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**‘TOWARD SOLVING  
THE PROBLEM OF  
THE UNEVANGELIZED’:  
A RESPONSE TO  
CHRISTOPHER LITTLE**

*Keith Ferdinando*

Traditionally most Christians have held that salvation from sin, death and hell is to be found only through faith in the person and work of Christ, a view identified as ‘Christian exclusivism’. However, as Harold Netland notes, ‘Christian exclusivism has fallen on hard times. Not only is it being rejected by non-Christians as naive and arrogant, but it is increasingly being criticised from within the Christian community as well for alleged intolerance and for being a vestige of an immoral religious imperialism’.<sup>1</sup> There are in fact many reasons for the attack on the exclusivist position, one of which points to the millions, even billions, of people who both now and throughout history have never heard the gospel, and who have therefore had no evident possibility of responding to it. Those

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1991), 27.

who employ this particular argument claim that such a position is intolerable, for it means that myriads have no chance of finding salvation and so are eternally and hopelessly lost 'through no fault of their own'. This frequently leads on to an inclusivist or pluralist conclusion. Inclusivism affirms that in some sense Christ remains a unique revelation of God but at the same time argues that he is present in revelation and salvation in other religious traditions too. Pluralism rejects any notion of Christian uniqueness. Either way, space is opened up for the salvation of those who have never heard the gospel, and the 'problem of the unevangelized' is thereby resolved.

Clearly, therefore, Christopher Little is grappling with an issue which is of concern for many. In the African context itself, the eternal fate of the ancestors who lived before the gospel was accessible within their societies is a question that has provoked considerable discussion, and continues to do so. It is evident that Little feels the weight of 'the problem of the unevangelized', and it is there that his argument takes its point of departure, in very much the terms outlined above: 'are they condemned through no fault of their own?' he asks. Thus he apparently shares the view that it would be unjust to condemn those who have not had the opportunity to respond to the gospel, while at the same time seeking to pursue a solution that avoids both inclusivism and pluralism. His discussion of Acts 4:12 indicates that he believes in the uniqueness of Christ, and in the main body of his article he refers to the necessity of a 'salvific relationship' with God which is brought about through the communication of 'His special revelatory truth'.

Furthermore, he argues that such a communication does not take place by means of general revelation: 'the idea that general revelation, whatever that information might be, provides hope for the unevangelized encountering salvation before God is unfounded, since humanity continuously responds negatively which results in condemnation.' Instead, God uses 'the modalities of special revelation' 'to initiate, direct, sustain, and fulfil a salvific relationship with himself on behalf of whosoever will': it is in this way, Little argues, that he reaches those who have not heard the proclamation of the gospel through the agency of a human

messenger. These modalities include the means traditionally identified with the communication of the gospel, such as human messengers and the written word of God, but also miracles, dreams, visions and angels which may operate independently of the Bible and the church. Thus, according to Little, God communicates with unevangelized people using the same methods that he has used to communicate special revelation, methods that are identified in various biblical accounts of the transmission of revelation. In defending this position Little strongly affirms God's sovereign freedom as far as communicating salvation is concerned: 'we must recognise that God is not limited either by the activity of the Church or the spread of the Bible to accomplish his redemptive purposes in history.' However, in Little's view, God does not apparently communicate with all the unevangelized through the use of such special means. Some are 'candidates' for special revelatory truth, and to be a 'candidate' means meeting certain criteria which, Little implies, not all are able to do. Accordingly, 'candidates' must recognise the hopelessness of their own religion and appeal for 'divine assistance in order to encounter spiritual truth'.

Thus, Little affirms the 'possibility' of the unevangelized 'finding and knowing God' through the 'modalities of special revelation.' 'There is great hope for the unevangelized because they have never existed, exist or will exist, without the possibility of finding and knowing God.' Moreover, the optimistic tone of his article suggests that this is more than a 'possibility', and that some have indeed been saved in that way. Nowhere, however, does he indicate how significant the size of this hypothetical group might be, which leaves the argument rather inconclusive and ambivalent, perhaps inevitably so. Indeed, the concluding proposition, 'no one has ever been lost, either in the past, present, or future, who has sincerely wanted to be saved', is one to which probably all evangelicals would assent without much difficulty, and which in practice tells us precious little about the fate of the unevangelized.

Little's argument may therefore not actually take us very far forward, even if we were to accept his thinking. Indeed, the category of candidates 'for God's special revelatory truth communicated through the various modalities', may, on the basis of

his own reasoning, be a null one. But the argument is itself vulnerable to weighty criticism at a number of other points too.<sup>2</sup>

*First, the starting point of the discussion is seriously flawed.* Little apparently goes along with the view that it would be unjust for men and women to be condemned without having had the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel. This is the implication of the series of questions he raises in the first paragraph: 'Are they part of the elect without knowing it, are they condemned through no fault of their own, or, should they be considered as within the redemptive activity of our sovereign God?' As he approaches 'the problem of the unevangelized', this is the full range of options which he recognises. The first presumably embraces the inclusivist and pluralist positions which Little rejects. The last is the route he wishes to follow, claiming that the unevangelized are 'within the redemptive activity of our sovereign God' by virtue of 'modalities of special revelation'. Accordingly, he implies that if that were not the case, if they are not 'within the redemptive activity of our sovereign God', then one must conclude that they are indeed 'condemned through no fault of their own.' Now, by definition, the very notion of a holy, just and infinitely wise God condemning people 'through no fault of their own' must be rejected, and Little of course does so as would any thoughtful Christian. But he presumably thinks some people believe or teach such a position, and one suspects that he uses the phrase to refer to the traditional or exclusivist approach to the question of the unevangelized, the view that men and women must hear the gospel of Christ and respond to it with faith and repentance in order to be saved. It is this view that is unfair because it means, in Little's view and, to be fair, in that of many others, that people are condemned for failing to respond to a message they never heard. If that were

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<sup>2</sup> The argument that follows focuses on what appears to be Little's principal thesis. Other disputable points are not necessarily discussed, such as the dubious claim that the witness of the Gentile conscience (Romans 2:14-15) takes place only at the final judgement, or the very speculative interpretation of the significance of the names of Cain and Abel.

indeed the case it would be patently unjust and would inevitably generate a 'problem of the unevangelized'.

However, this is not an accurate representation of the traditional position, and it is very questionable whether anybody actually holds such a view. God's righteous judgement falls on men and women not because they do not respond to the gospel, but because they are rebels and sinners, and because their sin merits his wrath and condemnation. The consistent and constant argument of Scripture is summed up in Paul's terse declarations: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' and 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom 3:23; 6:23). Clowney summarises the testimony of the Old Testament in this way:

The biblical prophets and poets struggle with this issue. Indeed it is the great question for the whole Old Testament. Sin has entered the world and the death knell sounds through the genealogies of Genesis. The doom that a holy God pronounces on sinful mankind is everywhere at hand.<sup>3</sup>

Rejection of the gospel is certainly sin, and grievously aggravates the already desperate situation of the sinner; but it is not rejection of the gospel as such that is the reason for condemnation, and certainly not ignorance of it, but rebellion against a holy God. All men and women deserve judgement because of their sin: none are condemned 'through no fault of their own'. The dying thief speaks for the whole of humanity, 'We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve' (Lk 23:41); repentance to salvation implies the recognition of that simple fact. That there is a gospel, and that any hear it at all, is due to the pure grace of God towards those who deserve only death. Once this is recognised, 'the problem of the unevangelized' is greatly diminished, since there is no longer any question of the arbitrary condemnation of the innocent. There are no doubt still questions to which we might like answers: how do we explain the particularity of grace? But grace is by definition free and undeserved, and the giver may bestow his gift as he wills. The

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<sup>3</sup> E.P. Clowney, 'The Biblical Doctrine of Justification by Faith', in D.A. Carson (ed.), *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), 23.

acute problem of apparent divine injustice, expressed by the question 'are they condemned through no fault of their own', is found to be non-existent.

*Second, the whole notion of becoming a candidate for God's special revelatory truth is problematic.* On the basis of Little's criteria, is anybody a candidate? And can anybody ever be a candidate? Little's conception is anthropocentric, and implies the necessity of some worthiness on the part of the 'candidate' before God acts. Indeed it looks very much like semi-Pelagianism. There is already a suggestion of this when he deals with Abraham's call. He proposes that God chose Abraham because of his 'positive response to the special revelatory truth contained in the Noahic covenant.' However, there is no suggestion of this in the biblical text, and it would be more consistent with the testimony of the rest of Scripture to affirm that Abraham's call was the result of free and unmerited grace. The revelation of truth is a sovereign act of God, for which none become 'candidates' by meeting particular criteria. Indeed, the Scriptures continually stress the hopelessness of humankind apart from grace. It is clear in Ephesians 2 where Paul speaks of being dead 'in transgressions and sins'; or in Romans 8:6-7, 'the mind of sinful man is death .. the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so'; or in John 6:37, 'all that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away'. Throughout the emphasis is on God's initiative in redemption. Little insists on God's sovereignty with respect to the means of communicating the gospel, but he is weak on divine sovereignty in the application of redemption to the sinner: people become 'candidates' for special revelatory truth when they recognise that their own religion is hopeless and appeal to him for help. They are self-selecting.

*Third, Little affirms God's ability to reveal himself apart from messengers of the gospel:* 'we must recognize that God is not limited either by the activity of the Church or the spread of the Bible to accomplish His redemptive purposes in history'. He quotes McGrath in support: 'The Creator is not dependent on his creation in achieving his purposes.' There is no disputing this; of course God can act as he wills. He is indeed free in all that he does, totally

unconstrained by his creation. However, there is more than this to be said on the subject. While it is true that God is free to use or not to use the church and the Scriptures to bring about the spread of the gospel, the question is rather whether there are certain methods he has determined to use, and whether in practice he does freely and sovereignly bind himself to the use of specified means. In other words, the fact that he *can* use means other than the church and the Bible, does not in practice mean that he *does* do so. The question needs to be decided on the basis of the biblical testimony, at which point texts such as Romans 10:14 - 'And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?' - become highly significant.

Little argues that Romans 10:14 is 'simply highlighting our human responsibility as Christ's ambassadors, nothing more and nothing less'. However, such an approach to the meaning of the verse is essentially reductionist. Paul highlights the responsibility given to human beings to preach the gospel precisely because this is the way God has appointed for its communication. In the context of the passage as a whole, 'the chain of questions ... indicates the impossibility of the Jews' calling upon Christ unless certain preconditions have been fulfilled,'<sup>4</sup> among which is the proclamation of the gospel by messengers sent by God. If indeed significant numbers of humanity will hear the good news through 'the modalities of special revelation' the argument would break down. In answer to his question, 'how can they hear without someone preaching to them?', Paul certainly seems to expect the response, 'in such a case they cannot hear.' However, Little would presumably give the reply, 'they will hear through visions, dreams, angels, miraculous events', thereby undermining the whole force of Paul's argument. Moreover, such an answer most certainly attenuates the force of the missionary imperative. Hywel Jones writes, 'as he was about to leave this earth and return to heaven, the Lord commanded his apostles, and through them his church, to "go

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<sup>4</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans*, vol. II (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1979), 529.



and make disciples of all nations ...” Did he send them on an unnecessary task, a fool’s errand? Or is their going out into all the world with the gospel as essential in its own way, as was his coming down into it?”<sup>5</sup> There will inevitably be a reduced sense of urgency about the task of bringing the gospel to the lost, if there is good reason to suppose that they will have the opportunity to receive it by other means. Indeed, one might even suppose that if God were to deal directly with human souls it would be far better for missionaries, imperfect as they are, to keep well clear and not risk undermining his work by their own clumsiness.

*This brings us to a fourth point, and to the fundamental stage of Little’s argument.* He suggests that God uses ‘the modalities of special revelation’ to bring saving truth to those to whom the gospel has not been preached and who do not have access to the Bible. As an introduction to the development of this point, which is found largely in the final section of the article, he clearly attaches great significance to the words of Elihu in Job 33:13-33: ‘the soteriological implications of this passage as it pertains to the state of the unevangelized are astounding, and therefore, worthy of much consideration.’ But the claim is very doubtful, and indeed the use of such hyperbolic language alerts the reader to the need for vigilance in evaluating it. Thus, first, Job is already a worshipper of the true God and the same is true of his ‘comforters’. It is this after all that makes the whole argument of the book meaningful: it is precisely because of his faith that the problem of his suffering is so acute. The dreams, visions, angels and mediators of which the passage speaks are therefore to be understood in the context of belief. Similarly, the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh were incomprehensible without interpretation by those who were already children of God; they were not self-explanatory pointers to the true God. Moreover, contrary to Little’s view, the text certainly does suggest that Job found the subsequent divine theophany unusual: ‘My ears had heard of you but now mine eyes have seen you’ (Job 42:5). There was an immediacy in the revelation that took him by

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<sup>5</sup> H.R. Jones, *Only One Way* (Bromley, England: Day One Publications, 1996), 136.

surprise and was quite unlike anything he had known before, and certainly beyond the dreams that Elihu had spoken of. It is clear that Job was overwhelmed by the theophany, and there is no indication that he had had such experiences previously during his life: quite the contrary, what happened was exceptional. And anyway, once again the theophany took place in the context of a believer's experience, not that of an outsider. It is very doubtful whether this passage has any clear-cut soteriological implications for the unevangelized at all.

Turning then to the final section, entitled 'Modalities of Special Revelation', what biblical arguments does Little adduce to support his position? This is the crucial phase of his whole thesis, for he needs to show from the biblical record that God does indeed continue to save men and women through 'the modalities of special revelation' apart from the proclamation of the gospel through human agents. However, on close examination none of the examples he cites actually sustains his case. It is questionable whether his first category, 'oral tradition' is in fact a 'modality of special revelation' at all. In Scripture it is normally simply a means by which the data of special revelation are passed on. Paul refers to such transmission on several occasions in his letters (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3; 2 Tim 2:2). The case of Rahab, cited by Little, involves somebody who had heard of God's acts of salvation - his special revelation - and so put her trust in him. She did not benefit from a 'modality of special revelation' but simply from the oral transmission of special revelation itself, the news of what God had done in Egypt and at the Red Sea. Similarly, if the devout men who heard the gospel preached at Pentecost took the message home with them and passed it on, they were just doing what missionaries are supposed to do. Of course, as Little says, the possibility - even probability - exists that the message of salvation was then passed on to subsequent generations; but that should always be the case, and it is difficult to see how it would support his case if it happened on this occasion.

As an example of 'miraculous events' constituting 'modalities of special revelation', Little refers to Saul's conversion. It does indeed prove 'that God is not limited to human agency', but that is not in

question, and the whole incident offers scant support for Little's case. First, the miraculous event led immediately to a visit by a messenger of the gospel, Ananias, which is very significant, as we shall note later. Furthermore, this is the conversion and call of a man to the unique office of apostle, and any generalisation based on it must therefore be problematic. Paul himself alludes to the unique nature of his experience in 1 Corinthians 9:1: 'Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?' Third, Saul was already well aware of Old Testament revelation and doubtless very familiar with the claims and teaching of the church which he was persecuting: it is not very convincing to identify him as a part of 'the problem of the unevangelized'. Little also quotes the conversion of the emperor Constantine as an example of 'God working redemptively through the modalities of special revelation' by 'miraculous events'. The authenticity of Constantine's 'conversion' is itself the subject of much debate, and there is in any case no doubt that he was already very well aware of the existence of the church and its teaching when he received his 'vision'. The very fact that Little has to use such an example actually implies the weakness of his case.

There is no evidence that either of the two biblical dreams that Little refers to (Abimelech, Gen 20:3; the magi, Matt 2:12) was instrumental in the conversion of the recipients. It would be helpful to have more detail and documentation on the case of Adiri, the pagan of Dutch Guiana, cited by Little who himself found it in Strong's *Systematic Theology*. The incident may indeed be significant, not so much because it supports Little's case, but because in the visions he received Adiri was told 'to go to the missionaries for instruction'. The case is parallel to that of Saul, to whom Ananias was sent. The role of missionaries appears to have been an integral part of his conversion experience, and the visions or dreams guided him to go to them for teaching. We will return to this later.

Little quotes Abraham (Gen 15:1), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2:28; 4:34-37), and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-6), as examples of those who received visions. The first is not relevant to his thesis, as Abraham was actually receiving special revelation and was not just a beneficiary of a 'modality of special revelation'. His crucial role in

the whole history of redemption makes him a quite exceptional case from which it is not possible to make any extrapolation. Nebuchadnezzar's visions were interpreted by Daniel - as with Saul's vision of Christ and the dream of Adiri from Dutch Guiana. They were not self-explanatory: it was the Lord's messenger who communicated their meaning. Similarly Cornelius was told to send for Peter.

Little's references to angels bringing the gospel similarly contribute little to his argument. The angels who informed the shepherds of the birth of Christ were bringing special revelation itself at the central moment of redemption history. The reference to the angel who preached the eternal gospel in Revelation 14:6 raises a number of issues. First, in view of the apocalyptic genre of the whole book, it is legitimate to enquire whether in this and the following verses John is referring to the intervention of a literal, visible angel, or whether the text is to be understood in some other way. Second, the emphasis in these verses is on judgement. Third, the announcements contained in the verses apparently refer to unique events of world-wide significance that are to take place at the end of history, and not to the way in which the gospel advances normally. Again, Little seeks to generalise from what appears to be an exceptional and unique situation.

Little goes on to refer to human messengers as examples of God working salvifically through 'modalities of special revelation', but it is not at all clear how this fits his argument. All of those referred to, Jonah, John the Baptist and Stephen, are effectively missionary communicators, proclaiming the gospel. Insofar as we have a 'modality of special revelation' here, it is because these men were in fact means through which God conveyed special revelation itself in the course of their regular ministry. However, Little's case surely is that God communicates his gospel in the absence of human missionary proclamation. These cases do nothing to establish that he does so.

The last category in this section is the written Word of God. Little writes: 'The Bible provides the only objective basis by which to evaluate the information that comes through the other

modalities. Obviously, if after doing our homework, a message delivered by any of the other modalities does not conform to the teaching of Scripture, it must be rejected.' This is certainly true, but what does it do for Little's argument? He seems to suggest that where 'modalities of special revelation' are used to communicate the gospel, the Bible must be present to validate the message. However, if the Bible is already present in such a context, special revelation itself is already present and the need for such modalities is largely removed.

*In conclusion*, none of the examples Little quotes substantiates his thesis. In every case what the text refers to is either the use of a 'modality of special revelation' precisely to communicate special revelation, or the intervention of a dream or vision to direct the recipient to those human messengers called by God to communicate his unique Word. Little refers to a survey of 100 Muslim converts which found that 'over one-half of these believers have had at least one (dream or vision) before or after conversion'. However, to evaluate the significance of this information more questions need to be asked. Were these people saved *uniquely* through a dream or vision or, as in the case of Saul, Nebuchadnezzar and Adiri, did the dream or vision direct them to a Christian preacher or missionary? There is indeed very strong evidence to suggest that dreams and visions play a major role in many Muslim conversions. However, the evidence also suggests that in the case of those converted in that way, the dreams usually start a process which often takes some years to complete before actual conversion occurs. It is not the dream as such that brings about conversion; rather the dream directs the individual to go to somebody who can explain the gospel, which is what the Bible suggests should happen in the cases referred to above. It certainly appears that in God's economy human messengers are an essential element in bringing the gospel to the unevangelized.

Finally, if Little's argument were valid, one would expect some evidence of its truth in the records of missionary endeavour. He is after all very optimistic about the implications of the case he puts forward: 'there is great hope for the unevangelized because they have never existed, exist, or will exist, without the possibility of

finding and knowing God'. He presumably believes that some, even significant numbers, of the unevangelized, have found Christ through these 'special modalities'. But, if that were the case, would it not be reasonable to suppose that as missionaries have gradually penetrated the unreached areas of the globe, they would have come across individuals, groups, even whole communities, who had indeed found God in this way and were already worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ? Do the annals of mission history suggest that this has happened and, if so, why does Little not refer to such cases to reinforce his position? For, if what he is arguing is true, one would expect to find empirical evidence for it. Theology, after all, ought to correspond to reality; if not, what is the point of it?

Ultimately Little's theory is a dangerous one, for it seeks to give reasons for a hope which is not justified. An invalid, when offered false hope, may well respond by neglecting the true remedy for his condition. In this case the biblical answer to 'the problem of the unevangelized' is to evangelize them: God's solution, and their one hope, is mission. He is himself a God of mission who sends his own Son for the lost, and the gospel records all refer to the transmission of the missionary mandate to his disciples. It is this which constitutes the divine response to an unevangelized world. In his favour, Little rejects inclusivist and pluralist approaches to the 'problem', but the outcome of his theory is likely to be similar. Without either biblical or empirical support, its tendency is to contribute to the erosion of the missionary imperative within our churches, and so to aggravate 'the problem of the unevangelized'.

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