰ I remember waking up to music from a transistor radio one morning in a low mud and stick hut on the Congo side of the Rwenzori mountains, where there was no electricity, telephone or running water. If anything, God would have told us the provisions of an easier way in the first centuries of Christianity.

Part of Evans' concern is for God's justice. “

God's invitation to all people to respond in faith assumes that those who have been invited have the capacity to respond. To put it another way, God's command to believe is only applicable to those who can heed it. (p. 354)

If you don't have the capacity to respond in faith to Christ, you're not lost, as long as you don't reject Christ. Since God said that "he who seeks finds" (Matt. 7:8), God would be inconsistent not to allow someone seeking Him to find Him.

You can't tell me God loves me—Jesus paid for my sin—but you're not going to give me any data and hold me accountable for that. That's a contradiction. In the most logical mind, that is a contradiction.¹¹

Therefore God must find a new way to save him. However, God does not owe salvation to anyone (Rom. 9:13-16). If anyone is saved anywhere, this is simply God's mercy. We cannot put God into an arm lock of logic, requiring Him to save anyone. When our logic and the Word of God disagree, even internally consistent logic must defer to the truth.

Does Evans' theology have an impact upon his organization? Evans indicated to Plummer in 2002¹² that these thoughts had been percolating in his mind for some time. The Urban Alternative, of which Evans is the president, sponsors an annual Church Development Conference, attended primarily by blacks. Less than 1% of their 123 Conference workshops dealt with cross-cultural ministry in 2002, similar to 2001, while in 2005 two (1.6%) of the 121 workshops offered were explicitly cross-cultural¹³. Only one of these two cross-cultural seminars dealt with global missions. The overwhelming focus was upon local church ministry and community development. Local church ministry will possibly extend across cultures, depending largely upon the pastor, but these conferences do not seem to equip African American church leaders to reach the planet for Christ. Whether or not transdispensational thinking has in fact influenced these conference offerings, there would be no stimulus to change them if transdispensationalism is embraced.

If Evans is right--if unevangelized God-seekers who don't consciously reject Christ are saved, it would be far better not to send missionaries, since it is likely that many of those who hear will consciously reject Christ, as any missionary can attest. So missions would then be virtually a criminal activity, resulting in the eternal damnation of probably the majority of those who hear (Matt. 7:13-14). According to this logic, we could reason that we should ignore their unbelief, saving the church valuable human and financial resources that could better be spent on local programming¹⁴. Evans would respond that we should go because Christ commanded it and because it's more sure (p. 361). But if Christ commanded it, why eviscerate that command through another gospel, even if articulated for the best of motivations?

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¹ The second edition of *Totally Saved*, ISBN 0802468241, 2002, omits the chapter in question, "What About Those People Who Can't Believe?" which appeared in the original edition, ISBN 0802468195, 2002. Whether this omission is due to a change of position of Dr. Evans, or to criticism directed at Moody Press, or both, is unknown. Page numbers refer to the earlier edition.

² Are Those Who Haven't Heard Really Lost? Backwardly Compatible Salvation. 2002. An interview with Dr. Tony Evans on Christian Television Live (Detroit) by Rev. Glenn Plummer, at the February 2002 National Religious Broadcasters convention in Nashville, Tenn., transcript by author.

³ Barrett, David B., and Todd M. Johnson. *World Christian Trends AD 30-AD 2200*, 2001. Global Diagram 41, p. 59.

⁴ This doctrine is the same as is explicitly stated by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent, Session V, decree #5, June 17, 1546. <http://www.catholic-forum.com/Saints/trent05.htm> accessed 11/27/06

⁵ Telephone interview of Gary Phillips, Th.D. (Dallas Theological Seminary), by author, 11/29/05

⁶ Plummer interview

⁷ Ryrie, Charles C. *Dispensationalism Today*, 1965. Moody Press. ISBN: 080242256X, p. 110-113.

⁸ Barrett, David, Todd Johnson and Peter F. Crossing, "Status of Global Mission, 2005, in Context of 20th and 21st Centuries," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jan. 2005, p. 29.

⁹ "Underground Church Grows in War-torn Afghanistan," *Charisma* online news service, January 29, 2004.

¹⁰ Center for the Study of Global Christianity "All Humanity in Mission Perspective in mid-2005" © 2004 www.globalchristianity.org

¹¹ Plummer interview

¹² Plummer interview

¹³ <http://www.tonyevans.org/conf/nonhtml/registration.pdf> cached copy accessed 11/28/05.

¹⁴ Dr. D. James Kennedy has exposed this logical absurdity elsewhere.