

## Nichols Position Brief

Dear Moderator,

Defense in detail would never fit in 3-4 pages, but I'll do my best to give you the big-picture view of my position so you can moderate sensibly. In the main, I'll cover the territory by stating my assertions and only alluding to my arguments. Let me start by addressing two bits of foolishness in which I will not indulge, then I'll move on to my position, and close by touching on a common objection.

First, I do not attempt to define a bare minimum message. Scripture never actually addresses this question anywhere, and I am comfortable following its example. I'm sure there is one, and that God knows what it is, but He hasn't said, and I'm not going to fill in the blanks for Him. There are candidate passages that people will run to, of course, but upon examination these passages (1) do not actually claim 'bare minimum' status for the message they present, (2) often contain information the person himself would consider extraneous, and (3) generally contain loaded terms which require definition from the context. This simply bumps the question back a level: "What is the bare minimum definition of \_\_\_\_?" This is a question the context simply does not answer.

Second, I do not regard this issue as having matured enough to be worth separating over. The positions are still developing and are somewhat unstable at this point. If we look at the history of doctrinal controversies in church history, we find that major debates take a great deal of time to "shake out." Maybe once the discussion has matured, one side or another will have so compromised essential doctrine that separation is necessary, or it may be that the positions are sufficiently far apart that for purely pragmatic reasons it becomes difficult to work together. But right now, although some wild things have been said on both sides, people don't necessarily stick to them when they've had a few months to reflect, so it's not yet time to start slinging anathemas.

Now to my position: I believe John is an evangelistic book, and that it's unique in that regard. The various objections I've heard and read so far notwithstanding, I don't think any other interpretation of John 20:30-31 is even worth serious consideration. I believe John is organized into an introduction and eight sign accounts, all of them aimed principally at an unbelieving audience. There is certainly meat there for a believer to chew on, just as a series of prophecies for believers may offer conviction to an unbeliever (1 Cor. 14:24), but the stated purpose of the book is evangelistic.

Therefore, when a believer sets out to evangelize, I believe the best strategy by far is to bring the unbeliever to grips with John's gospel, and let God talk to Him. He has promised that His word will not return void, which is a promise that does not attach to humanly crafted presentations like, say, a personal testimony. I don't think this necessarily means we have to read him John's gospel (valuable as that has turned out to be in my experience). The goal is to present John's message. As we look at how the biblical authors used Scripture, we find that they felt free to summarize and paraphrase as necessary to bring the message of earlier Scripture authors to their own audiences. We should do the same in our time, and like them, we should be faithful to the biblical content we're presenting.

On that basis, I can't say I approve of a "crossless gospel" (not that I know of any conservative who's preaching such a thing). The cross and resurrection figure prominently in John's gospel; they should figure prominently in my presentation.<sup>1</sup> For the same reason, the deity of Jesus should be a major theme, as should assurance of everlasting life. Regarding the latter, I strongly discourage the Clintonian notion that one might reasonably understand everlasting life as life which does not last forever. And as to the translation issue, *aiwnioj* might well mean other things in other contexts, but John's handling of the term simply does not permit us to abandon the notion of permanence in the relevant passages.

My priority in this discussion is to bring people to grips with the primacy of John for evangelism. I believe many of the debates that have cropped up between otherwise like-minded believers would simply evaporate if we could come to an agreement on this point. Many more of the controversies in which we are presently distracted would simply become unimportant, because if we are evangelizing according to John's pattern, it makes little difference what we believe the bare minimum message might be; we'll be seeking to include all that John does, which surely should be enough to satisfy anybody.

As I relate these concepts to people, I commonly encounter two objections which, upon closer analysis, turn out to be the same idea. The first is the objection from personal experience: "But I didn't understand all that when I was saved." I try to tread carefully, because here we are in highly emotional territory, but the response ultimately boils down to this: either we interpret Scripture according to our experience, or we interpret our experience according to Scripture. I encourage the latter. It may turn out that the "all that" to which the person is referring is not actually the message I'm talking about (as when, by "eternal security," I mean something like "certainly living with Jesus forever," while they mean a highly complex doctrine bound up with the immutability of God, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and so on.) It may turn out that the person thinks he was saved at time T because he had an overwhelming emotional experience at that point, but in fact he was not saved until time T+x, when he finally understood the whole message. (I think the man born blind in John 9 exemplifies this situation; the actual conversion is almost anticlimactic.) I think of a friend whose big emotional moment was when he realized that he did, in fact, believe that God existed. It took a little longer for him to get straight on the gospel—he had no conception of relating to God, or God doing anything for him, at first. As an insufficiently trained believer, he might well have understood his emotional "There's really a God" moment as the moment of his conversion, although it clearly wasn't.

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<sup>1</sup> As to whether one *must* believe in the cross and resurrection explicitly in order to have eternal life, I don't know of a passage that addresses the issue. Certainly Abraham did not, and he was nonetheless a believer. Of course, one can't expect Abraham to have known about the cross and resurrection explicitly. Peter and the other 11 disciples, however, can be expected to know these things; after all, Jesus taught them on these subjects Himself. However, they plainly did have life, and just as plainly did not accept this aspect of Jesus' teaching. Of course one can argue that paradigm is no longer applicable now that the events have actually taken place. But here again, John is writing in a church-age context to a church-age audience of unbelievers, and includes no warning label "*Then* they could get away with this, but *now* you have to believe in the cross and resurrection." But neither does he instruct us that the cross and resurrection are dispensable if you're in a hurry. I conclude that it's an interesting thing for friends and co-workers to speculate about, but if we're going to take our answers seriously, we need better evidence than I've seen so far.

The second common objection is what I call the religious group objection: “But if that’s true, then [Mormons, Nazarenes, pick a group] aren’t saved.” The unspoken premise here is that of *course* they’re saved, and therefore there must be something wrong with this doctrinal position. I want to know how my objector is so sure that they’re saved. If he’s using biblical criteria, let’s talk about them; if not, what is he using, and why should it trump Scripture?

Using either of these objections is a sign of either muddled thinking or desperation, a tacit admission that the objector has despaired of addressing the biblical issues effectively. Were he able to show that my position is biblically wrong, that would be the sole and sufficient reason for rejecting it; he would not need to smuggle the dubious premises “I know certainly when I was saved” or “I know certainly that Mormons are saved” into the debate.

There is another, slightly different, version of the second objection, which applies to groups of believers in the past: “But in the whole history of the church, practically nobody has believed this!” Again, this is in principle the same discussion: either history dictates our understanding of Scripture, or Scripture dictates our understanding of history. As before, I encourage the latter, and again, there are a few possibilities as to what is actually happening. If it should turn out that we need to revise our overly optimistic population estimates for heaven, Jesus has already prepared us for this possibility. The way is broad that leads to destruction, and many find it, but the gate that leads to life is narrow, and few find it. At worst, we are discovering that the way to destruction is broader, and the gate to life narrower, than we had at first supposed. We may well find it very disturbing, and so we should. But it should not so shock us that we rebel against the authority of Scripture and start appealing to an alternate standard. For Protestants especially, it’s a little late in the game to start aligning with Aleander and Eck.

However, I think there is reason for optimism. The written records we have of the church are not by any means a representative sample of Christian literature, let alone of the opinions of the Christian populace as a whole. I suspect the landscape was far more diverse than we might imagine. There are glimmerings of hope. In the most recent CTS Journal, we printed an article by Brian Wagner titled “Priscillian of Avila: Heretic or Early Reformer?” In the article, Wagner details evidence that Priscillian’s opponents slandered him severely. Although it’s too early to make a determination, it looks as though Priscillian was much more orthodox than previously supposed, and possibly, as the title indicates, an early reformer. Until recently, it appears our sole sources of information were his opponents, and since they won the political battle (meaning they killed him and burned his writings), alternate sources were scarce. Of course all this is somewhat beside the point; Scripture is the authority, not history. But some find it comforting to know that the situation might not be as bad as we think.