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John E. Sanders

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## Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?

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*From time to time The Evangelical Quarterly carries essays on controversial topics on which Reformed Christians hold different points of view. From the lists of scholars supporting each of the three views of the destiny of the unevangelised given in this essay it is clear that Mr Sanders has brought to our notice an area where Reformed scholars differ on the interpretation of Scripture. We therefore welcome his essay as a means of encouraging careful thought on this important topic and believe that readers will welcome its orderly presentation of the various arguments, whether or not they themselves share the view which the author favours. Mr. Sanders teaches at Oak Hills Bible College, Bemidji, Minnesota.*

In *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, Rebecca struggled with deciding whether or not to be a missionary saying, 'It isn't as if the heathen really needed me; I'm sure they'll come out all right in the end . . . they'll find God somehow, sometime.'

'What if they die first?' asked Emma Jane.

'Oh, well, they can't be blamed for that; they don't die on purpose.'<sup>1</sup>

This bit of humorous fiction summarizes the attitudes of many people towards those who have never heard of Christ; 'just leave them alone, they'll be all right.' We should not take such an uncritical approach, however, for this issue is intimately related to such other important subjects as: the truth value of other religions; the justice and love of God; the sinfulness of humanity; the atonement of Christ; and missions. This topic is a very common one raised by both Christians and non-Christians, since most human beings who have ever lived have never heard about the redeeming work of our Lord Jesus. Fortunately this issue is mentioned in Scripture and has been much discussed throughout church history and has received many diverse answers.

<sup>1</sup> Kate D. Wiggan, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (Racine Wis: Whitman Publishing Co., 1960), 220-221.

The major question to be answered is: 'Will God extend the opportunity of salvation to those who have never been presented with the proclamation of the person and work of Jesus Christ?' Or, 'Does a person have to be aware of the work of Christ in order to benefit from that work?' To help answer this question I will use the term *evangelized* to refer to those who have heard and understood the message of the saving work of Jesus Christ. I will refer to the *unevangelized*<sup>2</sup> as those who have not heard about Christ. The evangelized fall into two groups: the saved and the lost. The saved are those who have submitted themselves to the claims of God upon their lives; the lost refuse to place their trust in God. Is it possible that the unevangelized also fall into the two categories of saved and lost? There have been many answers to this question in the history of the church. Three views will be discussed in this paper, all of which find a home within evangelical circles. (1). Some maintain that the unevangelized are forever lost. (2). Others hold that the unevangelized will receive a future chance after death to hear and decide concerning Christ. (3). Some believe God separates the unevangelized into saved and lost depending upon the response they make to the limited information they have concerning God.

The three positions I shall discuss, hold at least one belief in common; salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. All the views to be examined hold to the following assertions: the only way to the Father is through Jesus (Jn. 14:6); 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). Each of the positions believes that 'It is *only* through Christ that any man can come to a personal knowledge of, and fellowship with, God, and *only* through his life, death and resurrection that any man can come to an experience of salvation.'<sup>3</sup> Yet the crucial question remains: does a person have to hear about and believe in Christ before death in order to receive salvation?

### The unevangelized are lost

This view asserts that, unless people hear and accept the proclamation of the person and work of Jesus Christ, in this life (before death), they cannot be saved. This position has been

<sup>2</sup> Throughout church history the terms 'heathen' and 'pagan' have been used but the term 'unevangelized' is to be preferred since it does not carry the cultural connotations of the other terms.

<sup>3</sup> J.N.D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1977), 97.

widespread throughout the history of the church and appears to be the dominant view in contemporary evangelical thought. Proponents of this perspective include: Melancthon; Spurgeon; Charles Hodge; John Gerstner; and Carl Henry. The view that the unevangelized are lost goes back to ancient Judaism. At the time of the New Testament, the rabbinic school of Hillel held that all Gentiles would be damned unless they became proselytes.<sup>4</sup> Until Vatican II Roman Catholics taught that all outside the visible Roman Catholic church were lost.<sup>5</sup>

Three main arguments are usually put forward in support of this view. First, it is claimed that natural revelation provides only enough information to condemn humanity, not to save them. In natural revelation God has revealed some of his eternal attributes through the created order. But this cannot bring saving faith because

General revelation, to be a vehicle of salvation, must insist that God is revealed sufficiently so as to restore the broken relationship with man . . . But the essence of special revelation is the truth that God is not revealed unto salvation in general revelation . . . This much is perfectly evident: general revelation is totally insufficient as a vehicle for salvation.<sup>6</sup>

The knowledge of God gleaned from nature, law, and conscience will not save a person from hell. The plan of salvation is not revealed in the created order. Nor is it found by human reason or conscience.<sup>7</sup> Even though people may try to be obedient to the knowledge gained from general revelation by which God gives them a chance, they inevitably fail and consequently fall under God's judgment.<sup>8</sup> R.C. Sproul comments,

Man's problem is not that he doesn't know God but that he refuses to acknowledge what he knows to be true . . . Thus, if a person in a remote area has never heard of Christ, he will not be punished for that. What he will be punished for is the rejection of the Father of whom he has heard and for the disobedience to the law that is written in his heart.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), II, 792.

<sup>5</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, XII, 'Salvation, Necessity of Church for': V, 'Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus'.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Lindsell, *A Christian Philosophy of Mission* (Wheaton: Van Kampen Press, 1949), 107.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), II, 646.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley Gustafson, 'The Heathen—Damned?', *HIS*, March 1951, 7. See also Leith Samuel, 'The Heathen—Lost?', *HIS*, May 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Sproul, *op. cit.*, 52, 56. See also, J. Ronald Blue, 'Untold Billions: Are they Really Lost?' *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October-December 1981, 344ff; J. Oswald Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972).

The Westminster Confession after asserting that those who reject Christ cannot be saved, says,

Much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature and the law of that religion they do profess . . .<sup>10</sup>

The second argument in favour of saying all the unevangelized are lost comes from the Scriptures. Much weight is placed on such statements as 'I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me' (Jn. 14:6); 'And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12); 'If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved' (Rom. 10:9); and 'Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? . . . So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ' (Rom. 10:13, 14, and 17). These passages certainly claim that no human being will be saved apart from the atonement of Jesus Christ. It is asserted that these passages also affirm that belief in the person and work of Christ in this life, is necessary for saving faith to occur. These verses clearly affirm that 'all who receive Christ will be saved', but those who say the unevangelized will not be saved claim that this proposition can be converted to say, 'All who do not receive Christ in this life are lost.'

The third argument put forward in defence of this perspective is based on the importance of foreign missions. Loraine Boettner writes,

In fact the belief that the heathen without the Gospel are lost has been one of the strongest arguments in favour of foreign missions. If we believe that their own religions contain enough light and truth to save them, the importance of preaching the Gospel to them is greatly lessened.<sup>11</sup>

If the unevangelized can be saved apart from the gospel then why should we spend so much time and money trying to reach them?

<sup>10</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, XI:4. Reformed theologians are divided, however, as to whether this means they are lost. See also The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, XVIII.

<sup>11</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932), 119.

Missionary fervour, it is claimed, would be non-existent if we believed that salvation were possible without missionaries preaching the gospel.

The question arises at this point whether the lost in hell will greatly outnumber the saved in heaven. This would seem to be the logical implication of saying the unevangelized are lost since most human beings who have ever lived have never heard of Jesus. This, of course, does not make the position false. We may not like it because it sounds so harsh, but that is irrelevant to its truth or falsity. Yet it is just this harshness that has made this issue so often discussed among theologians since the seventeenth century. Many have been willing to say that the number of those saved is small in comparison to the lost. B.B. Warfield and Charles Hodge both believed that the number of lost will be insignificant compared to the multitudes of those saved even though they also believed knowledge of Christ is necessary in this life for salvation.<sup>12</sup> But how can they logically arrive at the conclusion 'more saved than lost' when the unevangelized must hear the gospel from the lips of men, and most men throughout history have not heard? Warfield and Hodge appeal to the Postmillennial doctrine that a tremendous surge of evangelism and conversion will occur in the future. Since (they believed) the future population of the earth will be greater than the total population throughout history, more will be saved than lost.

Although the view that the unevangelized will all be damned is currently very popular in evangelical circles, the arguments for it are flawed in both logic and evidence. The first argument had to do with what could be known about God through general revelation. It was asserted that general revelation cannot save anyone, even if they try to be obedient to the information they have. They are not condemned because they have not heard of Christ but because they reject the Father. The problem with this reasoning is that it involves a curious twist of reasoning to say a person is condemned for her rejection of the information she has when, even if she repented of this rebellion and did acknowledge God, it would not save her. Why is it that a person can learn from the created order that she is condemned, but she cannot repent and be saved? 'How can the unevangelized be judged for rejecting God on the basis of the light they have when a total acceptance of that natural revelation would be insufficient for salvation?'<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, we must be clear that general revela-

<sup>12</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), XII; Hodge, *op. cit.*, III, 879-880.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Ferrante, 'The Final Destiny of Those Who Have Not Heard the Gospel' *Trinity Studies*, Fall 1971, 58.

tion does not condemn; it brings only sufficient knowledge so that a person is without excuse if she fails to respond.<sup>14</sup> It is a common error to say revelation saves or condemns. Revelation neither pardons nor condemns, it is God who makes that judgment.

The crucial question still remains, what does a person have to believe to be saved? Those who claim that belief in Christ is necessary before death, fail to recognize that a considerable amount of information is given in the created order.<sup>15</sup> From it we can see God's power and divinity (Rom. 1:20), goodness (Acts 14:17), and glory (Ps. 19:1). Furthermore, God has not been passively waiting for missionaries to reach the unevangelized with the biblical revelation. The Old Testament both declares (Deut. 2:5ff; Amos 9:7) and gives examples (e.g. Melchizedek, Balaam, Jethro) of God's activity outside the nation of Israel. In his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*, Don Richardson discusses various peoples like Ethiopia's Gedo and the ancient Incas who either received direct revelation from God or who thought through the implication of general revelation to discover and acknowledge the true God.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, 'the operation of God's grace may well be wider than the knowledge of the gospel just as the grace of God in the Old Testament was wider than Israel'.<sup>17</sup>

The arguments based upon Scripture put forth above in support of claiming damnation for the unevangelized contain several logical errors. Such statements as 'No one comes to the Father except by me' (Jn. 14:6), and 'there is no other name by which you must be saved' (Acts 4:12) certainly teach that any who receive final salvation do so only because of the atonement of Jesus. But it is not certain from these passages that one *must* hear of Christ in this life to obtain salvation. They simply say there is no other way to heaven except through the work of Christ; they do not say one has to know about that work in order to benefit from the work. Furthermore, Romans 10:9 could be summarized as saying, 'If anyone receives Christ, then he will be saved,' but this proposition cannot, according to the rules of logic, be converted to read, 'If anyone does not receive Christ, then he is lost.' Again, the statement 'All who receive Christ will be saved' is not

<sup>14</sup> Earl Radmacher, 'Can Man Be Saved by Light of Nature?', on a cassette by Campus Crusade for Christ International, San Bernadino, CA.

<sup>15</sup> See Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981). It should be noted that Richardson says that explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation (p. 61).

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Ramm, 'Will All Men Be Finally Saved?' *Eternity*, August 1964, 25.

synonymous with 'All who do not receive Christ will be lost.'<sup>18</sup> The argument, 'If you accept Christ then you will be saved. You did not accept Christ. Therefore, you are lost' is fallacious.<sup>19</sup> There is one sure way of salvation and that is to accept Christ. But these verses do not logically rule out other ways that Christ may save. The most that can be said from the biblical data is: 'All who accept Christ will be saved', and 'Some who do not receive Christ will be lost.' Those who hear and reject the message are lost, but those who have not heard the message might come to the Father through the work of the Son, about whom they have never heard, just as those who hear and accept the message are saved through the Son even though they may not know much about the atonement. C.J. Ellicott says, 'The heathen who obtain salvation are saved by the name of the Lord whom they have never heard.'<sup>20</sup>

Those who maintain that hearing the message of Christ and then 'calling upon the name of the Lord' are both necessary conditions for salvation cite verses like Acts 4:12 and Romans 10:13 for support. It is suggested that 'calling upon the name of the Lord' means believing in Jesus. In the Bible calling upon the *name* of God has not so much to do with using a specific title of God as it does with placing yourself at God's mercy. In Scripture, the word 'name' usually refers to a person's character rather than to a title identifying an individual.<sup>21</sup> To 'call upon the name of the Lord' refers to asking God for forgiveness and help.

In Romans 10:13 Paul quotes Joel 2:32; 'Whoever calls upon the name of the LORD will be saved.' He proceeds to mention the preaching of the gospel and the fact that some have not believed it. Then Paul raises the question of those who have not heard the gospel, '... all have not heard have they? They surely have: their voice has gone out into all the earth and their words to the end of the world' (v. 18). This is a difficult passage and several questions need to be asked. First, what does Paul mean by 'gospel'? Does he mean the proclamation of the work of Christ? Probably not, for he declares that this gospel is not new but was taught in the Old Testament (Rom. 3:21; 4:1-25; 10:5-8). Furthermore, in Galatians 3:6 Paul says the gospel was preached to Abraham. This certainly was not explicit knowledge of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus; it was simply the promise that God would do something great for the

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<sup>18</sup> This would be to commit the fallacy of 'converting an "A" proposition'.

<sup>19</sup> This would commit the fallacy of 'denying the antecedent'.

<sup>20</sup> C.J. Ellicott, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, VII (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 22.

<sup>21</sup> Collin Brown, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, II (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 57.

Gentiles through Abraham. Whatever Paul meant by the term 'gospel' he certainly had a broader definition than many commentators assign to it.

Second, the statement 'call upon the name of the Lord' is defined by Murray as 'worship by supplication'.<sup>22</sup> To make a request of God implies a degree of trust and confidence in God. How much trust and confidence are required to obtain the salvation spoken of by Joel? Paul does not give an answer to this question. It is clear from Romans 10:9 that whoever confesses Jesus as Lord and believes in his heart that God raised him from the dead will be saved. It is not clear that whoever does not fulfill these conditions is lost. Paul simply does not specify how much a person has to know to be saved.

The final argument used in support of saying the unevangelized are lost was the necessity of foreign missions. If they can be saved without knowledge of Christ, it was urged, then why bother to evangelize them. It is asserted that missionary fervour would slack off unless the unevangelized are without hope. This may be correct, but it is irrelevant to the truth or falsity of the position under discussion.<sup>23</sup> Just because some people feel it a crucial motivating factor to believe all the unevangelized are lost does not make it true that they are lost. Besides, there may be good reasons to continue missionary activity even if there is hope for the unevangelized without it (which will be discussed below).

### *God will send the message*

Before leaving the discussion of the perspective that the unevangelized are lost, a modification of this view should be mentioned since it seeks to give hope for the unevangelized while maintaining that explicit knowledge of Christ and acceptance of that knowledge is necessary before death. Those who hold this view suggest that God will move heaven and earth to get the message of Christ to the person who responds positively to the light of general revelation. This position is supported by: Augustine<sup>24</sup>; Arminius; J.O. Buswell; Earl Radmacher; and Robertson McQuilkin.

Gustafson says: 'The Scriptures teach that men who are conscientious about God's revealed law will be given further light. This light followed will eventually lead to Christ.'<sup>25</sup> God will see to it that the

<sup>22</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 57.

<sup>23</sup> This would be the logical fallacy of 'appealing to consequences'.

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XVIII, 47, Augustine appears to say the unevangelized may be saved apart from hearing about Christ in *Predestination of the Saints*, ch. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Gustafson, *op. cit.*, 7.

gospel gets to those who are searching for the truth. But once they hear the message they must accept it in order to be saved. Those wishing to know God are not saved until they hear and believe the word of Christ. To those who are sincerely searching, God will send the message of Jesus through one channel or another. God may send a Christian as he did for Cornelius (Acts 10) and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). God may reveal himself to the individual through dreams and visions as he did with Abimelech (Gen. 20) and Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2; 4). Or, as Arminius taught, God may convert some through the inward voice of the Holy Spirit or through the work of angels.<sup>26</sup>

This seems to be a solid position in light of its strong biblical support but it fails on two counts. First, it identifies the 'gospel' with information about the person and work of Christ. This idea was criticized above. Second, those who believe it necessary for God to send the message of Christ in order for a person to become a believer equate the terms 'believer' and 'Christian'. There may be believers who are saved even though they are not yet Christians. This raises some important questions: 'When does a person become a believer?' 'How much does one have to believe in order to be a believer?'; and 'Are believers saved even though they are not Christians?' These questions will be answered in the final section.

### **The unevangelized receive a future chance**

This view holds in common with the preceding position the belief that explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation, but adds the idea that those who have not had an opportunity in this life to hear the message of Christ will be given a chance to accept Jesus after death. This view parts company with those who say all the unevangelized are lost, because those who assert the possibility of a future chance do not make death the decisive barrier of time for people to make a decision of faith. The future chance position has sometimes been called the 'second chance' theory but this is incorrect since most of those advocating a future opportunity to hear and accept the gospel do not allow a second chance for those who have already understood and rejected the word of salvation in this life. John Lange summarizes the future chance view while commenting on the idea that Jesus went and preached to the spirits after his death.

Jesus, as a spirit, appeared to fallen spirits, to some as Conqueror and

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<sup>26</sup> J. Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, I (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), 329ff.

Judge, to others, who still stretched out to Him the hand of faith, as a Saviour . . . the preaching of Christ begun in the realms of departed spirits is continued there . . . so that those who hear on earth did not hear at all, or not in the right way, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, shall hear it there.<sup>27</sup>

Supporters of some form of this view include: Clement of Alexandria; possibly Luther; P.T. Forsyth; Donald Bloesch; Clark Pinnock; and Gabriel Fackre.

As in the other positions discussed so far, both theological and biblical arguments are used to substantiate this view. Theologically, the idea of a future opportunity to hear and accept Christ is reached by articulating some of the implications of God's love and justice. According to God's justice all people will be judged impartially and condemned if they reject the saviour. People will not be condemned for not hearing of Christ. Those condemned to hell are condemned *only* for their rejection of Christ (Jn. 3:17-18, Mk. 16:16). If people will be condemned only for their rejection of the saviour then they will have to be given an opportunity, sometime, to accept or reject him. If God is loving and just, then he will give all people ample opportunity to hear of the forgiveness and redemption which his Son accomplished and make a decision regarding it.

Several biblical passages are cited in support of the future chance theory. The most important text being used today is 1 Peter 3:18-4:6. This passage speaks of Christ preaching to 'spirits now in prison' (3:19) and the gospel being preached to 'those who are dead' (4:6). Pinnock writes,

Peter in his first epistle adds an important clue when he speaks of the gospel being preached to the dead. Though far from exegetically certain, it is held by some interpreters (as reputable as Cranfield and Pannenberg) that death is the occasion when the unevangelized have an opportunity to make a decision about Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup>

It should be noted that this passage in 1 Peter, generally, was not used to support the future chance theory until the nineteenth century. This text was associated with the doctrine of Christ's 'descent into hell' from the early fathers until Augustine.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the doctrine of Christ's descent and preaching to the

<sup>27</sup> John Lange, *The First Epistle General of Peter* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1868), 66-67.

<sup>28</sup> Clark Pinnock, 'Why is Jesus the Only Way?' *Eternity*, December 1976, 34.

<sup>29</sup> For good treatments of this passage and its various interpretations see: Lange, *op. cit.*, and Edward Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

dead was not usually applied by the patristic writers to the unevangelized but to the Old Testament saints or as simply informing the wicked of his triumph over the forces of evil.<sup>30</sup> In the last two centuries, however, the passage in 1 Peter and the doctrine of Christ's descent have been used to argue the future chance position.

Other Scriptural texts used to support this view include: Acts 17:31; 2 Tim. 1:2, 4:8; and 1 Jn. 4:17. These are used to support the idea that the time for making a final decision about the gospel is the 'day of Christ' not the 'day of death'. All will have opportunity to accept or reject the Lord Jesus until he brings in the consummation of all things. John 5:25-29 is also used to support the future chance theory. In this passage Jesus says the day is coming when the *dead* shall hear his voice 'and come forth; those who did the good, to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil to a resurrection of judgment' (v. 29).<sup>31</sup>

John Lawson argues for a future chance based on the distinction between Hades and Gehenna.

It is hard to defend the proposition that saving grace in Christ extends to all men without logically being led to extend the operation of grace beyond the life of man in this world . . . the parable of Dives and Lazarus . . . places the torment of Dives in Hades, the abode of the departed awaiting the resurrection, and not in Gehenna, the place of the finally lost.<sup>32</sup>

Lawson suggests that most people will receive an opportunity to hear of Christ including church attenders and those who were psychologically conditioned so as to not be able to make a responsible decision due to a 'blind spot' caused by a negative experience in early life. 'They are the multitudes of kindly, decent folk, who have sincerely intended to stand for the right, yet who by preoccupation, confusion, or apathy have failed effectually so to do.'<sup>33</sup> This might be thought to imply universalism but Lange cautions against this since the passages referring to a future chance say nothing of how many, or, if any, actually accept the salvation offered. In fact he argues that if the future chance theory

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<sup>30</sup> See J. Hastings ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, IV (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 654ff; J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: David McKay co., 1972), 378ff.

<sup>31</sup> Other verses used to support this position are: Mt. 8:11; Lk. 13:28-30; Mt. 12:40; Heb. 9:15; Rom. 10:7; Rev. 21:25.

<sup>32</sup> John Lawson, *Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury Press, 1980), 216, 262.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 216, 263.

had been given more prominence in the church than universalism would not be so strong today.<sup>34</sup>

Some writers modify the future chance theory by suggesting that instead of a full-fledged future chance, the unevangelized will be judged by an omniscient God who knows what they would have decided concerning Christ had they heard.<sup>35</sup> God will give everyone a 'future chance' in that he knows what they would have decided if they would have had the opportunity to hear of Christ in this life. This idea is plausible, however, only if a certain view of God's omniscience is accepted. This concept implies that God is able to know all the potential and actual choices free personal beings could and would make. Although this is a popular notion of God's omniscience it is being hotly debated in current evangelical theology.<sup>36</sup>

The concept of God giving the unevangelized a future opportunity to accept or reject Christ is on solid ground theologically but weak biblically. It seems correct to say that people will be condemned only for rejecting Jesus Christ. This would make it essential that they be given an opportunity to do so either in this life or the next. On biblical grounds it is quite uncertain whether 1 Peter or the doctrine of Christ's descent have anything to do with a future opportunity to hear the gospel. Commentators disagree as to the meaning of each individual word of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6. The passage is a difficult one so caution should be used when placing a lot of theological weight upon it.

### The unevangelized are saved/lost

This position maintains that the unevangelized are saved or lost depending on their response to the light they have. If they respond positively, in faith, they will be saved; if negatively, they will be lost. 'Saving faith' (faith required to obtain salvation) does not necessitate knowledge of Christ in this life. God's gracious activity is wider than the arena of special revelation. God will accept into his kingdom those who repent and trust him even if they know nothing of Jesus. The evangelized (those who have heard of Christ) are divided into two groups, saved and lost, depending

<sup>34</sup> Lange, *op. cit.*, 67, 71.

<sup>35</sup> Chapter by Donald Lake in Clark Pinnock ed., *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 43. Also Rene Pache, *The Future Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), 273.

<sup>36</sup> cf. Nash, *op. cit.*; Peter Bertocci, *The Person God Is* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970); Alvin Plantinga, *God Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Stephen Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

upon a faith response. The unevangelized also are saved or lost depending upon the response they make to the limited revelation of God they have.<sup>37</sup> 'Believers' are defined as those unevangelized who in faith have thrown themselves on the mercy of God, but do not know of Christ. Christians are defined as believers who in faith have thrown themselves on the mercy of God as specifically revealed in Jesus Christ. Upholders of this view include: Justin Martyr; William Booth; G.T. Shedd; A.H. Strong; G. Campbell Morgan; E.J. Carnell; William Dyrness; and C.S. Lewis.<sup>38</sup> The Roman Catholics since Vatican II have reversed their older position that the unevangelized need to hear about Christ for salvation. They no longer hold to: 'No salvation outside the church.' They now say,

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet, sincerely seek God, and moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor, does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace.<sup>39</sup>

The arguments used in support of this view are biblical, theological, and historical.

### *Biblical*

In the criticisms of the position which says the unevangelized are lost it was argued that to 'call upon the name of the Lord' did not imply knowledge of Jesus but only requesting mercy from God. It was also argued there that general revelation reveals enough about God to enable us to make a faith response to God since it reveals God's power and divinity (Rom. 1:20), goodness (Acts 14:20), and glory (Ps. 19:1). Furthermore, it was pointed out that the Old Testament both declares (Dt. 2:5ff; Amos 9:7) and gives examples (e.g., Melchizedek, Balaam, and Jethro) of God's gracious activity outside the nation of Israel. It is now time to

<sup>37</sup> See Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 530-531, for a similar treatment.

<sup>38</sup> In *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 65, C.S. Lewis takes a somewhat agnostic stance on the issue but in the *Last Battle* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 161-166, he takes a more optimistic position towards the unevangelized.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: American Press, 1966), 35.

focus in on the meaning of Peter's statement, 'God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him' (Acts 10:34-35).

Peter's comment arises in the context of the early Jewish disciples' failure to comprehend the universal application of the work of Christ. God wished to spread the news of the work of Jesus beyond the Jewish community to the Gentiles so God sent a vision to both Cornelius, a Gentile who 'feared God' (Acts 10:2) but was not a full-fledged proselyte (v. 28), and to Peter. Cornelius then sent for Peter and explained what God had said to him. Up to that moment Peter had not understood the vision God had given him. But at that moment he understood that Gentiles were accepted by God. At first glance this passage may seem to support the view that knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation and God will send someone with the message, but upon closer inspection it will be seen that this passage does not say this.

The key lies in Peter's meaning to the expression 'fear God and work righteousness'. This certainly cannot refer to the complete observance of the Mosaic covenant since Peter is addressing the household of an uncircumcised Gentile (11:3). Peter is here broadening the scope of those who fear God. It is not only those who through faith keep the commandments of the Old Testament, but also those who trust and obey God to the extent of the revelation they have. F.F. Bruce comments that the term 'righteousness' is used here in its widest possible sense.<sup>40</sup> It is not the righteousness derived from God's revelation at Sinai which Peter has in mind, but the righteousness of faith and obedience to God's general revelation. This right standing before God was granted by his grace, 'objectively bestowed for the merits of Christ, and subjectively appropriated by the faith which, in the Providence of God, was possible under the conditions of the case.'<sup>41</sup> Cornelius, even with limited knowledge of God and though he had little knowledge of the life of Jesus (10:38), was acceptable as a believer to God. Peter then explained the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus to the Gentile household. Cornelius was already a saved believer before Peter arrived but he was now a Christian believer.

The fear and righteousness which Cornelius possessed did not come about entirely on his own initiative, rather, these effects are signs of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the unevangelized. God is at work whenever a person is searching for him, helping them to understand whatever revelation they have, convict them of sin,

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<sup>40</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 225.

<sup>41</sup> Ellicot, *op. cit.*, 69.

and come to faith in the true God. In commenting on God's work with Cornelius Matthew Henry wrote,

He never did, nor ever will, reject or refuse an honest Gentile, who, though he has not the privileges and advantages that the Jews have, yet, like Cornelius, fears God, and worships him, and works righteousness, that is, is just and charitable towards all men, who lives up to the light he has, both in a sincere devotion and in a regular conversation.<sup>42</sup>

### *Theological*

There are two main theological arguments used to support the idea that the unevangelized are saved or lost depending upon their faith response to the revelation they have. The first (discussed above) is that the 'gospel' does not always refer to the message about Jesus but has a broader meaning which may include even general revelation (see the discussion above on Rom. 10:18). The second main argument is that saving faith means to trust in the true God and does not necessarily involve explicit knowledge of Jesus. Now it is necessary to define faith and discuss the relationship between knowledge and saving faith.

Saving faith certainly involves knowledge but how much and of what specific content? Is cognitive information the most important element in saving faith or is a person's attitude the decisive factor? In answer to these questions H.P. Hook cites Hebrews 11:6: 'Without faith it is impossible to please God; the one who comes to God must believe that God exists and that he will reward those who diligently seek him'; then he comments,

As foundational as these facts are (belief in the existence of God and that God will fulfill his part of the relationship), they are insufficient knowledge for saving faith; according to Paul's definition of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, further facts are added to the knowledge aspect of faith. First, one must know the fact that the death of Christ was for sins according to the Scriptures; second, that He was buried; and, third, that He arose from the dead.<sup>43</sup>

The problem with Hook's argument is that Paul does not say one has to know these facts to be saved, only that he had proclaimed this message to the Corinthians. In response to the claim that one must have explicit knowledge of Christ to be saved, J.N.D. Anderson says,

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<sup>42</sup> Matthew Henry, *Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, VI (New York: Revell).

<sup>43</sup> H. Phillip Hook, 'A Biblical Definition of Saving Faith', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June 1964, 135-136.

Does ignorance disqualify for grace? If so, where in Scripture do we have the exact amount of knowledge required set out? For *assurance*, no doubt, knowledge is required, but for grace it is not so much knowledge as a right attitude towards God that matters.<sup>44</sup>

If knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation then how do we explain the salvation of the Old Testament believers whose knowledge was quite limited concerning the Messiah, but, who yet were justified by faith in God's word? The Old Testament believers did not know of Christ's death and resurrection, yet, they experienced the saving hand of God. Of course, even their salvation ultimately depended on the atonement of Jesus. But the point is that when an Israelite acknowledged his sin, repented, and turned to God for help, this was viewed as genuine faith by God. The common element between the Old Testament believers was trust in God; though the specific occasions of trust varied. Some trusted God to give them a son in old age (Abraham), others that God would be with them in battle (Gideon), and one, that God would help him destroy a temple (Samson). The specific content of their faith was different from one person to the next throughout the Old Testament, the common thread was the object of their faith—God. The Old Testament believers' knowledge was deficient, their assurance often fitful, but their forgiven status identical with ours.<sup>45</sup>

Paul demonstrates this same point in Romans 4. He claims that the justification by faith which he is preaching, is taught in the Old Testament. To substantiate this claim, he points to Abraham who was justified because he believed that God would indeed fulfill his promise to grant Abraham a son. This is an astonishing action by God: giving someone salvation because they believe they will have a son in old age! (Gen. 15:6). Paul then says David was saved by faith (Rom. 4:6–8). Paul concludes his argument by saying the benefits of justification were not just for Abraham, but 'for our sakes too, we shall be accounted righteous, as those who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead' (v. 24). Righteousness is not reckoned to us because we believe a different content than Abraham, but because the object of our faith (God) and the action of our faith (trust) are identical. We believe in the same God even though Abraham identified him as the God who kept his word and we identify him as the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Many commentators make a serious error in interpreting verse 24 when they claim we must believe in the resurrection of Jesus. But as Godet points out, Paul does not say,

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*, 104.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

‘when we believe in the resurrection of Jesus,’ but, ‘when we believe in *God who raised Jesus*’ (italics his).<sup>46</sup> Paul says we must believe in the same God as Abraham; he does not say we must know about the resurrection. We may believe in the same God even though he may be known by different people through assorted identifying characteristics: to Abraham as the God who gives a son in old age; to the evangelized as the God who raised Jesus; to the unevangelized as the God who is angry with them (Rom. 1:18–20), or as the God who created and providentially cares for them (Acts 14:17).

Faith is to be defined as the process of moving from some truths about God’s character to a degree of trust in the person of God which results in obedience to the will of God. This process of moving from truth to trust to obedience is a common experience of our everyday lives. We all go through this process daily in our interpersonal relationships. According to this definition of faith, some cognitive information must be present for faith to take place. Yet, the Scriptures do not set out the precise amount of information which must be present for saving faith to come about. Machen says: ‘No one knows how little a person can believe and still be saved.’<sup>47</sup> Millard Erickson makes a similar point when he says, ‘a perfectly developed theology is not essential for salvation.’<sup>48</sup> A.H. Strong wrote,

The patriarchs, though they had not knowledge of a personal Christ, were saved by believing in God so far as God had revealed himself to them; and whoever among the heathen are saved, must in like manner be saved by casting themselves as helpless sinners upon God’s plan of mercy, dimly shadowed forth in nature and providence. But such faith, even among the patriarchs and heathen, is implicitly a faith in Christ, and would become explicit and conscious trust and submission, whenever Christ were made known to them.<sup>49</sup>

Knowing about and having faith in the God who raised Jesus is one sure way of appropriating salvation but it is not the only way. We must be careful not to place constraints on God’s mercy and activity where He does not.

### *Historical*

If it is true that it is possible for the unevangelized to be saved

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<sup>46</sup> F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883), 183–184.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in *Eternity*, December 1976, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Millard Erickson, *Salvation* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1978), 46–47.

<sup>49</sup> A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1947), 842.

apart from hearing the message about Christ then we would expect to find examples of such people in history. A good number of theologians and missionaries throughout the history of the church have written about finding 'heathen' who held to a belief in the true God, who were searching for more information about God, or desired God's forgiveness. Most of these accounts are beyond the scope of this study but I will mention some of the findings of missionary anthropologist Don Richardson.<sup>50</sup> Richardson speaks of 'redemptive analogies' in every culture which serve to set the stage for the message of Christ. These analogies (stories or customs) are evidences of God's gracious activity among peoples previously thought to be wholly ignorant of the true God. He documents cases of what he calls the 'Melchizedek factor'; cases of God working through general revelation to reach humanity. He places these cases into three categories: (1). Peoples of the vague God—those who know something of the true God and desire to serve him but are hampered by lack of knowledge—like the Athenian, Inca, Santal, and Gedeo peoples; (2). Peoples of the lost book—those who are looking for special revelation (a book) which was lost to them—like the Karen, Kachin, Lahu, and Maga peoples; (3). Peoples with strange customs—those with practices which graphically portray redemption and forgiveness—like the Sawi, Dyak, and Asmat peoples. Space does not permit giving a detailed account of Richardson's documentation but his book is a powerful study of God's work outside the missionary enterprise. My point is simply this: God has not been sitting idly by waiting for missionaries to take special revelation to the unevangelized so they could be saved. God has been very active in bringing salvation to the peoples of the world who have never heard of Christ.

It should be noted that these people would not know they were saved or forgiven unless God explicitly told them so. But a person does not have to know the giver of salvation or how it was procured in order to benefit from the mercy of God. Those who are already believers in God will still benefit from hearing the message of Christ. They will gain 'a fuller knowledge of the Trust, and therefore, a clearer faith, a fuller justification, and a higher blessedness, but . . . they are already accepted with God.'<sup>51</sup>

The usual criticisms of the view which claims the unevangelized are saved or lost depending on the faith response they make to the revelation they have come from those who say the unevangelized are lost without knowledge of Christ. First, some

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<sup>50</sup> Richardson, *op. cit.*

<sup>51</sup> Ellicot, *op. cit.*, 69.

assert that this final view amounts to a works salvation. But it does not because it involves both a faith response and God's gracious mercy. Their salvation is based on grace and faith just as with those who know Christ.<sup>52</sup> Second, some criticise this position because it gives too much credit to general revelation and makes man the one who figures salvation out. But this is incorrect since all that has been argued is that the Scriptures teach that we can know enough about the true God through the created order to know we are accountable to God. We still would not know we were forgiven unless God told us by special revelation. Third, it is asserted that verses like 1 John 5:12 rule out any possibility of salvation without knowledge of Jesus because, 'He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.' This criticism, however, fails to recognize that all 'believers' have Christ implicitly, whether they were Old Testament or unevangelized people of faith. Finally, it is common to say that this perspective makes missionary activity insignificant. This idea has already been discussed above but there are at least three good reasons to continue evangelizing wholeheartedly even if men may be saved apart from evangelization: (1). God commands us to go; (2). Those who are not searching for God need to be challenged to do so; (3). Unevangelized believers need the clearer revelation of God's love, assurance, and will for their lives.

### Conclusion

There is hope for the unevangelized. They are in much the same position as all those who were before Christ in terms of information. God's work among the Old Testament peoples served as a *proto evangelium* (a promise) through which they could be saved by grace if they trusted in God. God's work among the unevangelized is parallel to the *proto evangelium*. If they exercise repentance and genuine faith in their creator they will be saved. Yet this hope does not deter us from our responsibility of spreading the good news of what God has done through his son Jesus Christ. If we should find those who already believe in the true God, we will rejoice in that we will have brought a word of encouragement and further knowledge of the God they worship.

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<sup>52</sup> See: Anderson, *op. cit.*, 101–102; William Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, II (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 706–708; Berkhof, *op. cit.*, 530.