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TOWARD SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF THE UNEVANGELISED

Christopher Little

One of the perplexing problems which faces theologians is the eternal fate of those who have never heard the gospel. Believing that salvation necessitates the knowledge of the gospel, missionaries have laboured and died in foreign lands to bring the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ to them. However, this certainty of the unevangelised being lost has fallen on hard times, even within evangelical circles.

In this article Christopher Little finds no hope of salvation through General Revelation. But he seeks to "solve the problem of the unevangelised" by finding possibilities of Special Revelation being granted to them. Following this article by Little, Keith Ferdinando offers a response.

One of the most difficult theological questions ever considered by the human mind has to be: what happens to those who never have an opportunity to hear about the saving gospel of Jesus Christ? 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?

In approaching this formidable topic, scholars have become trenched in one of three different camps. In very simplistic terms, Mr. Christopher Little has served with three different mission agencies on three different continents. Presently, he is the Director of the International Ministries of World Mission Associates. He has earned a BS from the University of Southern California, an MDiv from Talbot Theological Seminary, a ThM from Fuller Theological Seminary and is now pursuing a PhD at Fuller Theological Seminary.

the *pluralist* believes that most ways, if not all, lead to God; the *inclusivist* affirms that several ways, primarily those among the world religions, lead to God; and the *particularist* contends that there is only one way to God, through personal faith in Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this article will not be to comment on the pros and cons of each these positions,¹ but rather, to add food for thought to this on-going discussion by attempting to construct a well-informed soteriological missiology. To do so, I will endeavor to re-examine the character of general revelation, trace the historical nature of special revelation, and lastly, offer various modalities of special revelation by which God is capable of working redemptively among the unevangelised.

RE-EXAMINING GENERAL REVELATION

General revelation is God's universal communication of Himself through nature, human conscience, and history. Psalm 19:1 and Romans 1:20 establish the fact that God continuously discloses His "glory," "eternal power" and "divine nature" (NASB) through creation to humankind. The question is however, are people, specifically the unevangelised, responding positively to God in this way?

It is doubtful. As Calvin pointed out, the psalmist possessed the *spectacles* of special revelation (Ps. 19:7-14) through which he was able to discern what God was revealing of Himself through "the heavens." In addition, the Apostle Paul leaves very little room for debate on the subject. According to him, "men," that is, collective humanity, continually "suppress the truth" about God which is "understood through what has been made" and this results in being "without excuse" before God (Rom. 1:18, 20).

¹ For those interested in an evaluation of these positions plus the presentation of a fourth, the evangelist paradigm, see Charles Van Engen, "The Uniqueness of Christ in Mission Theology" in *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions*, Edward Rommen & Harold Netlands, eds. (Baker, 1995), 183-217.

When it comes to human conscience, it is commonly believed that Romans 2:14-16 provides the basis for Gentiles potentially and very innately cultivating a relationship with God through “the Law written in their hearts.” But there are two serious problems with this view: first, the idea that individuals come to know God through the works of the Law is contrary to biblical thought (cf., Rom. 3:20); and second, the witness of the Gentile conscience in this passage takes place not in the course of this life but in the final judgement (Rom. 2:16).

But then, who are these “doers of the Law”? (v. 13). There are only two other options: either they are hypothetical Gentiles or Gentile Christians. While the correct view is open to debate,² the only conclusive thing that can be said is that this passage makes no reference to Gentiles, apart from Christ, seeking and obeying God through their consciences. If one wants to make a case for that, then an appeal to Romans 1:19 must be made where it says, “that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.” A. T. Robertson translates the phrase “evident within them” as “in their hearts and consciences.”³ Yet this still does not prove productive since, as the context shows, the same repulsion of divine truth that takes place in relation to nature also occurs within the context of human conscience.

Some find this difficult to swallow and turn to the illumination of the *Logos* for support of a divine, inner enlightenment of all individuals. For example, John Sanders states, “Jesus is the light that came into the world and enlightens every person (John 1:9). Not all respond positively to this light – it is not irresistible – but every person experiences the illumination of the *Logos* to one

² Douglas Moo argues for the former interpretation, “Romans 2: Saved Apart from the Gospel?” in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, William Crockett and James Sigountos, eds. (Baker, 1993:142-145), but C. E. B. Cranfield reasons very convincingly for the latter in *The International Critical Commentary. The Epistle to the Romans* (T. & T. Clark, 1980), Vol. 1, 156-161.

³ *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Baker, 1931), Vol. 4, 328.

degree or another.”⁴ But as some respected commentators have pointed out,⁵ the activity of the *Logos* here is inseparably connected to the Incarnation event in John’s prologue. While commenting on the light which “enlightens [Gr. *photizei*] every man”, D. A. Carson provides some lexical information which enables one to correctly interpret the passage:

(1) The verb *photizei* may mean ‘to illuminate (inwardly)’, i.e. ‘to give knowledge’. Though lexically secondary, this meaning is common . . . in the New Testament (e.g. Eph. 1:18). . . . (2) The verb *photizei* may have its primary lexical meaning ‘to shed light upon’, i.e. ‘to make visible’, ‘to bring to light’. Inner illumination is then not in view (whether of general revelation or of the special light that attends salvation). What is at stake, rather, is the objective revelation, the ‘light’, that comes into the world with the incarnation of the Word, the invasion of the ‘true light’. It shines on every man, and divides the race: those who hate the light respond as the world does (1:10); they flee lest their deeds should be exposed by this light (3:19-21). But some receive this revelation (1:12-13), and thereby testify that their deeds have been done through God (3:21).⁶

The book of Acts has much to say on God’s self-disclosure in the course of human history. Concerning the Apostles’ experience at Lystra, Clark Pinnock has written: “To the people of Lystra he [Luke] quotes Paul as saying that ‘He [God] did not leave himself without witness’ (Acts 14:17). Apparently these people possessed truth from God in the context of their religion and culture, and Luke does not hesitate to acknowledge it.”⁷ Yet this conclusion is unwarranted simply because it cannot be supported by the text. The

⁴ *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelised* (InterVarsity Press, 1992), 217.

⁵ See William Hendrickson, *New Testament Commentary – The Gospel of John* (Baker, 1988:77-79), and D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1991), 118-125.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁷ “The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions” in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, Mark Noll & David Well, eds. (Eerdmans, 1988), 158.

people of Lystra, instead of heeding God's "witness" in the form of graciously providing "rains from heaven and fruitful seasons," became idol-worshippers and tried to offer sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas in response to the healing of a crippled man (vv. 11-13). Even after they attempted to rectify the situation they had a hard time restraining "the crowds from offering sacrifice to them" (v. 18).

Another important Acts passage is the Areopagus discourse (17:22-31). Don Richardson, well-known for his redemptive analogies, believes that the alter to the "UNKNOWN GOD" represented the true God which the Athenians worshipped, but in ignorance.⁸ Others take exception to this view.⁹ For example, George Ladd writes, "In their religious zeal, the Athenians did not wish to omit from worship any deity with whom they might not be acquainted. Paul states that there was indeed one whom they did not know, and this one he declared to them."¹⁰ In attempting to understand the meaning of this passage, it might be helpful to point out that in v. 23 both the word "UNKNOWN" and the word "ignorance" come from the same Greek root word. Hence, there is evidently a play on words here. The substantive "ignorance" comes from a verb meaning "to be ignorant, not to know." It occurs in the present active participial form and therefore signifies that, according to Paul, the Athenians were continually worshipping without knowledge, that is, in ignorance. Thus, if we take the plain sense of Paul's words, what he is doing is informing the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who prided themselves on their ability to ascertain true knowledge, that this "UNKNOWN GOD" is unknown to them precisely because their worship of Him is being

⁸ *Eternity In Their Hearts Revised* (Regal Books, 1986), 21-22.

⁹ The fundamental problem with Richardson's position and his views on the efficacy of general revelation have been rightly criticized by Bruce Demarest and Richard Harpel, "Don Richardson's 'Redemptive Analogies' and the Biblical Idea of Revelation" in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 146(583), and by Arthur Glasser, "Old Testament Contextualization: Revelation and Its Environment" in *The WORD Among Us*, Dean Gilliland, ed. (Word Books, 1989), 38.

¹⁰ *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Moody Press, 1962), 1157.

done without knowledge or in ignorance of Him. Obviously, one cannot truly worship God unless He first be known (cf., Jn. 4:23).

There are two other important statements in this discourse worthy of note. First, the phrase “if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him” (v. 27), is sometimes taken to mean that individuals and/or communities have actually found God on their own. But it must be pointed out that the two verbs “grobe” and “find” are in the optative mood of the Greek language, which is one step farther removed from reality than the subjunctive. God revealed Himself through creation and history so that individuals would “grobe for” and “find Him,” but there is no guarantee that they would since the mood implies that it is only a possibility, not an actuality. And as this passage shows, the Athenians disregarded this heavenly message and turned away from the true God and toward worshipping idols. Second, the phrase “having overlooked the times of ignorance” (v. 30), likewise needs clarification (cf. Acts 14:16). Does it indicate that God did not hold culpable the Gentile nations until the coming of Christ? As John Piper demonstrates, it appears not:

The ‘times of ignorance’ in Paul’s sermon correspond to the ages in which the ‘mystery of Christ has been kept secret’ (Romans 16:25; Colossians 1:26; Ephesians 3:5). . . . God’s overlooking the ‘times of ignorance’ does not mean that he ignores sins so as not to punish them. This would contradict Romans 1:18 . . . and Romans 2:12 But ‘now’ –a key word in the turning of God’s historic work of redemption–something new has happened. The Son of God has appeared. . . . This turn in redemptive history is for the glory of Christ. Its aim is to put Him at the center of all God’s saving work.¹¹

In the final analysis, the idea that general revelation, whatever that information might be, provides hope for the unevangelised encountering salvation before God is unfounded, since humanity continuously responds negatively which results in condemnation. This may sound a bit unfair on God’s part because why should we

¹¹ *Let The Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Baker, 1995), 136, 140.

be held guilty for something which we never asked for in the first place? The following illustration may help. Suppose a wood shop teacher offers a hammer to one of his or her students in order to assist in a class project. If the student refuses to accept the hammer and chooses to work with his or her own hands instead, then the teacher should not be held guilty for a failing grade given to the student due to the poor quality of work. Similarly, when God offers knowledge of Himself through general revelation, He should not be considered unjust when humankind rejects it. For the student to blame his or her shop instructor for the mess he or she has made as a result of rejecting the hammer makes about as much sense as humankind accusing God for the inexcusable state it finds itself in as a result of rejecting His goodness.

TRACING SPECIAL REVELATION

At this point it is imperative to remember that "God has shut up all in disobedience that He may show mercy to all" (Rom. 11:32). One way in which He shows mercy to all is by providing special revelation. Special revelation is God's communication of Himself at specific times in specific ways with specific truths in order to reconcile specific individuals and/or communities with Himself. I would like to now discuss some of the more important events and individuals surrounding the disclosure of special revelation.

Because of God's unfailing love, immediately after the fall He sought to restore fellowship between Himself and our first parents through the *protoevangelium*. This first gospel states that the woman's seed shall bruise the head of the serpent's seed, while the serpent's seed shall bruise the heel of the woman's seed (Gen. 3:15). But how much of this prophecy did Adam and Eve comprehend? More than meets the eye. The word "bruise" can also carry the connotation of "to crush or strike at" and the word "seed" can signify "offspring." When they named their first son "Cain" which means "spear", it seems pretty clear that they believed he would be the one to strike at the head of the serpent. When they named their second son "Abel" which denotes "futility", it likely demonstrates that they were confused about the

significance of his birth since their first son already met the requirement. Although we know that they were ultimately wrong about their understanding of the "seed" which is Christ Himself (cf., Gal. 3:16; Heb. 2:14; 1 Jn. 3:8), all that needs to be emphasized here is that there was a definite faith response to special revelation manifested in their actions:

Continuing down the line of redemptive history, it is uncertain whether or not Lamech in naming his son "Noah" meaning "rest", actually believed along with his contemporaries that he would fulfill the prophecy concerning the seed of the woman. However, the connection made between Noah and his ancestors through the godly line of Seth provides support for the opinion that Noah heard about the special revelation passed on by Adam and Eve through oral tradition, believed it, and like Enosh and Enoch, developed a relationship with God (see the genealogy in Gen. 5).

After the flood, God again gave special revelation to humanity in the form of the Noachic covenant (Gen. 9:1-17). There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that the flood tradition was widely known in numerous ancient societies.¹² How much of the information contained in the Noachic covenant was accurately transmitted to these societies, through which they could have established a relationship with God, is debatable. On the one hand, the Tower of Babel incident casts much doubt on the idea, but on the other hand, the life of one particular individual argues for a more likely possibility.

That individual is Abraham, a Chaldean. Why did God choose him among all the people of the earth to be at the centre of His next redemptive stage? I propose that He did so because of Abraham's positive response to the special revelatory truth contained in the Noachic covenant. The fact that Abraham had open access to this information is based upon his family lineage (cf., Gen. 11:10-26). He could have easily heard the message of the Noachic covenant, either directly or indirectly from Shem and others (according to one's view on genealogical gaps), and incorporated it into his life

¹² For example, see Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Zondervan, 1982), 82.

by following its precepts thereby manifesting his faith (cf., Jam. 2:22). As Roland Harrison puts it: "the deliberate choice of God by each successive generation of patriarchs represents an extremely ancient religious concept that is thoroughly consistent with the Biblical tradition. . . . It was to such a deity that the clan members, following the lead of the patriarchal head, gave supreme if perhaps not always complete devotion."¹³

Yet, for this perspective to be valid it must be reconciled first with the fact that Abraham's family "served other gods" (Jos. 24:2), and second, with God's declaration of Abraham's justification only after he sojourned in the promised land (Gen. 15:6). Concerning the first point, the verse does not say that Abraham himself served other gods, only his "fathers." In addition, Leon Wood states: "it may be that Terah earlier in life had given allegiance to . . . other deities as well as Yahweh, but later changed. He may never have arisen to Abraham's monotheistic belief, but at least he had come to a place where he had introduced his son to the worship of Yahweh and been willing to respond to Abraham's urging to leave Ur when Yahweh called."¹⁴ Hence, I deduce that because Terah left Ur with Abraham to make the long journey to Canaan, he and other members of Abraham's family, at least Nahor and Lot, were converted to Yahweh through Abraham's testimony (cf., Gen. 31:53; 2 Pe. 2:7). This conclusion is further substantiated by Genesis 11:31 which states that "Terah took Abram his son," thus indicating that Terah himself led the expedition to Canaan, but because of health problems and old age, was only able to make it as far as Haran.

Secondly, on the question of just when Abraham came to faith in God, Walter Kaiser Jr. makes the following comment on Genesis 15:6:

We will answer that it was not the first he believed, but it is the first time that the Scriptures expressly mention his faith. It is appropriate to bring out his faith at this point because of the prominence that the text has now given to what has been there all along (since the ancient

¹³ *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1988), 397.

¹⁴ *A Survey of Israel's History* (Zondervan, 1970), 45-46.

promise made to Eve) – the promise of the ‘seed’ – but is only made explicit by the newly raised problem of the lack of an heir to be the Seed that was promised. Thus, the passage connects the Seed . . . as the object of Abraham’s belief.¹⁵

This indicates that God’s involvement in Abraham’s life depicts a process in which his faith was conceived in Ur and nurtured throughout his life as he faithfully responded to special revelation (cf., Acts 7:2; Gen. 12:1; 12:7; 13:14; 15:1; 17:1; 18:1; 21:12; 22:1).

One of Abraham’s contemporaries, Melchizedek, king of Salem, often comes up in the debate concerning the unevangelised. How is it that both he and Abraham employed the exact same title, “El Elyon” for God (Gen. 14:20, 22)? Is it necessary to assume, as some do, that he must have responded positively to general revelation and come to know God in this way?¹⁶ Gleason Archer points one in the right direction when he states: “Obviously Melchizedek was a true believer, who had remained faithful to the worship of the one true God (just like . . . Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law . . .). The testimony of Noah and his sons had evidently been maintained in other parts of the Middle East besides Ur and Haran.”¹⁷ Hence, Melchizedek appears to have come to faith in God, including no doubt many others, in the same way that Abraham did: through believing and adhering to the special revelatory truth contained in the Noahic covenant.

Although it may be difficult to chronologically place the life of Job within the context of redemptive history, a discussion of this nature would not be complete without mentioning him. The most intriguing thing about the man called Job is that he already had a well-developed theology concerning the Redeemer and the resurrection of the dead before these concepts were fully revealed in the New Testament (Job 19:25-26). The key to understanding how he could have come to hold to such beliefs may lie in the mindset of the author as presented through the words of Elihu, the wisest of

¹⁵ *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Zondervan, 1991), 127.

¹⁶ For this point of view, see Richardson, p. 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

Job's friends (Job 33:13-33). While speaking to Job, he states that God speaks directly to people through dreams (vv. 14-15), visions (vv. 14-15), and angels (vv. 23-24). Two important points in the narrative need to be emphasised. First, after the mediatorial work of an angel is described whereby he reminds "a man what is right for him" (v. 23), the statement comes, "Then he [the individual] will pray to God, and He will accept him, That he may see His face with joy, And He may restore His righteousness to man" (v. 26). The result of this is that the individual is able to say, "I have sinned and perverted what is right, And it is not proper for me. He [God] has redeemed my soul from going to the pit, And my life shall see the light" (vv. 27-28). And second, Elihu asserts, "Behold, God does all these oftentimes with men, To bring back his soul from the pit, That he may be enlightened with the light of life" (vv. 29-30). That "Indeed God speaks once, Or twice, *yet* no one notices it" (v. 14) should not be interpreted that no one ever responds to God in this way, because we have an example in the same passage of an individual who does.

At the very least, what we have here is a phenomenological treatise presented through poetry concerning how God works redemptively "oftentimes" through the modality of a dream, a vision, and/or an angel. Furthermore, the life of Job is offered as a real life example in order to substantiate this position. God speaks to Job not once (38:1-40:1) but twice (40:6-41:34), and Job replies both times (40:3-5; 42:1-6). Nothing in the text indicates that Job found this mode of communication with God either surprising or unusual. The content of God's message, not the medium, is accented. Hence, is the author trying to disclose to us that Job had such experiences with God throughout his life? And is it possible that through these incidents God revealed to Job special revelatory truth whereby he came to believe in his Redeemer and in his resurrection from the dead? Whatever the case may be, the soteriological implications of this passage as it pertains to the state of the unevangelised are astounding, and therefore, worthy of much consideration.

Moving on to the New Testament, another figure that has relevance to our discussion is Cornelius, the Roman centurion. The

key to understanding this God-fearer is to realise that there are two simultaneous and very significant movements occurring in the book of Acts. One is the movement progressively outward on the part of the Church while the other is the movement progressively Godward on the part of individuals and/or communities. These two movements intersect as each is brought to fulfillment throughout the narrative.

The Apostle Peter's encounter with Cornelius plainly illustrates this. Through the vision on the roof of Simon's house (Acts 10:9-16), Peter is brought to a paradigmatic shift in his theology which leads to a change in his missiological practice. Then, as a result of Peter's testimony about his experience to the church in Jerusalem, Gentiles were welcomed into the Church since "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads to life*" (11:18). But even before Peter visited the house of a Gentile, Cornelius was already moving toward God. This can hardly be disputed because before God ever sent Peter, he dispatched an angel to converse with Cornelius in response to his almsgiving and prayers (10:3-6). Does this mean that Cornelius was saved before Peter arrived and the Holy Spirit fell? Apparently not because the angel informed Cornelius that Peter "shall speak words by which" he would be saved (11:14). It almost goes without saying, but all involved in missions today should be looking for the "Cornelius" of God," in order to be as effective as possible in their particular contexts of ministry.

Each of these events shows how God has chosen throughout redemptive history to deal with individuals and/or communities solely on the basis of and response to special revelation, and as such, any well-informed soteriological missiology will necessarily take this into account. After having laid the preceding foundation, I am now prepared to discuss the modalities of special revelation through which God continues to reveal Himself in our world today.

MODALITIES OF SPECIAL REVELATION

Although I have shut the door of salvation regarding general revelation, I now want to prop it wide open in relation to God

working redemptively through the modalities of special revelation among the unevangelised. In reality, there is great hope for the unevangelised because they never have existed, exist, or will exist, without the possibility of finding and knowing God. The Lord of the universe, in His sovereignty and goodness, has provided various means by which to initiate, direct, sustain, and fulfill a salvific relationship with Himself on behalf of whosoever will. These means are the modalities, as defined below, which are employed by Him in order to communicate His special revelatory truth.¹⁸

1. Oral Tradition

Rahab heard by word of mouth that the God of the Israelites had delivered them from the Egyptians and the Amorites, and as a consequence, put her trust in the Lord (Jos. 2:10-11). Moreover, Luke states that “devout men, from every nation under heaven” were present on the day of Pentecost when Peter stood up and preached the gospel (Acts 2:5). How much of this message was later handed down to successive generations among the various nations represented is unknown, but the possibility does exist.

2. Miraculous events

On the road to Damascus, the resurrected Lord Jesus appeared to Saul which directly led to his conversion and call (Acts. 9:1-22). This experience combined with the fact that he later received in Arabia the gospel of grace “not from man, but through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12), proves that God is not limited to human agency when communicating the gospel to people. In the annals of church history, we learn that the Emperor Constantine, while praying, saw in the heavens a cross of light bearing the inscription “Conquer by this.” His appropriation of this event contributed to the establishment of Christianity in the Roman empire.

¹⁸ For a similar outline, see Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Victor Books, 1986), :63-65.

3. Dreams

God came to Abimelech in “a dream of the night” and informed him that he was “a dead man” because of taking Abraham’s wife, Sarah (Gen. 20:3). Also, God warned the magi “in a dream not to return to Herod” and thereafter returned home by another route (Mt. 2:12). For an extra-biblical example of this modality, the story is told of “Adiri . . . of Dutch Guiana . . . a heathen and a fetish worshipper. He was convicted of sin and apparently converted through dreams and visions. Heaven and hell were revealed to him. He was sick unto death, and One appeared to him declaring himself to be the Mediator between God and man, and telling him to go to the missionaries for instruction. He was persecuted, but he won his tribe from heathenism and transformed them into a Christian community.”¹⁹

4. Visions

The word of the LORD came to Abram “in a vision” (Gen. 15:1). King Nebuchadnezzar was told by Daniel that God was speaking to him through visions in his mind while on his bed (Dan. 2:28). This is significant in understanding the king’s spiritual progress as he eventually came to faith in Daniel’s God (Dan. 4:34-37). And, as we have already seen, Cornelius saw “in a vision an angel” sent by God (Acts 10:1-6). On the contemporary scene, Dudley Woodberry, after surveying 100 Muslim converts, states that “Over one-half of these believers have had at least one (dream or vision) before or after conversion.”²⁰

5. Angels

An angel proclaimed the gospel to the shepherds at the time of Jesus’ birth (Lk. 2:10-11). At the end of the age, an angel will preach the “eternal gospel” to all the inhabitants of the earth (Rev. 14:6). This is the primary reason why the view which holds that

¹⁹ Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Pickering & Inglis Limited, 1962), Vol. 3, 844.

²⁰ “Dreams of Christ awakening Muslims to newfound faith” in *World Pulse* (March, 1995), 4.

the Church must reach the world with the gospel before Jesus Christ can return is mistaken. The entire world will hear the gospel before Christ returns in fulfillment of Mt. 24:14, but this may very well be accomplished through an angel rather than the Church.

6. Human messengers.

Jonah's preaching led to the repentance of the Ninevites (Jonah 3), John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of the Lord (Mt. 3:1-3), and Stephen paid with his life for boldly proclaiming God's word (Acts 7). This modality is being utilized by God every time a person opens his or her mouth and delivers special revelation to those who are in need of hearing it.

7. The written Word of God

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.

By way of conclusion, several things need to be clarified. First, 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. Just as He employed the modalities of special revelation throughout redemptive history as recorded in Scripture, He is able to utilise them today in view of His desire to call a people unto Himself (Rev. 5:9). As Alister McGrath explains, "God's saving work must never be exclusively restricted to human preaching, as if the Holy Spirit was silent or inactive in God's world, or as if the actualisation of God's saving purposes depended totally on human agencies. The Creator is not dependent on his creation in achieving his purposes."²¹ Hence, we are not as important as we sometimes like to think we are.

²¹ *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Dennis Okholm & Timothy Phillips, eds. (1995), 179.

Some may be wondering, didn't Paul say "how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14)? In answering that question, it is hard to believe that Paul would have agreed with the idea that God has restricted the gospel witness to human preachers alone since he himself was reached and transformed through other means. The context of this passage shows that Paul is simply highlighting our human responsibility as Christ's ambassadors, nothing more and nothing less. In addition, it is important to realise that the various modalities do not work in opposition or contradiction to each other but rather complement and support one another as part of God's grand orchestra of redemption (e.g., the Ethiopian eunuch, the written word of God, and Philip (Acts 8:26-40); Cornelius, the angel, and Peter (Acts 10); etc.). Furthermore, some may wrongly conclude that all this may lead to a dampening of the missionary vision and call. But fundamentally, missions is a matter of obedience and not until the last soul on the face of the earth has had an opportunity to hear about salvation through Jesus Christ, can we rightly abdicate our God-given duty to disciple the nations in fulfillment of the Great Commission. Hence, on the other hand, we are more important than we sometimes like to think we are.

Finally, as far as I can discern there are essentially two criteria which enable an unevangelised person to become a candidate for God's special revelatory truth communicated through the various modalities. Initially there must be a recognition that one's own way of seeking after God, and therefore, one's religion, is beyond repair and leads only to hopelessness (Pr. 14:12; Rom. 6:21; 1 Cor. 1:21). Subsequently, an appeal is needed, in one form or another, for divine assistance in order to encounter spiritual truth (cf., Ps. 145:17-19; Jn. 3:21; Acts 10:35).²² Once a person comes to this turning point in his or her life, I see no reason why God would withhold manifesting Himself to that individual through the various modalities of special revelation. Hence, in heaven when we stand

²² Notice that Luke 13:24 and Romans 3:11 speak of seeking God on one's own terms while Jeremiah 29:13 and Hebrews 11:6 refer to seeking God on His terms, that is, from a broken and a contrite heart (Ps. 51:17).

before God, our praise and worship will only abound all the more as we realise that, in light of His infinite wisdom and grace, no one has ever been lost, either in the past, present, or future, who has sincerely wanted to be saved.²³

What does Acts 4:12 really mean?

In responding to this question, Clark Pinnock writes: “Biblical authority means heeding the positive teaching of the Bible and not reading our ideas into it—however precious our opinions are to us. I am sure that Acts 4:12 is often taken to settle questions it does not address. . . . The first such question is the eschatological fate of unevangelised people, whether they lived before or after Christ. Although this is a question that weighs heavily on our minds, Acts 4:12 does not say anything about it. The text speaks forcefully about the incomparable power of Jesus’ name to save (and heal) those who hear and respond to the good news, but it does not comment on the fate of the heathen” (*Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who have Never Heard*, William Crockett & James Sigountos, eds., Baker, 1993:109-110). Although Pinnock’s emphasis on the healing nature of the gospel is sound, his assertion that this verse has nothing to say with regards to the destiny on the unevangelised, demands a second look.

The observant reader of this verse will notice that there are two phrases of universal proportions. First, “no other name under heaven” (NASB) highlights the vertical heaven-earth dimension and clearly teaches that there is no name, that is, authority or power, except the name of Jesus, by which people on earth can find redemption before God who is in heaven. Second, “that has been given among men” emphasises the horizontal-human dimension and plainly reveals that among humankind there has only been

²³ Obviously I haven’t been able to touch on all the issues related to the unevangelised in this presentation. For those interested in a more detailed discussion, see my book: *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelised* (William Carey Library, 2000).

given one name, the name of Jesus, “by which we must be saved.” One may want to argue about the possibility of Jesus’ name saving people before His Incarnation since it was not specifically known or widely proclaimed, but in our day and age, we have no justification for doing so either in relation to ourselves or the unevangelised.