**The Logic of Salvation in the Gospel of John**

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**Abstract**

I evaluate two claims; that (a) Jesus’ message as recorded in the gospels implies exclusivism with respect to salvation and that, correspondingly, (b) Christians should be exclusivists with respect to salvation. I evaluate these claims through a cataloguing and evaluation of the logical condition involved in each of the claims regarding conditions for salvation made by Jesus in the Gospel of John. As a result, I argue that (a) is false and that, correspondingly, so is (b).

**Introduction**

This paper falls into the theological area of soteriology, within the discussion between exclusivism (sometimes called restrictivism), inclusivism, and universalism. The positions, proponents, and main arguments in this debate are well laid out by John Sanders in his work *No Other Name: Can Only Christians be Saved?* (1992). I will not spend much time reviewing those positions, proponents, or arguments, except to say something additional about the implications of exclusivism. I take exclusivism to be the position that if people have not explicitly “believed in” or “accepted” Jesus, they cannot be saved. This clearly implies that people who have literally never heard of Jesus will not be saved. But there is another group of people that might be included in this category as well. Imagine a person who was raised by abusive, but “Christian” parents, who abused her “in the name of Jesus” and taught her that Jesus wanted them to abuse her and wanted her to be abused. Or, imagine a person who was sexually abused by a priest or pastor “in the name of Jesus.” And suppose that these people responded (quite properly, I think) with horror and disgust at the “name” of Jesus for the rest of their lives and died in that state. It would follow from exclusivism, I believe, that these people would not be saved. These implications strike me as going against most of the central attributes of the Christian God, including love, mercy, justice and righteousness. I argue that, if God is loving, merciful, just, and righteous, everyone will at least have a *reasonable* or *fair* opportunity to meet any conditions necessary for salvation (“reasonable” and “fair” are rather nebulous, I admit, but I will not try to address that lack of clarity here). So, given these attributes of God, there is a prima facie case against exclusivism and in favor of at least what has been called a “hopeful inclusivism” (Sanders).

**Approach**

Most arguers in soteriological debates amass and interpret texts from throughout the Bible that seem to support their position and/or undermine the other positions (and ignore texts that might challenge their position). I will take a different approach. My project is to examine, using the Gospel of John, all of the texts in which *Jesus* mentions any condition associated with salvation. My specific question will be “Do the claims of Jesus himself regarding conditions for salvation support the position of exclusivism?” My position will be that, unless Jesus’ claims make the position of exclusivism undebatable, we should remain hopeful inclusivists.

The analysis of Jesus’ claims regarding the conditions for salvation is made difficult by the fact that in commentaries on and books about the Gospel of John, the logical format of the conditions for salvation identified by Jesus is almost nowhere discussed explicitly. When they are discussed, the logical format of the claims is usually evaluated in an unclear manner, and in a number of cases, the logical format of the claims is evaluated incorrectly altogether. My project here is to carefully and correctly evaluate the logical format of Jesus’ claims about the conditions for salvation, in order to answer the question of whether Jesus’ doctrine of salvation is exclusivist.

**Logical Principles**

Since I will be subjecting the statements made by Jesus to logical analysis, I begin with some of the logical syntax and rules that I will be using.

1. Conditional statements, of the form “If A, then B” will be translated “A → B.”
2. Jesus often uses the logical form of a universal statement, “All A are B.” If all As are Bs, then IF something is an A, THEN it is a B, so a universal affirmative statement of the form “All A are B” may be translated by the conditional “A → B.”
3. My main interest here is to evaluate Jesus’ claims with respect to the logical concepts of necessary and sufficient conditions, so a word about those terms is in order.[[1]](#endnote-1) Take the statement, “if you cheat on a test, then you will fail the course.” It would translated as C (Cheating) → F (Fail the course); C → F. In this case, cheating on a test is *sufficient* for failing the course (it guarantees the result), but cheating on a test is not *necessary* for failing the course (there are other ways to fail it as well). On the other hand, suppose the grade cut-off for passing the course is 60% of the possible points. Then we can say, “if you pass the course, you will have at least 60% of the possible points.” This would be translated as P (Passing) → H (Having 60%);

P → H. In this case, H, having 60% of the possible points is *necessary* (you will *not* pass if you *don’t* meet the requirement) for P, but is not *sufficient* (you can have 60% of the points, but still fail the course).

In symbolized conditional statements, sufficient conditions go on the left of the arrow, and what is on the left of the arrow is always (only) a sufficient condition. What is on the right is a *necessary* condition. With respect to symbolizations,
Sufficient → Necessary. A common error (represented in some commentaries) is to take a sufficient condition for a necessary condition. When Jesus says in John 3:16 that *whoever believes in him has eternal life*, the logical form is IF you believe in Jesus, THEN you have eternal life (B → E). In this case, believing is a *sufficient* condition for eternal life, meaning that it is *enough* for salvation, but believing is not cited in this verse as being *necessary* for salvation. So John 3:16 itself does not imply exclusivism with respect to salvation.

1. Transposition. The logical rule of transposition says that if it is true that A → B, then it is also true that ~B (*not-B*) → ~A (*not*-A) If it is true that if something is a human, then it is a mammal, H → M, it follows that if something is *not* a mammal, it is *not* a human, ~M → ~H, and vice versa. In logic, a statement may always be replaced by an equivalent statement. This rule is known as *transposition.* In short form:

(A → B) = (~B → ~A)

Jesus makes a number of statements of the form “if you do not B, then you will not A.” I use the rule of transposition to convert these into “If A, then B.”

1. In all of the verses I have here, Jesus is talking about what I take to be conditions for *salvation*. Jesus uses a number of terms and ideas to represent salvation (more or less explicitly). Each time I translate a statement into its logical form, I make one of the conditions “salvation”, symbolized as an “S”, whatever terms Jesus used.
2. The general question here, again, is, “what are the conditions for salvation mentioned by Jesus, and, for each, what type of condition (necessary or sufficient) is it?”

**Incorrect logical analysis in the literature**

The following texts illustrate incorrect logical analysis of claims made by Jesus in the gospel of John.

“…while God loves the world (as it is stated in this verse [3:16]) his love *only* becomes effective among those who believe in Christ. For the rest love turns, as it were, to judgment.” (Barrett 1978, 215. My italics)

My evaluation: The claim is that belief is identified in John 3:16 as a *necessary* condition for salvation. However, in John 3:16, belief is only identified as a *sufficient* condition.

“The universality [of salvation] is qualified, however, by the phrases **everyone who believes** in verse 15 and **whoever believes** in verse 16. To gain eternal life, a person *must* believe…” (Michaels 2010, 59. My italics, his bold)

My evaluation: The claim is that belief is identified in John 3:15 and 16 as a *necessary* condition for salvation – this is false. In both cases, belief is only identified as a *sufficient* condition.

“On this basis, universalists can [incorrectly] explain away verses like John 3:16 and Mark 3:29.” (Erickson 1998, 1029)

My evaluation: The claim is that belief is identified in John 3:16 as a *necessary* condition for salvation – this is false. In John 3:16, belief is only identified as a *sufficient* condition.

“When we observe the clear statements in John about the condition for salvation, the effect of this condition, and the pictures of this condition, we conclude that John presents faith alone in Christ alone as the *only* condition for salvation.” (Bing 1996. My italics)

My evaluation: The claim is that faith in Jesus is “clearly” posited as a necessary condition. This is the claim that I am evaluating.

“There is no salvation apart from faith in him, judgment of the non-believers…is inevitable.” (Haenschen 1984, 205)

My evaluation: The claim is that “faith in him” is presented incontestably in John as a *necessary* condition. This is the claim that I am evaluating.

*“The condition* for moving from spiritual death to life is to hear and believe [5:24]... Those who do not believe will suffer the consequence of the wrath of God.” (Van de Watt 2005, my italics)

My evaluation: The use of ‘the condition’ implies that “hearing and believing” is presented incontestably in John as a *necessary* condition. This is the claim that I am evaluating.

“For John, therefore, belief in the Father and the Son is *the condition* for experiencing spiritual life and salvation.” (Turner 1976. My italics)

My evaluation: The use of ‘the condition’ implies that “belief in the Father and the Son” is presented incontestably in John as a *necessary* condition. This is the claim that I am evaluating.

“The idea of belief as the only necessary and therefore sufficient condition for salvation is reiterated. Throughout the Gospel of John this thought has been paramount, we *need* to believe in the Son of God to receive salvation. Everlasting life, being born again, not being condemned, passing from death to life, all of these are comprehended in belief in Jesus the Son of God.” (Barry 2013. My italics)

My evaluation: The claim is that “belief” is presented incontestably in John as a *necessary* condition. This is the claim that I am evaluating.

**Insufficient or unclear logical analysis in the literature**

The following texts illustrate unsufficient or unclear logical analysis of claims made by Jesus in the gospel of John.

“Whoever believes in him experiences new birth (3:3,5), has eternal life (3:15,16), is saved (3:17); the alternative is to perish (cf. also 10:28), to lose one’s life (12:25), to be doomed to destruction (17:12, cognate with ‘to perish’). There is no third option.” (Carson 1991, 205.)

My evaluation: Carson presents only two options (salvation accompanying “belief” and damnation accompanying “non-belief”). I will evaluate whether these are the only two options presented in John.

John thinks of absolute opposites (cf. Dt. 30.15-20), and admits no middle position between them. (Lindars 1972, 159.)

My evaluation: Lindars presents only two options (salvation accompanying “belief” and damnation accompanying “non-belief”). I will evaluate whether these are the only two options presented in John.

“In John, likewise, there is no middle ground; believing in the Son (resulting in eternal life) or refusing to believe (resulting in destruction) are the only options.” (Kostenberger 2004, 129.)

My evaluation: Kostenberger presents only two options (salvation accompanying “belief” and damnation accompanying “non-belief”). I will evaluate whether these are the only two options presented in John.

“To fail to believe is to be judged in the sense of being condemned.” (Kysar 1986, 55.)

My Evaluation: It is not made clear what “fail to believe” means.

“Belief leads to freedom from condemnation and to life, but unbelief produces condemnation…To refuse belief brings self-condemnation…Jesus alone makes God known and judgment flows from the acceptance or refusal of that revelation (vv. 16-21).” (Ramsey 2010, 96.)

My evaluation: Belief in Jesus is cited as a necessary condition and it is not made clear what “unbelief” or “to refuse belief” means. I will evaluate both of these claims.

“John…has said that Christ died for men. But that does not automatically bring salvation. [Verse 3:18 attests that] No man is saved unless he believes.” (Morris 1972, 232).

My evaluation: Verse 3:18 does state “no man is saved unless he believes” but this is just one verse and Morris doesn’t cite or address any other claims.

**Textual Analysis**

The following chart is a catalogue of all of Jesus’ references to a concept of “being saved” in the book of John. I have listed each reference, sorted alphabetically by the condition associated with “salvation” (beginning with any form of “belief”), followed by a translation into its logical structure, identification of the condition mentioned, whether the condition is sufficient or necessary, and any notes about the reference in question.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Verse[[2]](#endnote-2)**  | **Logical form** | **Condition for salvation** | **Type of Condition** | **Notes** |
| 1 | **3:16** For this is the wayGod loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.  | All who believe (B) have eternal life (S)B → S | Believe | Sufficient |  |
| 2 | **3:18a** The one who believes in him is not condemned.  | All who believe (B) are not condemned (S)B → S | Believe | Sufficient |  |
| **3** | **3:18bThe one who does not believe has been condemnedalready, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.** | **All who don’t believe (~B) are condemned (~S)****~B → ~S****S → B** | **Believe** | **Necessary** | **See discussion of “not believing.”** |
| 4 | **3:36** The one who believes in the Son has eternal life.  | All who believe (B) have eternal life (S) B → S | Believe | Sufficient |  |
| 5 |  **6:47** I tell you the solemn truth, the one who believes has eternal life. | All who believe (B) have eternal life (S) B → S | Believe | Sufficient  |  |
| 6 | **11:25** Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even if he dies. | All who believe (B) will live (S) B → S | Believe | Sufficient |  |
| 7 | **11:26** and the one who lives and believes in me will never die. | All who live and believe (L & B) will not die (S)(L & B) → S | Believe (and live) | Sufficient |  |
| 8 | **5:24** “I tell you the solemn truth, the one who hears my message and believes the one who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned, but has crossed over from death to life. | All who hear and believe have eternal life and are not condemned (H & B)(H & B) → S | Believe (and hear) | Sufficient |  |
| 9 | **6:40** For this is the will of my Father– for everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him to have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” | All who look on and believe  (L & B) have eternal life (S)(L & B) → S | Believe (and look on) | Sufficient |  |
| 10 | **8:24 Thus I told you that you will die in your sins. For unless you believe that I am he,you will die in your sins.”** | **If not you believe (~B), then you will die (~S)****~B → ~S****S → B** | **Believe** | **Necessary** | **See discussion of “not believing.”** |
| **11** | **3:3 Jesus replied, “I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** | **If not born from above (~A), no Kingdom of God (~S)****~A → ~S****S → A** | **Born from above** | **Necessary** | **Doesn’t explain what “born from above” means or what conditions are necessary for it or how it is related to “believing”** |
| **12** | **3:7 Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must all be born from above.’** | **If not born from above (~A), no Kingdom of God (~S)****~A → ~S****S → A** | **Born from above** | **Necessary** | **Doesn’t expain what “born from above” means or what conditions are necessary for it or how it is related to “believing”** |
| **13** | **3:5 Jesus answered, “I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.** | **If not born of water and spirit ~(W & S), no kingdom of God****~(W & P) → ~S****S → (W & P)** | **Born of water and spirit** | **Necessary** | **Doesn’t explain what “born of water and spirit” means or what conditions are necessary for it or how it is related to “believing”** |
| 14 | **6:57** Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who consumes me will live because of me. | All who Consume me (C) will live (L)C → S | Consume | Sufficient | Meaning is unclear. |
| **15** | **6:44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.**  | **If not drawn by the Father (~F), no coming (or being raised) (~S)****~F → ~S****S → F** | **Drawn by the father** | **Necessary**  | **Meaning is unclear. Seems to be an additional, previous, and involuntary condition.** |
| **16** |  **6:65 So Jesus added, “Because of this I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has allowed him to come.”** | **If Father doesn’t allow (~F) then one doesn’t come (~S)****~F → ~S****S → F** | **Father allows** | **Necessary** | **Meaning is unclear. Seems to be an additional, previous, and involuntary condition.** |
| 17 |  **4:14** But whoever drinks some of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again, but the water that I will give him will become in him a fountainof waters springing up to eternal life.”  | All drinkers (D) have eternal life (S)D → S | Drink my water | Sufficient | Meaning is unclear. |
| **18** |  **6:53 Jesus said to them, “I tell you the solemn truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,you have no lifein yourselves.**  | **If not eat Flesh and drink Blood ~(F & B), then no Eternal life (~S)****~(F & B) → ~S****S → (F & B)** | **Eat flesh and drink blood** | **Necessary****(and sufficient, see 6:54)****(F & B) ≡ S** | **Meaning is unclear.** |
| 19 | **6:54** The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. | If eat Flesh and drink Blood (F & B) then eternal life (S)(F & B) → S | Eat flesh and drink blood | **Sufficient****(and necessary, see 6:53)****(F & B) ≡ S** | **Meaning is unclear.** |
| 20 | **10:9** I am the door. If anyone enters through me, he will be saved, and will come in and go out, and find pasture. | If enter through Jesus (J), then saved (S)J → S | Entering through Jesus  | Sufficient | Meaning is unclear. |
| 21 | **17:2** …Just as you [God] have given him [Jesus] authority over all humanity,so that he may give eternal life to everyone you have given him. | All the father has given to Jesus (F) are given eternal life by Jesus (S)F → S | Father giving to Jesus | Sufficient | Seems to be an additional, previous, and involuntary condition. |
| 22 | **8:12** Then Jesus spoke out again, “I am the light of the world. The one who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” | All who follow (F) have light and life (S)F → S | Follow | Sufficient |  |
| 23 | **5:29** and will come out – the ones who have done what is good to the resurrection resulting in life, and the ones who have done what is evil to the resurrection resulting in condemnation. | If one does good (G) then Life (S)If one does evil (E), then condemnation (~S)G → SE → ~S | GoodEvil | Sufficient | Not “believing”, but “doing.” This condition could be met by people who have never “heard” of JesusIf "good" and "evil" are exhaustive, then “evil” means “not good” so it becomesG → S and~G → ~SSo S ≡ GOne is saved IF AND ONLY IF one does good |
| **24** | **12:47 If anyonehears my words and does not obey them, I do not judge him. For I have not come to judge the world, but to save the world.**  | **If one hears and doesn’t obey (H & ~O) then judged (~S)****(H & ~O) → ~S****S → ~(H & ~O)****S → (~H OR O)** | **Not (Hearing AND Not obeying)** | **Necessary** | **This only applies to people who have “heard,” not to people who have not “heard.” It allows the possibility that people who haven’t heard can be saved.**  |
| 25 | **14:21** The person who has my commandments and obeys them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by the Father, and I will love him and will revealmyself to him.” | All who have commandments and obey (H & O) are lovers of Jesus (J).All lovers of Jesus (J)are loved by father AND loved by Jesus AND revealed to (S)(H & O) → JJ → SNote: (IF A → B and B → C, then A → C), so(H & O) → S | Have command- ments and obey | Sufficient  |  |
| 26 | **14:23** Jesus replied,“If anyone loves me, he will obey my word, and the Father will love him, and we will come to him and take up residence with him. | If love Jesus (L) then (Jesus loves and Father loves and takes up residence) (S)L → S | Love Jesus | Sufficient |  |
| 27 | **8:51** I tell you the solemn truth,if anyone obeysmy teaching, he will never see death.” | If obey (O), then don’t see death (S)O → S | Obey | Sufficient | Could one “obey his teaching” without having “heard” or “believed”? |
| **28** | **3:36b The one who rejects the Son will not see life,** | **All rejecters (R) don’t see life (~S)****R → ~S****S → ~R** | **Not Rejecting** | **Necessary** | **Does rejecting imply having heard and a conscious act of will?** |
| **29** | **12:48 The one who rejects me and does not acceptmy words has a judge; the word I have spoken will judge him at the last day.** | **All who reject and don’t accept are judged (~S)****(R & ~A) → ~S****S → ~(R & ~A)****S → (~R v A)** | **Not (rejecting and not accepting)** | **Necessary** | **Does rejecting imply having heard and a conscious act of will?** |
| 30 |  **8:36** So if the sonsets you free, you will be really free. | If the son sets free (F), then free (S)F → S | Son sets free | Sufficient |  |

**Results**

Total references: 30

Number involving “belief”: 10 33% of total

Number in which belief is necessary: 2 20% of belief conditions, 6% of total

Number in which belief is sufficient: 8 80% of belief conditions, 27% of total

**Necessary conditions**

Note: if a list of conditions is presented as necessary, then they are ALL considered to be necessary, and meeting the whole list is still not sufficient (doesn’t guarantee the result).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 3:18b, 8:24 | Believe (2) (Necessary & Sufficient) |
| 3:3, 3:7 | Be born from above (2) |
| 3:5 | Be born of water and spirit |
| 6:44 | Be drawn by the father |
| 6:53 | Eat his flesh and drink his blood (Necessary & Sufficient) |
| 6:65 | Father allows them |
| 5:29 | Doing good (Necessary & Sufficient) |
| 12:47 | Not (hearing AND not obeying) |
| 12:48 | Not rejecting |

(Total of 11 necessary conditions)

**Sufficient conditions**

Note: If a list of conditions is presented as sufficient, its logical status is unclear. Perhaps meeting ALL of the conditions is necessary, but that seems inconsistent with the notion of sufficiency. Perhaps meeting ANY of the conditions is sufficient; if so, then there are a number of possibilities here other than “believing.”

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 3:16, 3:18a, 3:36a, 5:24, 6:40, 6:47, 11:25, 11:26 | Believe (8) (Necessary & Sufficient) |
| 4:14 | Drink his water |
| 6:54, 6:57 | Eat flesh and drink blood (Necessary & Sufficient) |
| 10:9 | Enter through him |
| 17:2 | Father gives one to him |
| 8:12 | Follow him |
| 5:29 | Do good (Necessary & Sufficient) |
| 14:21 | Hear and Obey |
| 14:23 | Love him |
| 8:51 | Obey |
| 8:36 | Be set free by Jesus  |

(Total of 19 sufficient conditions)

**Summary notes**

1. Belief is mentioned by Jesus as a necessary condition for salvation in 2 verses and as both necessary and sufficient in one of those verses (3:18). But those are only 2 verses out of a total of 30 in which Jesus talks about conditions for salvation. Belief is mentioned as (only) a sufficient condition for salvation in 8 verses. This seems to imply that Jesus was more concerned about belief being sufficient than he was about belief being necessary.
2. Belief is mentioned more times than any other single condition, which makes it a central condition, but Jesus mentions conditions other than belief in 20 out of the 30 references. Many of them are very mysterious (eating and drinking him, being born from above, being drawn by the father, etc.). So, while belief is important to Jesus, it is not his only concern.
3. Of the 30 references, three conditions are stated as both necessary and sufficient (3:18, *belief*; 5:29, *doing good;* 6:54, 6:57, *eating his flesh and drinking his blood*). But these are all different conditions. Logically, is seems that one could meet any one of them without meeting the other two. As conditions, for salvation, their relationships are very unclear.
4. 11 references mention necessary (but not sufficient) conditions and 19 mention sufficient (but not necessary) conditions. Logically, this pattern is inconsistent and may be contradictory – Logically, to meet any single sufficient condition is to achieve the result, which makes the status of the necessary conditions unclear.
5. Jesus’ conditions for salvation definitely focus around how one responds to him. But that message, as presented here, is that the people who respond appropriately to him will be saved, so we might take the general message as, “if you respond appropriately to Jesus, you are saved” (R → S). This, finally, is only a sufficient condition, not a necessary condition. Even if it were necessary, it seems to presuppose having encountered Jesus somehow.
6. Responses like “rejecting”, “not obeying”, “refusing belief” or “not believing” are mentioned several times as conditions of not being saved. All of these actions seem to require (a) having encountered Jesus and (b) some willful rejection of him.

**Conclusion**

Jesus doesn’t seem to be trying to lay out specific logical conditions for salvation. His conditions are mysterious, ambiguous, and inconsistent. This argues against the conclusion of the commentators at the beginning that Jesus proclaimed a clear message that only people who have explicitly heard of him and “believed” in him may be saved. It provides grounds for “hopeful inclusivism” – while a direct encounter with and positive response to (the real) Jesus is a sufficient condition for and the best means of salvation, a just and loving and active God will avail himself of (possibly many) other means of saving people as well. Even if we take the general condition, positive response to (the real) Jesus, as necessary AND sufficient, it would seem that a just, loving, and merciful God would allow everyone to have that opportunity, which would argue for some sort of post-mortem encounter with Jesus before judgment. My conclusion is that exclusivism is not supported by the words of Jesus himself.

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1. A very similar logical analysis of Romans 10:9 is presented by Sanders (1992, 67). This is the one other place that I found a discussion of this distinction. Sanders doesn’t use the terms “necessary” and “sufficient”, though, and he doesn’t address any of the other texts I am evaluating. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. All biblical texts are from the NET Bible translation (www.net.bible.org). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)