

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO DON'T HEAR THE GOSPEL?

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Introduction

Since I became a Christian, and as I began to experience more of the Christian journey with the Lord Jesus, I began to realise, and see, certain issues, which I often pondered, and which often seemed unsatisfactory to me. The one, which I have always considered seriously, concerns our Melanesian ancestors, and their salvation. What happens to these ancestors, who have died in the period between the death of Christ and the pioneer missionaries reaching our land? I have often thought: If only our ancestors would have had the opportunity of God's revelation. Somehow, I feel sure that there will always be available some alternative salvation for them.

I will seek to argue on the basis of assumptions, which I feel reasonably convenient, from my point of view. I am assuming that our Melanesian ancestors must have received revelation from God, and that some fortunate ones must, somehow, have received salvation through Christ.

I will not deny the fact that the entire Bible gives no definite room for those, who have had no chance of hearing the gospel. It seems that, for them, there will only be doom to eternal hell. Yet, my feeling is otherwise. My argument will focus strongly on those, who have not had the chance of hearing the message of the gospel – that they must have received some kind of revelation from God. And, along this line, they must have certain possibilities of salvation through Christ, and not apart from Christ. This is, perhaps, contrary to much scholarly argument in this area.

The Orthodox View

Most scholars have argued that the biblical point of view is that those who have not heard the gospel will certainly be doomed to eternal hell. My basic summary of the orthodox view is as follows:

1. All humans are sinners by nature, and by choice, and, therefore, are guilty, and under divine condemnation.
2. Salvation is only through Christ, and His atoning work.
3. Belief is necessary to obtain the salvation achieved by Christ. Therefore, Christians and the church have the responsibility to tell unbelievers the good news about Jesus Christ.
4. Adherents of other religions, no matter how sincere their belief, or how intense their religious activity, are spiritually lost apart, from Christ.
5. Physical death brings to an end the opportunity to exercise saving faith, and accept Jesus Christ. The decisions made in this life are irrevocably fixed at death.
6. At the great final judgment, all humans will be separated, on the basis of their relationship to Christ during this life. Those who have believed in Him, will spend eternity in heaven, in everlasting joy and reward, in God's presence. Those who have not accepted Him, will experience hell, a place of unending suffering, where they will be eternally separate from God.¹

It is clearly understood that the orthodox view is, indeed, based on the Bible. I acknowledge the fact that God's Word is the authority for believers, who follow Him. Likewise, as I have said, above, my assumptions will be touching on certain aspects, from the biblical standpoint, as well as viewing the situation from a Melanesian context.

¹ William V. Crockett, and James G. Sigountos, *Through no Fault of Their Own*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1993.

General Revelation

Its Nature

Man is finite, and God is infinite. If man intends to seek to know God, this may always be impossible for man. The only way it may come about, is by God's revelation of Himself to man. This implies the necessity of God's manifestation of Himself, so man may be able to relate to God, and obtain consciousness of whom God is to man.

There are two basic classifications of revelation. On the one hand, Erickson states: "general revelation is God's communication of Himself to all persons, at all times, and in all places. Special revelation, on the other hand, involves God's particular communication, and manifestation, of Himself to the particular person, at the particular time."²

This definition of general revelation obviously refers to God's self-manifestation, through the nature, history, and the inner being of the human person. According to Erickson, "It is general in two senses, its universal availability (it is accessible to all persons at all times), and the content of the message (it is less particularised and detailed than special revelation)."³

The Place of General Revelation

The traditional place of general revelation is in places, such as, nature, history, and the constitution of the human being. Scripture, itself, proposes that there is a knowledge of God, available through the created physical order:

"The heavens are declaring the glory of God" (Ps 19:1).

"It clearly exposed the very fact that, since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, His eternal power, and divine nature, have made man without excuse in the judgment day" (Rom 1:20).

² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1987, pp. 154-155.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

There are many other passages, such as the “nature Psalms”, that suggest that God has left evidence of Himself in the world He has created. General revelation is most-frequently thought of in connection with the amazing, and impressive, character of the creation, which seems to point to a very powerful, and mighty, and wise person, who is capable of designing and producing intricate variety and beauty.⁴

The second place of general revelation is history. God has a certain goal for the world, and He is working towards it. It should be possible to detect the trend of God’s work in the events that occur as part of history.

The third place of general revelation is God’s own image, which He has placed in the highest earthly creation: man. God, revealing Himself, can be seen in the physical structure and mental capacities of man. The moral and spiritual qualities of man reveal God’s character.

General revelation is found in all religions of man, in all cultures. Human beings have believed in the existence of a higher being, who is much more superior, and all powerful, over the entire universe.

Special Revelation

The definition, according to Erickson, is “God’s manifestation of Himself to particular persons, at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with Him”.⁵ Both the Hebrew and Greek words for “reveal” express the same idea of “uncovering what was concealed”.

The reason why there should be a need for special revelation is that man, in the beginning, had a pure relationship with God, and then lost this relationship, due to disobedience. Special revelation is a means, used by God, to link again this broken relationship between man and Himself.

The Style of Special Revelation

The style, first of all, is personal. God presents Himself in a personal way to persons. This is seen in several ways: for example, in the Old Testament, God revealed Himself, by telling His name, when Moses

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 175.

sought to know Him. Nothing is more personal than one's name. "God said to Moses; 'I am who I am!' This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent you' " (Ex 3:14).⁶

The Anthropic Nature of Special Revelation

It is claimed, according to the Bible, that God is unlimited in His knowledge and power. He is not at all subject to the confines of space and time. For man, it is impossible to reach God by himself, and he would not understand, even if he could. Therefore, God had to reveal Himself, by a revelation in anthropic form. This is simply a revelation, coming in human language, and human categories.⁷

The Holy Spirit and Life

The work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament is commonly referred to in relation to the creation of the cosmos. In Gen 1:2, the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters, like a bird hovering over its young ones. And later on, in Ps 104:30 and Is 40:12f., there is indication that God brought life out of nothing at the very beginning. The Spirit is God's power, which gives life to man, in both the physical and spiritual senses.

The Holy Spirit illuminates man's mind with the knowledge of God's truth (Deut 34:9; Ps 143:10). The Holy Spirit, then, does the work of giving life, illuminating man's mind, and convicting man's heart, to realise his sins.⁸

Election

Election is simply a matter of foreknowledge. God knows all the future of every human being. He knows who will be responding to the gospel, if the gospel was preached. He "elects" those He foreknows will freely be responding to the gospel. "For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many" (Rom 8:29). God knew the "elect", in the sense of choosing them by His grace, before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). Similarly, in 2 Tim 1:9, it is stated that God has saved us,

⁶ Ibid., pp. 177-178.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 178-179.

⁸ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1982.

because of His purpose and grace, and that this grace was given in Christ. However, God knew everything already.⁹

The Melanesian Point of View

The New Hebrides Contextual Perspective

Let us review certain “heathen ideas”, which prepared our people for the coming of the gospel. It was obvious that the Bible did not exclude the heathen from the things, which God used as a means of His witness to them, e.g., in Acts 14:17; 11:28; Rom 2:14, 15. The Holy Spirit was already at work in our islands before the gospel came. The Holy Spirit prepared our ancestors beforehand, with a consciousness of the guiltiness of sin, of sacrifice, of the High God, of the consequences of immorality, of hope of life after death, of atonement for sin, through the shedding of pig’s blood, and of prayer, and thanksgiving, as acts of worship.

In addition, God somehow seems to have given some of our ancestors special revelations through dreams, visions, and deep insights of understanding. We came to realise that this was done in God’s goodness. Its purpose was to encourage our ancestors not to despair, but, rather, that they should wait, hopefully, for the coming of salvation. I feel that our ancestors cannot miss out on salvation. There must be a way, somehow, in order for Christ to be presented as Saviour to them.

In heathen times, our people had men and women who lived moral lives, and who attempted to tell the people about a divine message from God. There were some, who also were regarded as false prophets, but *munais*, and sacred men and women often spoke for God. They attempted to say who was guilty, who had caused sickness, and who should be killed. These men and women were highly honoured and feared, because of the special power they had.¹⁰

Manusian Contextual Perspective

The ancestors were worshipping the living God (*Nydrei*). I am picking on a story told by my great-grandmother, or the mother of my grandmother.

⁹ Don W. Hillis, *Are the Heathen Really Lost?*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1961.

¹⁰ J. Graham Miller, *Work Book on Christian Doctrine*, Melbourne Vic: Lawsons, 1974.

Our ancestors, indeed, were conscious of who God was to them. They knew God as a triune God: the names used for them were *Nydrei* (God the Father), *Ndro Lapan* (God the Son), and *Sameluwa ndoruei* (God the Holy Ghost). They knew of the dwelling place of God. The name given to the dwelling place of God was *Lundialong*, which means “beyond the clouds above us”.

Before the gospel arrived in our lands, our ancestors had already been acquainted with practices of worshiping the living God. They knew Him from general revelation, special revelation, and history from their ancestors. Despite the fact of cannibalism, yet, there were men and women, who were living moral, righteous lives. There were certain men and women, who were given a mandate from God to govern by their moral and ethical standards, as well as their spiritual standards. These people were called *Lapans*. Among these *Lapans*, there were some, who were highly esteemed, and they were often feared by the people. They spoke words of wisdom, they foretold, they predicted, they cursed evil people, and they were intelligent, and very powerful.

Our Melanesian ancestors also observed certain occurrences of events. I pick on two, which I have grasped in my memory. The first one was an Easter event. There would be a day, when the daylight would become blacked-out in the middle of the day, children would cease from games, and adults would have to cease from what they were doing. They would have to light fires, and other means of providing light, and that period of time would be observed by keeping silent, until the daylight returned. This event occurred annually, and our ancestors knew, for sure, that Christ was crucified by the evil ones.

The second one was the observance of Christmas. There would be a great day of feasting and celebrating for a week. This day was called *Urruh*, which means “year”. When the feasting was over, the *Lapans* would pronounce that the commemoration be stopped, and they would welcome the new *Urruh*, so that the community could proceed again with new life.

My great-grandmother lived to a ripe old age. My grandmother did not live that long, but my great-grandmother's life was prolonged, due to her faithfulness. She was almost faithful in everything. She was blessed by the *Lapans* to live longer on the earth, and I became her fourth generation. She died in 1983, at the age of 116-120. Her life signifies that the ancestors had a fair idea of God's word. In fact, she acknowledged that the gospel later came as confirmation to what she already had – and that was faith in God. And the observance of these things indicates that our ancestors were already practising acts of worship. This, I assume, was conducted by the special *Lapans*, who were highly esteemed, and regarded as powerful.

My Point of View

With the above approach, I would assume that our Melanesian ancestors must, somehow, have had access to salvation through Christ, somewhere in these places. From the above, I would point to the possibilities of our ancestors having received revelation from God. The possibilities, I strongly suggest, may come from general revelation, special revelation, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the history passed on from generation to generation. Also, there were godly men and women, despite cannibalism. If this is true, then some of our ancestors must have been fortunate in obtaining salvation, not apart from Christ, but through Christ, due to what has been discussed, above.

According to the Melanesian point of view, our ancestors were already practising acts of worship to God, through observing certain special events. Also, there were men and women, who were living moral, righteous lives. I want to stress the fact that they had already related to God, in this sense. My great-grandmother was involved in the period of cannibalism, when she was in her teens. She was illiterate, but yet she was fully aware of what our people were doing (e.g., the celebration of Easter and Christmas). She related the new celebrations, brought by the missionaries, to what had already been happening. She was able to understand clearly, without difficulty in her comprehension, because of past traditions and events. She found her faith before the gospel came.

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