

# Concerning Those Who Have Never Heard the Gospel

by Rudolph D. Gonzalez, Ph.D.

The question concerning the fate of those who have never heard the gospel is a perennial one. Since the day of Pentecost, whole populations and ethnic groups have lived and died without ever having an opportunity to hear of Jesus Christ's offer of salvation. Even at the dawn of the twenty-first century, there are pockets of humanity who have yet to have the gospel delivered to them. How does the Bible address the question concerning those who, through no fault of their own, have never heard the gospel?

It should come as no surprise that Christendom is by no means unified on this issue. In the wake of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church has moved in an inclusivist direction—maintaining that people can be exposed to grace that saves through the honest practice of a non-Christian religion. The Catholic Church insists, however, that when people become exposed to any kind of grace, it is, nevertheless, a grace mediated in and through the world religions because of the presence of the Holy Roman Catholic Church in the world. Moving even further, some liberal protestant groups go so far as to adopt *universalism*—believing that all people will eventually be saved, despite their religious beliefs or lack thereof. On the other hand, others who believe that hearing the gospel is necessary to salvation have constructed ingenious theologies with names such as *universal sending*, *middle knowledge*, and *eschatological evangelization* to say that God spreads the message of Jesus wherever his heralds fail to go, through miraculous means or through non-Christian agencies.<sup>1</sup> In one view, a Biblical scholar theorizes that God, in His infinite knowledge, *knew*—not to be confused with *determined* or *chose*—who would eventually accept and reject the gospel. Thus, He providentially placed those who would be receptive to the gospel into circumstances that would allow them to hear the gospel and embrace it. Those who would never accept the message simply were born into times and places where the gospel would never reach them in their lifetime.

The above-mentioned examples do not exhaust all the views, but do illustrate the range of opinions over the fate of people who have never been exposed to the life-saving message of Christ. It should be apparent that people often hold positions that resonate with their beliefs about the nature of God's mercy and justice, rather than clear Biblical teaching. Thus, many people come to the Bible with presuppositions about what God will or will not do and then impose them on the Biblical evidence. In this treatment, the aim is to offer an *evidentiary* perspective on this issue. This view simply asserts that the Bible can and must be interpreted literally, unless the context and the nature of the literary style itself calls for something different. Barring the obvious use of symbolism, metaphor, hyperbole, anthropomorphisms, etc., this view takes the text of Scripture at face value and affirms its common sense and logical meaning.

## A Survey of the Biblical Evidence

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The biblical evidence supports the following facts:

- Lost humanity consistently distorts natural revelation that demonstrates the fact that people live under the wrath of God (see Rom. 1:18-23).
- Thus, humanity is dead in sin and alienated from a saving knowledge of God (see Rom. 3:9-19,23).
- All people stand condemned and are, by nature, children of wrath (see Rom. 1:18-20; 2:1; 3:9-24; 5:12-21; 11:32; Gal. 3:22; Eph. 2:1-3,12; Col. 2:13-14; 1 Pet. 1:18; 2 Pet. 1:4).
- All people without Christ are lost and without hope (see Ps. 16:1-2; Eph. 2:12).

However:

- Salvation is a good-faith offer to anyone who exercises personal faith in Christ (see John 1:12; 14:6; Acts 4:12).
- People who fail to respond positively to the Gospel stand utterly condemned (see John 3:18; 5:23-24; 1 Thess. 2:16).

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<sup>1</sup>Known as wider hope positions, the proponents insist that God makes the offer of salvation in Christ, available even if the church never takes part in its proclamation. John Sanders, "Evangelical Responses to Salvation Outside the Church," *Christian Scholar's Review*, XXIV:1 (September 1994): 45-58.

If one takes the points above as honest Biblical statements regarding the condition of humanity and God's offer of salvation through His Son, they lead to a profound pessimism about the fate of those who have never heard the gospel. About "those who have not heard of the historic Christ," John Newport laments:

Clearly, such people cannot be expected to have placed their faith in a story they have not heard. However, as Paul asserts in Romans 1, even people who have never heard the gospel have a revelation of the cosmic Christ in their conscience and nature. Paul sadly states that, for the most part, they have not accepted even this amount of light and followed it. Therefore they, too, have rejected Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Newport's point is that all people by virtue of living in God's creation have, in effect, been exposed to the aspect of Christ that is exhibited in the realm of natural revelation. Whether such an exposure amounts to contact with the gospel he does not say, but his assessment is unmistakable: a rejection of the evidence for the cosmic Christ in nature is tantamount to the rejection of the gospel for the person who has been exposed to it. Similarly, Carl F. H. Henry notes,

The world philosophies and non-biblical religions are indeed a response to general revelation, but a response forged by humankind in revolt rather than in obedience. A distorted view of God that consequently lies at the heart of these schemas has reductive and distorted results involving every affirmation about the nature of reality and the human condition.<sup>3</sup>

Of direct relevance to this issue is Paul's statement about the condemnation of Jews and Gentiles alike in Romans 2. The thrust of his argument is that all people will stand condemned before the judgment seat of God (see Rom. 2:3-10). Paul lays down the firm principle of God's impartiality and goes on to state unequivocally,

For there is no partiality with God. For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus (Rom. 2:11-16, NASB).

The overwhelming sense of this passage is sobering. Apart from any access to the gospel, people are born into this world with a conviction of God's high moral standards, otherwise understood to be the law written in their hearts. This conviction is sufficient to condemn them on the Day of Judgment.<sup>4</sup> It is important to understand that because people have an instinctive awareness of God's demand for righteousness as proscribed in the law, never having heard the gospel will not be an excuse for their unrighteousness. According to Paul, to know the law intuitively is to potentially understand how impossible it is for humanity to fulfill every aspect of it. In an interesting twist, God's impartiality is mentioned. This is not meant to point to His universal offer of grace, but to remind the reader that God is completely just in condemning those who have rejected Him. The question this passage answers is: Will anyone be saved on the Day of Judgment by the instinctive work of the law written in their heart? As earlier noted by the apostle, he is very pessimistic that any witness that arises from the person is sufficient to allay the wrath of God and escape condemnation (see Rom. 6:12-13; Gal. 3:8-14).

In light of the evidence, we must conclude that people who never have an opportunity to hear the gospel stand condemned. As unpalatable as this is, we must let the clear teaching of Scripture outweigh any personal impulse to distort the facts out of

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<sup>2</sup>John Newport, *Life's Ultimate Questions*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 312.

<sup>3</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, "Is It Fair?" *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, eds., 252.

<sup>4</sup>Paul's statement, "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom. 2:14-15, NASB), should be taken as the temporal application of the law when intuitively understood. Thus, Paul is saying that, judged by their own earthly standards, the fact that Gentiles both live up to and fail to live up to this law shows they have a witness of God's holy standards. In the end, however, their vain attempts at fashioning righteousness according to their standards will serve to condemn them just as surely as if they had heard the gospel of Christ and rejected it outright.

misplaced compassion. With all soberness, there is in the Bible what some have insightfully called “a consistent pattern of ‘fewness’ in redemption and ‘wideness’ in judgment.”<sup>5</sup> In 2 Peter 3:9 (NASB), Peter declares, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (see also Ezek. 18:32; 33:11). This passage is both hopeful and tragically ominous, for in spite of God’s declared concern not all will come to repentance (see Eph. 5:5-6; 2 Thess. 1:6-10; 2 Pet. 2:9) and many will perish (see Matt. 7:13; 13:41-50).

Thus, for the sake of the perishing, we must let the full impact of humanity’s lostness grip the mind and heart of the church. Uncomfortable as it must have been, the first century church must have understood this very well.<sup>6</sup> Christianity was born into a world as religiously diverse as ours is today. Yet it was against the backdrop of the religious pluralism that Jesus Christ was lifted as the sole Savior of humanity. Christianity was nothing more than an offspring of Judaism, barely notable in the Roman Empire, and yet Christians consistently elevated Christ as the only Savior of the world without compromise.

Thus, it follows that the Bible places such emphasis on the need to physically hear the gospel. Paul certainly believed as much when, speaking of the lost, he penned the following sentiment: “How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher” (Rom. 10:14, NASB)?

Note that the apostle offers rhetorical questions that suggest a three-fold impossibility—all based, ultimately, on the availability of a preacher of the gospel. Paul, in essence, says that without a gospel preacher: the lost do not hear the gospel; thus, they cannot believe; thus, they cannot call on the Lord. The verse is heavy with implications: humanity stands lost, but it is unable even to call out in desperation until the lost soul is moved to repentance through the faithful proclamation of the gospel by God’s preachers (see also Acts 8:30-39).<sup>7</sup>

In light of this critical reality, Scripture reveals at least four motivations to share the gospel:

1. The love of God should compel us to proclaim the gospel (see Luke 10:27; 2 Cor. 5:14; Gal. 5:14).
2. Our love for sinners whose eternal destiny hangs in the balance should compel us to proclaim the gospel (see Luke 10:27).
3. Obedience to the Great Commission should compel us to evangelize the world (see Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8).
4. The prospect of being held accountable for failing to deliver the message should compel us to proclaim the gospel (see Ezek. 33:1-9; Acts 10:42; Rom. 10:11-15; 1 Cor. 9:16-17).

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## Conclusion

In this brief study no attempt has been made to answer all the questions related to all people who never hear the gospel. For example, what about the many children who are aborted, stillborn, and miscarried? And then there is the question about children who live, yet never reach that nebulous age of accountability, not to mention the wrenching question about those who, because of diminished mental capacity, are unable ever to understand the gospel. This brief study in no way attempts to speak

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<sup>5</sup>R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gray Phillips, “A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach,” *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, D. L. Okholm and T. R. Phillips, eds., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 238. The exclusivist (Particularist) position is well articulated in this article.

<sup>6</sup>Note Paul’s deep concern for Israel (see Rom. 9:3-4) and Gentiles alike (see 2 Cor. 5:18-21; 6:11-18).

<sup>7</sup>1 Timothy 2:4 is often cited as an example of God’s purpose to offer salvation universally. However, it must be observed that Paul makes this statement in the midst of a call to prayer for the peaceful continuation of civil order. In its context (see 1 Tim. 2:1-7), the verse actually is quite clear—a tranquil world will allow believers to fulfill God’s desire to extend salvation to all through the literal proclamation of the gospel. Thus, this verse is in harmony with Romans 10:11-15.

to such broader issues.

When it comes to people with full capacity to reason and contemplate their condition in the world, however, there is an undeniable reality that hangs over fallen humanity—people are lost by nature and by volitional choice. Thus, the Bible offers the hope of redemption against the backdrop of the certainty of Hell.<sup>8</sup> While we know that God has not revealed the totality of His mind, what He has revealed is quite specific: God has chosen to save people by allowing them to hear and respond to the offer of salvation.<sup>9</sup> He has not made any other way explicitly known through the Bible. However, if the world is unaware of its alarming condition, God holds the church responsible to proclaim the gospel to the lost.

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<sup>8</sup>This writer recognizes the two prominent positions among those who hold to Hell as a true biblical teaching—Traditionalism and Conditionalism. While most Baptists insist that punishment is eternal—the traditional view—there are differences of opinion as to the severity of punishment. See Robert A. Preston, “Hell: Annihilation or Eternal Torment?” *Christianity Today* (October 23, 2000), 29-37.

<sup>9</sup>Other means by which the Gospel is communicated include printed materials, radio, television, internet, etc.



Rudolph D. Gonzalez, Director, Interfaith Evangelism

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All other inquiries should be addressed to: Editorial and Design Manager, North American Mission Board, 4200 North Point Pkwy., Alpharetta, Ga. 30022-4176; or fax (770) 410-6006; or e-mail [permissions@namb.net](mailto:permissions@namb.net).

For more information contact Interfaith Evangelism via e-mail at [interfaith@namb.net](mailto:interfaith@namb.net).

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