SALVATION OUTSIDE THE CHURCH

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Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

More-conservative Christians (e.g., most Evangelicals) claim that one can only be saved if one is a professed Christian. They base their position on verses like these.

Mark 16:16, “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.”

John 3:5, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

John 15:5, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

Rom 10:9, “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Eph 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith . . .”

Eph 4:4-5, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism . . .”

More-liberal Christians (Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, mainline Protestants) claim that one can be saved even if one is not a professed Christian. They base their position on verses like these.

Matt 2:16, Herod “sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.” (The feast day for these “Holy Innocents” is Dec. 28. Even without explicit faith, baptism, and church membership, they are considered saved.)

John 1:9, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

Rom 2:14-16, “When Gentiles, who do not possess the [Mosaic] law, do instinctively what the law requires, [they] are a law to themselves. 15 They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them 16 on the day when . . . God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.”

1 Tim 2:4, God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

1 Tim 4:10, God “is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.”

Heb 11:6, “without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

The New Testament also mentions several unbaptized adults who were nevertheless saved:

 the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

 the good bandit (Luke 23:40-43)

 Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48)

 the dead whom Jesus visited when he descended to hell (1 Pet 3:19-20; 4:6).

Catholicism teaches that God has a “universal salvific will.” (See 1 Tim 2:4: God “desires everyone to be saved.”) If God wills everyone to be saved, then no doubt he provides to everyone the graces needed to be saved.

What exactly are “graces”? God intervenes in creation in two ways: outside human souls (as when Jesus turned water into wine) and inside human souls (as when God helps a person change from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh, Ezek 11:19; 36:26). Interventions outside human souls are called “miracles.” Interventions inside human souls are called “graces.”

A “means of grace” is something Christians use which prompts God to give us graces. The Catholic Church considers itself to have the most means of grace. To it belong the Bible and that Church’s 2000-year-long tradition. The tradition includes the creeds, the Church Fathers, the 21 ecumenical councils, the full 7 sacraments, religious orders, the pope; also bells, candles, liturgical vestments, nativity scenes, customary prayers, devotions like the rosary and the way of the cross, etc.

Eastern Orthodoxy has most of these means of grace: the Bible, the creeds, the Church Fathers, the 7 sacraments, various devotions. But it does not recognize any ecumenical councils beyond the first seven, and it lacks the universal jurisdiction of the pope.

Protestantism has fewer of these means of grace. It has the Bible, though without 7 Old-Testament books (Luther removed those in 1536); it has the sacraments, though only 2 of the 7; it only has the first seven ecumenical councils; no religious orders; no pope; few devotions; a cross rather than a crucifix; etc. By opting for *sola scriptura* (“the Bible is the sole authority”), Protestantism stripped Christianity of most of the rich tradition it had developed over a millennium and a half.

You can see why Catholicism considers Orthodoxy as closer to it than Protestantism. In fact, Catholicism arranges other groups around it as if they were concentric circles. If Catholicism is the center, then the circles would be: Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, other polytheistic religions, indigenous religions, non-religious persons seeking God, non-religious persons unaware of God, and non-religious persons opposed to God. The criterion for closeness to the center is fullness of the means of grace. (This grouping by nearness to Catholicism can be found in several official documents—*Ecclesiam suam*, *Lumen gentium*, *Nostra aetate*, and *Dignitatis humanae*.)

One might ask: “The statement that God wants everyone to be saved could mean that he wants everyone to become a Christian, i.e., to do what is necessary to be saved. Is there a reason for your broader interpretation?”

The statement, “God wants everyone to be saved,” is found in 1 Tim 2:4. The justification for the broader interpretation is all of the other statements in scripture indicating the broader interpretation. These include the Books of Ruth and Jonah; the Old-Testament wisdom literature (several passages); Matt 2:16-18; 16:16; Luke 10:25-37; 23:40-43; John 1:9; 3:5; 14:6; 15:5; Acts 10:1-48; Rom 2:14-16; 10:9; Eph 2:8; 4:4-5; 1 Tim 2:4; 4:10; Heb 11:6; 1 Pet 3:19-20; 4:6.

Plus, giving a broad interpretation to what scripture says about the salvation of non-Christians is part of the 2000-year tradition of the Church.