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Jimmy Carter Revises the Gospel . . . Again

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Former President Jimmy Carter is at it once again. In a recent interview with Beliefnet.com, Mr. Carter stated once again his belief that there is salvation outside of faith in Christ. But this time he seems to have gone even further, suggesting openly that all persons will be saved.

Here is the relevant exchange at Beliefnet.com:

Do you believe that grace ultimately applies to people who don't presently believe in Jesus?

Yes, I do. I remember two things. One is that in John 3:16, which is probably the best known verse in the Bible - "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." And Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, said we should love our neighbors, but also love those who despise us and hate us and our enemies. So, the opportunity for everyone to be saved through the grace of God with faith in Christ applies to everyone.

And I have been asked often, you know, in my Sunday School classes, which are kind of a give and take debate with people from many nations and many faiths - what about those that don't publicly accept Christ, are they condemned? And I remember that Christ said, "Judge not that ye be not judged." And so, my own personal belief is one of God's forgiveness and God's grace. That's the best answer I can give.

Well, that's not good enough. The former president's answer is a confused mash of out-of-context biblical citations set to the music of universalism. For some time Mr. Carter has been arguing that explicit faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is not necessary for salvation. Now, he takes this argument further, and the inescapable conclusion a reader of his latest comments must reach is that President Carter evidently believes that *all* persons will be saved. This, in fact, is how Beliefnet.com characterized his position.

But Mr. Carter's argument, if one can call these sentences an argument, is also self-contradictory. In one sentence, he argues that "the opportunity for everyone to be saved through the grace of God with faith in Christ applies to everyone." Does the opportunity apply to all, or does salvation? If he means the former, how do all persons confront this opportunity? The tragic reality is that millions of persons have never heard the Gospel of Christ. As the Apostle Paul makes clear, this is the central thrust of the missionary mandate.

The apparent contradiction in Mr. Carter's argument comes with the second paragraph of his answer, in which he argues that God's grace and forgiveness is extended even to those who do not profess faith in Christ. He goes on to suggest that when Jesus taught love of neighbor and the limitations of human judgment, He was teaching universalism. This is nonsense, of course, since those texts mean nothing of the kind. Beyond this, Mr. Carter's interpretation would mean that Jesus contradicted himself when He warned of Hell and condemnation for sin.

The Bible is clear that not all persons will be saved. Jesus contrasted the wide gate that leads to destruction with the narrow gate that leads to salvation. As the Lord said in Matthew 7:13:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

The fact is that many persons are embarrassed by the Gospel as revealed in the Bible and taught by Christ. The central issue of offense is the exclusivity of the Gospel of Christ, And yet, Christ left no doubt about the matter.

In John 14:6, Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The first sentence is not the ground of offense. The second sentence is. The “but by Me” statement leaves no room for confusion.

In recent decades, some have attempted to argue that faith in Christ is indeed necessary for salvation, but this faith need not be *explicit* faith in Christ. This position, known as inclusivism, suggests that persons may know nothing of the Gospel, and yet be saved. This argument is often used to claim that adherents of other faiths and belief systems will be saved through the work of Christ, even though they may not hear of Him in this life. Many Roman Catholic theologians have adopted this argument. The late Karl Rahner put an interesting twist on the theme by suggesting that some persons are “anonymous Christians.” These would be persons who now think themselves devotees of other belief systems but who are actually Christians who have no explicit faith in Christ. This argument cannot be squared with the biblical witness.

Universalists take the argument even further, with most arguing that all persons will be saved, completely without regard to faith in Christ. With this latest interview, Mr. Carter appears to join these ranks.

The Apostle Paul refuted both inclusivism and universalism in Romans 10, where he insisted that all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Paul explained that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ — which means explicit knowledge of the Gospel. He explained that salvation comes to all those who confess with their mouths that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead. Then, just in case we missed the obvious, Paul explains the missionary mandate — a mandate completely undercut and contradicted by inclusivism and universalism (and by President Carter’s comments):

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. [Romans 10:13-17]

The logic of Paul is clear. If they hear they may believe, but if they never hear they will never believe. And, if they never hear and believe, they will not be saved.

In a series of books, interviews, and comments, Mr. Carter has dismissed biblical inerrancy and once suggested that his faith would not be shaken, even if Jesus did not perform some of the miracles attributed to him in the New Testament. He has adopted liberal positions on a host of issues and once identified liberal theologians such as Paul Tillich as major influences in his life and thought.

Nevertheless, it is tragic to see this man of influence, now releasing another published set of his recorded Sunday School lessons, set himself so clearly against the Bible and the historic faith of the Christian church. This, like all demonstrations of theological error, is both sad and deeply dangerous. What could be worse than getting the Gospel wrong?

