

# ***Teaching Them to Observe the Doctrine of Salvation: Tiessen's Accessibilism vs. Jesus' Exclusivism***

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## **Introduction**

In his recent book *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions*,<sup>1</sup> Terrance Tiessen proposes his own accessibilist answer to the question raised in the book's title. Following his recent intriguing book surveying theological perspectives on divine providence, *Providence and Prayer: How God Works in the World*,<sup>2</sup> Tiessen in this volume addresses another crucial issue confronting contemporary Christianity – how Christian exclusivism can be maintained in a pluralistic world. As his title suggests, he is proposing a reassessment of traditional Christian soteriology.

Tiessen, who is professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Providence Theological Seminary in Manitoba, Canada, seeks to answer two key questions in the book: “How does God save people?” (p. 12) and “How do the (world's) religions fit into God's purposes in the world?” (p. 477). These two main questions are broken down into nineteen more detailed questions which serve as the chapter titles of the book.<sup>3</sup> After an introductory section that surveys other

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<sup>1</sup> Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004). All parenthetical references in this paper refer to this book. Tiessen presented an early outline of his proposal in a paper presented at the 2002 annual meeting in Toronto of the Evangelical Theological Society. Tiessen's paper was entitled “God's Work of Grace in the Context of the Religions: A Reformed Proposal.” Tiessen also published an earlier work on this subject, an ATLA monograph entitled *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000. For a critique of this book, see Steve Lemke, “God's Relation to the World: Terrance Tiessen Proposal on Providence and Prayer,” *Criswell Theological Review* n.s. vol. 1, no. 2 (Spring 2004):205-213; and Steve Lemke, review of *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* by Terrance Tiessen, in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6, no. 1 (Summer 2002):114-118, available online at [http://www.sbts.edu/pdf/sbjt\\_2002SpringComplete.pdf](http://www.sbts.edu/pdf/sbjt_2002SpringComplete.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, chapter titles. These are listed in Appendix 2.

options, Tiessen proposes his version of accessibilism in thirty theses.<sup>4</sup> Fleshing out these thirty theses provides the primary content of the book.

Tiessen, who was reared on the mission field as a child of missionaries, generally favors the importance of missions and the ultimate necessity of Christ for salvation. Most of his affirmations are positive and evangelical. However, some of his accessibilist theses and their implications are controversial for exclusivist evangelicals. One of Tiessen's driving concerns is how few people will come to salvation under the conventional exclusivist standards of salvation only through personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Therefore, his accessibilist proposal denies "ecclesiocentrism" and contends that salvation may be obtained (a) apart from the proclamation of the gospel by the church, (b) through means of another world religion, (c) without necessarily becoming a Christian, (d) without a conscious commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, (e) by an infant or mentally incompetent person, and (f) through a "last chance" decision after this life. This paper will identify seven problematic theses of Tiessen's accessibilism and critique them in light of the teachings of Christ.

### *An Unnecessary but Interesting Excursus: Tiessen and Calvinism*

Another key issue which seems to drive Tiessen's project is his effort to address acknowledged "difficulties in Calvinism" (242) regarding election. Tiessen describes himself as writing from a monergistic Calvinist perspective (69). As he advocates in much greater detail in his book on divine providence,<sup>5</sup> Tiessen affirms middle knowledge Calvinism (158). However, at points it is difficult to ascertain how Tiessen's views correspond to traditional TULIP Calvinism.

Total depravity – While the "total depravity" doctrine holds that unregenerate sinners are dead in their sins and thus utterly incapable of doing anything to please God, Tiessen suggests that Native Americans who had never heard the gospel were god-fearers like Cornelius who "were sincerely seeking the gospel" (61), that God is "more pleased" with unregenerate children who honor their parents than regenerate children who do not do so (399), that people can be "good" without being "saved" (423), that a non-Christian community may *better approximate God's ideal* than does a Christian community (417), and indeed that (even in their fallen state), "everyone is made in the image of God and is seeking ways of dealing with the awareness of and the hunger for God that is intrinsic to our human being" (359). These affirmations of the goodness of unregenerate persons would seem to fly in the face of the doctrine of total depravity as most Calvinists understand it.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 22-30, and as addressed throughout the book. These theses are listed in Appendix 1. In this paper, they will be referenced simply by number.

<sup>5</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, chapters 12-14.

Unconditional election – Tiessen forthrightly challenges the doctrine of unconditional election by agreeing with Neal Punt that “God consigns someone to destruction (hell) *only on the basis of what that person does*”(233), and indeed Tiessen concludes his chapter on “Who Is Able to Believe?” with the assertion that God gives sufficient revelation to save persons “*if they respond appropriately*” (358). Tiessen is thus asserting that election is in some way conditional on human response. Tiessen notes Pascal’s complaint that the problem with the Jesuit concept of “*sufficient grace*” was that it was *not sufficient* for salvation. Tiessen concedes these “difficulties in Calvinism” regarding election for which no adequate answer has been provided, namely how those who have no ability to respond positively to God can be held accountably by God. Tiessen proposes an alternative view of God’s “universal sufficient enabling grace” (241-242). Tiessen’s accessibilist proposal seeks to avoid these problems concerning election and human response by proposing a neo-Amyraldian “universal sufficient enabling grace” in which God provides everyone with a universal at-death revelatory experience with a final opportunity to confess Christ (239-258, 487-497). While Tiessen’s proposal avoids the hypothetical universalism of Amyraut, it does not resolve the problem voiced by Pascal because in Tiessen’s proposal God’s enabling grace is not efficacious, and therefore not sufficient for salvation. However, he appears to make election conditional on human response.

Limited atonement – Although Tiessen seems to affirm the traditional doctrine of a limited atonement at times (90-91, 487-490), his Thesis 14 asserts that “God’s saving grace is universally sufficient so that, on at least one occasion in each person’s life, one is enabled to respond to God’s self-revelation with faith response that is acceptable to God as a means of justification.” Thus Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is universally sufficient, and everyone will have an opportunity to respond to the gospel. Not only that, but the central contention of Tiessen’s accessibilism is that salvation extends beyond the church, such that some persons who are unaware of even the name of Jesus Christ can share in the same salvation as Peter and Paul. Tiessen affirms in his Thesis 16 that “we have reason to be very hopeful concerning the proportion of the human race that will enjoy life with God . . . .” So the number of the saved is not a small minority, but is much larger than is commonly expected.

Irresistible grace – According to Tiessen’s Thesis 8, “God’s knowledge of what people would do if they heard the gospel does not make salvation more accessible, but it enables him to bring about the salvation of the elect without coercion.” God’s grace is thus not coercive or irresistible. Tiessen asserts that the “hardening” of heart spoken of in Scripture “results when people *resist and refuse grace*” (244). Clearly, then, that such grace is resistible.

Perseverance of the saints – Tiessen contends that the warning passages in Hebrews were “designed to keep the elect from *irrevocable apostasy*” (490). His interpretation of these passages in Hebrews seems to leave the door open for former believers to lose or renounce their salvation, in contradiction to this classical Calvinist tenet.

*The sovereignty of God*— In addition to these ambiguities about the traditional points of the TULIP, Tiessen also appears to have a low view of the sovereignty of God. While Tiessen describes himself as being within a monergistic Reformed perspective that “affirms God’s complete control of all things in his creation” (394), the God he describes comes across as impotent and incompetent. Tiessen’s proposal of a last-ditch “at death encounter with Christ” is apparently offered as a stopgap measure for all those for whom God has been incompetent to reach with sufficient revelation during their lives. Tiessen’s God is forced to work through other world religions to reach those whom He is apparently incapable of reaching through the proclamation of the gospel, and even in this Tiessen rejects that God does so by “intentional instrumentality” (394). Evidently the salvation of these persons is out of God’s control or design.

So thoroughgoing Calvinists might question whether Tiessen appropriately identifies himself as being within the Calvinist camp, and some who lean toward the Arminian camp may wonder what the real distinction is between their own position and that of Tiessen. But whatever his position with regard to Calvinism and despite his generally favoring evangelical doctrines such as the importance of missions and the ultimate necessity of Christ for salvation, some of Tiessen’s accessibilist theses and their implications are controversial for exclusivist evangelicals. Unfortunately, space will not allow me to address all of these controversial points or even to provide a detailed response to each issue. Suffice it to be said that Tiessen’s unique brand of Calvinism further clouds the seven problematic theses of his accessibilism that are the focus of this paper.

### ***Salvation Apart from the Church and Its Proclamation of the Gospel***

*Objection 1: In Tiessen’s proposal, salvation may be had outside and apart from the church.*

Does the church play a necessary or crucial role in the proclamation of the gospel, or is it unnecessary and peripheral? Are there Christians who are not a part of the body of Christ, the church? *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the church) was a traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic church as early as Pope Pelagius II (578-590), and was codified in the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 A.D.). Protestants obviously reject this teaching as Catholics understood it, but they do tend to equate those who are saved with the church.

Tiessen’s anti-ecclesiocentrism, with its sharp bifurcation between the believers and the church, leads to a weak ecclesiology and a lack of confidence in the church (443, 450-451). Tiessen’s proposal concedes much to pluralism, since people can be led to salvation through non-Christian religions. By opening up alternative ways of salvation, Tiessen’s proposal obviously undermines the motivation to fulfill the missionary mandate of the church and ultimately makes witness by the church superfluous and unnecessary.

Jesus had a different ecclesiology than that voiced by Tiessen. Jesus gave the keys of the Kingdom to the church, and declared that the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matt. 16:16-19). Certainly, this does not make the church as the means of grace to salvation. But it

does make the church the post-Pentecost locus of God's activity on earth, and places all of Christ's followers within the church. All persons who claim Christ as Savior and Lord are members of the church of Jesus Christ, whether or not they officially join a local church. In addition to individual local churches, the Bible also speaks of the body of Christ, the universal church that includes all those who are redeemed in all places and in all ages (1 Cor. 12:12-31, Rev. 21:2-3).

### **Salvation through Other World Religions**

*Objection 2: In Tiessen's proposal, one can have genuine revelatory experiences that can lead to saving faith through other world religions.*

In many ways, Tiessen appears to be orthodox with regard to salvation through other world religions. He affirms that the scriptures of other world religions are "not themselves instances of divine revelation" (Thesis 22), and that Christians cannot truly worship with unbelievers (Thesis 30). He affirms that Christianity has a "great advantage" over other world religions because of God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ and Scripture (Thesis 18), and indeed Jesus is "God's supreme self-revelation" (Thesis 23). He also claims that evangelizing Jews "is as necessary today as it was in the time of the apostles" (165, Thesis 11).

However, Tiessen leaves the door open to salvation through the vehicle of other world religions. According to Tiessen, "God may graciously give faith to individuals while they live in the context of a non-Christian religion," utilizing "revealed truth that people encounter as a part of their religious tradition to elicit saving faith" (28). With Gerald McDermott, Tiessen believes that other world religions may be used by God as "stepping stones" or "schoolmasters" to lead people to salvation (379). A world religion may thus serve as a "bridge" or "stepping stone" not only in "facilitating communication of the gospel" to the lost but also "becoming an instrument of the Spirit of God in eliciting faith in Christ" (Thesis 24). Among non-Christian religions, Tiessen considers animistic sacrificial religions, Islam, and Judaism to have viable and genuine revelatory experiences. Tiessen believes it is possible that sacrifices offered by devout non-Christians outside the Mosaic covenant may be acceptable to God (172), and that "Muhammad may have had God speak to him in particular ways" (373). He also suggests that present day Jews need not come to faith in Christ to be saved, because "we can assert that the faith of Abraham still saves, and we can acknowledge that some Jews may be believers (with an old covenant faith) and hence be saved, although they are not Christians" (165). Further, Tiessen is unwilling "to assume that even a Jew who rejects the proclamation of Jesus made by a Gentile Christian today has rejected Jesus himself" (200). Therefore, an imperfect gospel messenger may clear the Jewish hearer of accountability for hearing and rejecting the gospel message.

Scripture declares that it is through the "foolishness of preaching" that persons are saved (1 Cor. 1:17-24), even though that gospel is proclaimed by "earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:6-7).<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> All Scriptural citations are King James Version unless otherwise noted.

scandal of the gospel was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks in the first century, just as it is today. God’s messengers were imperfect then as they are now. But the message remains the same – Jesus is the only way to salvation. Jesus did not say that He simply offered a “great advantage” over other religious paths; He affirmed that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one comes to the Father but by Him (John 14:6). He is the “Door” that leads to salvation and satisfaction, all others are “thieves and robbers” (John 10:10). The New Testament church likewise declared that only through Jesus was salvation available (Acts 4:12). While Tiessen insists that all persons are saved through Christ, his belief that God could have been revealed and persons saved through Judaism or other world religions seems to mitigate the necessity of Jesus’ incarnation and sacrificial atonement. If Jesus saw no other way for salvation, we must take that one way more seriously.

### **Salvation Without Becoming a Christian**

*Objection 3: Tiessen affirms that one can be saved without becoming a Christian.*

Flowing from his anti-ecclesiocentrism, Tiessen draws an unusually sharp distinction between those who are saved and Christians. According to Tiessen, “Some people are saved who have not yet become Christians” (165), and “being saved and becoming a Christian are not the same thing” (202). For Tiessen, people who would fall into this category of unsaved Christians are persons (a) who “are ignorant of Jesus” and/or (b) those who “have heard about him but have not yet been convinced of his identity by the Holy Spirit” (165). In my confessional tradition, we describe folk such as these as “lost persons,” for although they might be interested in God or seeking God they have not trusted Christ as their personal Savior. Tiessen is clearly suggesting an option of salvation apart from Christ, for to put one’s trust in Christ is to be a Christian.

Most evangelicals would understand even the salvation of Jews in the Old Testament era to be at least in some degree based upon their faith in God’s atonement through a coming messiah. Jesus fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies, and His sacrificial atonement afforded a new covenant in His blood that was an improvement over and fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system (Hebrews 7-9). Since Jesus said that He was the only way to the Father (John 14:6), there is no salvation apart from becoming a follower of Jesus Christ.

### **Salvation Without a Conscious Personal Faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord**

*Objection 4: In Tiessen’s proposal, one can be saved without a conscious commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.*

Consistent with his disjunction between those who are saved and those who are Christian, Tiessen affirms that persons may achieve salvation without expressing personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. According to Tiessen, “God may graciously save some who do not believe in Jesus as Savior if they are ignorant of him through no fault of their own” (123). Indeed, Tiessen claims, the Bible demonstrates that “one *can* be saved by Christ without knowing

about him” (180). Likewise, Tiessen discounts the applicability of Jesus’ assertion that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one comes to the Father but through Him (John 14:6) by limiting it to the people to whom Jesus was speaking at the time, persons to whom He had personally revealed Himself. Tiessen warns that “it is critical that we not overextend such statements to the unevangelized, who are, by definition, without such revelation” (85).

Tiessen’s imaginative hermeneutics undermine the believability of his proposal. John 14:6 is obviously not the only passage in Scripture that asserts salvation by grace through faith in Jesus (John 10:1-10; Acts 4:12; 16:31; Rom. 10:9-10). If Tiessen’s interpretation were correct, then salvation through Christ would pertain only those to who received this revelation directly. One would be doing a disservice, then, to share the gospel of Christ, because the hearers would be jeopardized by being under a stricter standard for salvation. Salvation does not come by ignorance, but only through a conscious faith commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. As 1 John 2:22-23 affirms, only those who know and confess the Son can properly claim to have God the Father, and those who do not confess the Son do not know the Father.

### **Diminishment of the Missionary Mandate of the Church**

*Objection 5: Since other revelatory and salvific means are available, the mission mandate of the Great Commission is not really necessary for the church.*

Tiessen affirms in Thesis 15 that “accessibilism is not detrimental to the church’s missionary motivation.” However, for Tiessen, “making people Christians is not our main goal” (202). The primary motivation for missions is merely to “vindicate God’s justice toward people who have not heard the gospel” (259) and to maximize the number of people who experience “the joy of salvation in *this* life” (479). Ultimately, however, missionary efforts are essentially superfluous for Tiessen because “*Nowhere* has Scripture stated that God will not save anyone whom we do not reach with the gospel” (293).

Tiessen’s hermeneutic in support of these claims is questionable at a number of points. For example, Tiessen makes an argument from silence that since the Apostle Paul doesn’t specifically mention his passionate concern for the unregenerate in Spain in any of his canonical epistles, he and the early church “had no sense of urgency” about sharing the gospel with all nations to save them from hell (274-275). Evidently, then, Tiessen is suggesting that the great missionary apostle and the entire early church were unaware of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20, Acts 1:8), and that Paul’s passionate statements about his obligation to preach the gospel to Greeks, Jews, Gentiles, barbarians, wise, and unwise throughout the Roman world (Rom. 1:13-16) or his expressed willingness to be accursed by God if he could win his own people (Rom. 9:1-3) were evidently either spoken sarcastically or were not an original part of the canon of Scripture. These are ludicrous notions.

Again, despite Tiessen’s protestations, if persons can have genuine revelatory and salvific experiences apart from the proclamation of the gospel, it radically undermines the missionary

mandate of the church. Tiessen appears to be maddeningly self-contradictory at times. For example, in his longer statement of Thesis 11 (165), Tiessen affirms *both* of these statements, which were separated by only one sentence: (A) “Evangelism among Jewish people is as necessary today as it was in the time of the apostles, *and*, (B) “We can assert that the faith of Abraham still saves, and we can acknowledge that some Jews may be believers (with an old covenant faith) and hence be saved, although they are not Christians” (Thesis 11, 165). For Tiessen, affirmation (B) applies for (a) Jews who are unaware of “the real identify of Jesus” and (b) those “who have not knowingly rejected the Messiah” (165). Thus for Tiessen, proclaiming Jesus among Jews might actually hurt the likelihood that they might be saved, because it would then force them to be judged by the higher standard of their acceptance or rejection of Christ. Who would feel any real imperative for Jewish evangelism if Jews can be saved without Jesus?

If Tiessen’s proposal were true, the proclamation of the gospel would be helpful but unnecessary. The gospel proclamation is unnecessary because all persons are going to be presented with an at-death encounter with Jesus, so proclamation of the gospel in this life is not crucial for determining one’s afterlife. Gospel proclamation is helpful only because it allows persons to receive the benefits of the Christian faith in this life, before that final presentation of the gospel. Besides, Tiessen believes that we can be optimistic that a much larger proportion of people will be saved than is commonly assumed (26).

Jesus assigned the church the task of the proclamation of the gospel, of baptizing those who were converted, and of discipling them (Matt. 28:19-20, Acts 1:8). The Apostle Paul also underscored the burden of proclaiming the gospel of salvation by stating its alternative – persons who are lost cannot call on Him in whom they have not believed, they cannot believe in Him of whom they have not heard, they cannot hear without a preacher, and preachers cannot go unless they are sent. So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:13-17). God does reveal Himself universally through creation and conscience (Rom. 1:20, 2:14-15), but He has chosen the church as the vehicle by which the gospel of salvation through Christ is proclaimed. The Great Commission should not become the Great Omission.

### **Salvation Competency of Infants and Mentally Incompetent Persons**

*Objection 6: That a child or mentally incompetent person can be saved (as opposed to being seen as not a sinner because they have not yet reached the age of accountability).*

In his discussion of Thesis 2, Tiessen asserts that “there are no ‘innocent’ people, whether they be unborn, infant, disabled, or competent and adult” (22). As a consequence of original sin, “everyone is born a sinner, alienated from God, guilty of enmity toward God” (22). “Every human being, therefore, needs to be saved from the guilt of sin and its terrible consequences” (22). Rather than understanding that persons only become guilty of sin when they actually commit sin when they reach the age of accountability, Tiessen believes sin to be a sexually transmitted disease such that persons receive inherited guilt through original sin. He is thus forced to insist that God reveals Himself to the unborn, infants, and mentally incompetent, and

they are miraculously made mentally competent to respond in a way that effects salvation (78, 215). Tiessen makes the shocking claim that “*The possibility and the process of salvation are no different for infants and the mentally incompetent than for competent adults*” (25). It is very difficult to even imagine what Tiessen means by this claim.

Tiessen’s accessibilism is fraught with theological and logical problems, but his claim that the unborn, infants, and mentally incompetent are intellectually and spiritually capable of understanding and responding to God’s revelation in a way that is sufficient for salvation is perhaps the least tenable of all his claims. If Tiessen’s system drives him to make these absurd claims, then there is obviously something wrong within his theological system. The problem with his system is accounting persons as guilty of sin that they never committed. Anyone such as myself who has lost a child in the womb finds Tiessen’s suggestion incredibly offensive.

An alternative proposal that is both more biblical and more logical considers one to be saved or lost only after the age of accountability. While it may be more of a “state” of being accountable rather than an “age” of accountability, apart from mentally challenged individuals this state of accountability is normally associated with a “coming of age.” No specific age is given; it is assumed that individual children mature at different paces from each other. We should take note that when Ezra read the law in the Old Testament era, he read it to men and women and all “those that could understand” (Neh. 8:3). Only those at a certain level of maturity could be expected to understand the meaning and significance of the law. Even in the American legal system we understand the concept of whether or not someone should be “tried as an adult” for crimes they have committed. The presumption is that persons below a certain age simply cannot be held accountable for their actions in the same way that adults are.

Foundational to belief in the age of accountability is justification by faith. If we are justified by faith, we must be of age to understand our sinfulness and trust Christ. The doctrinal confession to which I ascribe, the Baptist Faith and Message, asserts that “*as soon as they are capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are under condemnation.*” By affirming the age of accountability, Baptists deny that children are guilty upon birth, and thus deny infant baptism. Only those who are of age for moral accountability are capable of recognizing their own sinfulness, the first step toward salvation in Christ.

I would suggest that Tiessen begin with the notion that although we are all born with a nature inclined toward sin, only when we act on that sin do we become sinners and become guilty of sin. Projecting guilt on unborn children is counterintuitive and obscures the definition of sin as *known* rebellion. Sin takes place when one *knows* to do good and chooses not to do it (Jas. 4:17). The nature of the new covenant in Christ, in contrast to God’s covenant with Israel, is that it primarily relates to individuals rather than a nation. Note that in Jeremiah’s description of this coming new covenant, one is not held accountable for the sins of ancestors, but only for one’s own sin (language that is echoed in Ezekiel 18):

In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grapes, and the

children's teeth are set on edge. But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer. 31:29-33, KJV).

The author of Hebrews specifically applied this new covenant language from Jeremiah and Ezekiel to the new covenant in Jesus (Heb. 8:7-13, 12:24). Clearly, it is the actual sins we commit personally and individually for which we are accountable. We cannot be saved until we are lost, and we cannot be saved until we are of age to recognize our sinfulness and respond consciously in faith to Jesus Christ. I believe that Jesus saves all children before the age of accountability and all those whose health or mental capacity does not allow them to be morally accountable, and all those after the age of accountability who trust Him as Savior and Lord.

### **Salvation by a Universal Opportunity at Death**

*Objection 7: That all unsaved persons will have one last opportunity for a universal encounter with Christ upon their death.*

Foundational to all of Tiessen's system is the last chance for salvation. Like the liquor store poised at the border of a "wet" county adjacent to a "dry" county that offers the "last chance" for liquor for many miles, Tiessen's system requires that all people have a last chance "universal at-death" encounter with Christ which provides them one last opportunity to place their faith in Him (217, 225). Only with this last chance encounter can Tiessen solve his "difficulties" with Calvinism. Only with this last chance encounter can he make sense of most of the assertions objected to in this paper – salvation apart from the proclamation of the church, salvation through non-Christian world religions, salvation apart from being Christian, and salvation apart from a personal conscious commitment or even awareness of Jesus Christ. This last chance encounter is Tiessen's version of a "gap theory" – whatever theological problems may arise are solved in this universal last chance encounter with Christ.

The problem with Tiessen's proposal about a last chance encounter is that it lacks credibility both medically and biblically. Tiessen's "universal at-death encounter with Christ" is incoherent for anyone who has clinical experience. Tiessen sharply distinguishes his own view from those who propose post-mortem encounters with Christ, but this is a distinction without a difference. One goes immediately from life to death; there is no temporally extended period at death sufficient for such a revelatory encounter. Again, Tiessen's proposal is entirely an argument from silence. Scripture never speaks of such a last chance encounter, although clearly this is important enough that it would if such an event were in God's plans. We do have God's

word that death is final and then one experiences judgment (Heb. 9:27). Jesus mentioned no such last chance encounter in describing the rich man and Lazarus, and in fact the rich man was unable to change his mind or communicate with his brothers after his transition from time into eternity (Luke 16:19-31). When Jesus describes the last judgment, the basis for His judgment is the response of persons during their lives, not in the afterlife (Matt. 25:31-46). Therefore, Tiessen's proposal about a universal last chance encounter with Christ fails the test of Scripture, and as a result his entire system built upon this proposal crashes down with it.

### Conclusion

Like his other major published works, Tiessen provides a well-researched, thoughtful, readable, and innovative proposal that is above all interesting and stimulating. Theological innovation usually stretches or challenges Christian orthodoxy, but to his credit, Tiessen never makes theology boring. This is an important book for evangelicals to read and consider, even if they do not agree with his creative proposals.

However, instead of Tiessen's accessibilism, I suggest that we consider the accessibilism of the Apostle Paul. In Paul's accessibilism, there is one way to access the Father – through Jesus Christ. Paul expresses his accessibilism in three passages. We read in Rom. 5:1-2, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have *access* by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Likewise, in Eph. 2:18, it is through Jesus that we "have *access* by one Spirit unto the Father." Again, in Eph. 3:11-12, "According to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: in whom we have boldness and *access* with confidence by the faith of Him." So in Paul's accessibilism, we all have *access* to God through faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, the accessibilism of Paul is the exclusivism of Jesus.

Tiessen's accessibilism shockingly makes Tiessen himself appear to be a better advocate than Jesus Himself (1 John 2:1). Like a skilled lawyer, by proposing novel readings of normative texts and arguing from silence in other texts, Tiessen argues every possible angle and technicality to extend salvation to the maximum number of people. Note the stunning contrast between the advocate Tiessen and the advocate Jesus:

Tiessen asserts that "we have reason to be very hopeful concerning the proportion of the human race that will enjoy life with God in the glorious new earth" (26).

Jesus said that the way to eternal life was narrow and comparatively few would find it (Matt. 7:13-14)

Tiessen allows for people to receive divine revelation and salvific experiences in other world religions, including Judaism, Islam, and the sacrificial systems of animistic religions.

Jesus taught that He is the Door to eternal and abundant life, and those who enter in by other paths than the Door are thieves and robbers (John 10:1-10).

*Tiessen* allows for people to be saved who have never heard of Jesus (165, 180). *Jesus* taught that only those who have a personal relationship with Him and who base their lives on the foundation of Jesus Christ will be saved (Matt. 7:21-27). Jesus taught that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Those who do not know and confess the Son do not know the Father (1 John 2:22-23).

Personally, I would love for *Tiessen* to be right. It would lighten the burden we feel for the millions who do not know salvation through Jesus Christ. We all hope for and pray for the salvation of those who are lost. It is God who makes these judgments, and He can save whomever He wants. But God has given us His Word, we must abide by the criteria established in Scripture. The holiness of God cannot countenance unforgiven sin. Remission of sin comes only through the shedding of blood (Heb. 9:22). Jesus is the Lamb who was slain as a propitiation for our sin (Rom. 3:25). Therefore, salvation comes only through faith in the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. This *is* the gospel of salvation. So, all things being equal, we must choose the exclusivism of Jesus over the accessibilism of *Tiessen*.

## **Appendix 1: Tiessen's Thirty Theses**

1. Accessibilism can be traced in Christian thought back to the second century.
2. By God's appointment, the entire human race was represented in Adam in his moral probation in the Garden of Eden.
3. There is only one means by which salvation of sinners can be accomplished.
4. People experience the salvation that God has accomplished in Christ only when they respond to God in a way that satisfies him, which the Bible calls "faith."
5. Whatever information, religious or moral, a person accepts as ultimate authoritative truth (whether this is understood to be from a personal God or not) must be believed and obeyed.
6. Since faith is essential for reconciliation with God, unbelief and its attendant disobedience leave people under God's just condemnation.
7. Salvation has always been by grace through faith, but the faith that God expects (and gives) is appropriate to the revelation of himself that he has given to a particular individual.
8. God's knowledge of what people would do if they heard the gospel does not make salvation more accessible, but it enables him to bring about the salvation of the elect without coercion.
9. Old Testament believers were saved by faith in God and in God's sure fulfillment of his promises to them, although the manner in which those promises would be fulfilled became clear only gradually.
10. From observing the experiences of people who met Jesus during this earthly ministry, we notice that God led them through a process that sometimes happened quickly and sometimes went more slowly.
11. The implications of the principles derived from both the Old Testament situation and from the lifetime of Jesus are particularly important for our perspective on Jewish people today.
12. The possibility and the process of salvation are no different for infants and the mentally incompetent than for competent adults.

13. All people meet Jesus Christ personally at the moment of death, and they respond to him in a manner consistent with the response they had been giving to God in his revelation during their lifetime.
14. God's saving grace is universally sufficient so that, on at least one occasion in each person's life, one is enabled to respond to God's self-revelation with faith response that is acceptable to God as a means of justification.
15. Accessibilism is not detrimental to the church's missionary motivation.
16. Scripture is silent about the final numbers of the saved relative to the unsaved, but we have reason to be very hopeful concerning the proportion of the human race that will enjoy life with God in the glorious new earth that he plans to bring about when his redemptive program is complete.
17. Religious develop as inherently religious people respond to God's revelation in the forms that are accessible to them.
18. Among the religions of the world, Christianity has the great advantage of being constructed in response to God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the Scriptures of the New and Old Testaments.
19. The biblical writers consistently bear witness to the uniqueness of the God who created all that exists and who established a covenant relationship with the people of Israel, which was later extended to the Gentiles, in the church.
20. God appropriated divine names and religious forms from contemporary culture without endorsing the religious forms from contemporary culture without endorsing the religion of Israel's neighbors.
21. Formalized religions are ambiguous responses to divine revelation, and so are the religious commitments of individual members of those religions.
22. The scriptures of other religions are not themselves instances of divine revelation.
23. After the supreme self-revelation of God in Jesus, the incarnate Word, there have been no divinely appointed prophets on the order of those in the old covenant, such as Moses and Isaiah.
24. In God's gracious providence, he may have caused or allowed ideas to emerge within a religious context that provide a bridge or stepping stone toward the gospel, thereby facilitating communication of the gospel to those people and becoming an instrument of the Spirit of God in eliciting faith in Christ.

25. No religion saves people—only God does.
26. We can observe signs of the work of God's common grace in the world through religions, and we should give thanks to God for this when we discern it in religions we encounter.
27. We can discern the work of God's grace in the teaching and life of other religions and in the lives of individuals who adhere to other religions by using three criteria: *the degree to which the religion or individual is orthodox, orthopraxy, and the motivation of religion's or person's heart.*
28. Dialogue with members of other religions is valuable.
29. Some concerns are common to various religions, such as the dangers of secularism, the protection of innocent human life, the protection of the ecosystem and the quest for social justice.
30. It is impossible for Christians to join in worship with members of other religions.

## **Appendix 2: Tiessen's Nineteen Questions**

1. Where are we going?
2. What are the options?
3. Is accessibilism a new idea?
4. Who needs to be saved?
5. Whom is God trying to save?
6. To whom does God reveal himself?
7. By what standard are people judged?
8. Can people be saved if they only have general revelation?
9. What about the saved who do not believe in Jesus?
10. Can infants be saved?
11. Who is able to believe?
12. Why should we send missionaries?
13. How do religions come into being?
14. How did the covenant people relate to other religions?
15. Is there revelation in other religions?
16. Is there salvation in other religions?
17. How do we discern God's grace in other religions?
18. Should we participate in interreligious dialogue?
19. Should we cooperate in interreligious dialogue?