

AN APOLOGETIC PROBLEM: NO HOPE WHERE THE GOSPEL HAS NOT BEEN HEARD?

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In his book of autobiographical reflections, *The Summing Up*; Somerset Maugham gives a reason for his early alienation from Christianity. He attributed to churchmen he knew the idea that men are condemned to perdition because of the accident of being born out of reach of the true view of the Christian faith. He therefore "ceased to believe in God."¹

Recently I heard a missionary on furlough from his work in Africa address a church group. He declared without qualification that every African who did not hear the gospel would go to hell.

Christian leaders have told me that some of their young people were troubled about the fate of the people who had never had a chance to hear the gospel. Only recently I heard a young people's group refer to a discussion of this problem in an earlier meeting.

The problem is a live one. Do we really believe the facts are as the missionary boldly stated them? Was Somerset Maugham accurately reproducing the teaching of qualified expositors generally? If this is true we have a fearful problem in theodicy upon our hands.

It is the position of this paper that there is relief for those who are honestly troubled about this, and that there is and always has been opportunity for salvation for those out of range of the preaching of the gospel in the Christian era.

I prefer not to begin the argument with the concept of God's sovereign electing grace; though God is, of course, the initiator of salvation through the Holy Spirit, and men are saved only as they are drawn by Him (cf. John 6:44).

We may begin rather by affirming as a basic position that the Scriptures unequivocally teach, according to any fair interpretation, that salvation is by faith in God, and that this salvation is mediated through Jesus Christ. "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Where the message of Christ can be adequately known, there must be explicit faith in Him. He is God incarnate. To believe in Him is to believe in God; to disbelieve in Him is to disbelieve in God. Further, I propose that everywhere and in all ages where men savingly believe in God (and He Himself knows whether a given man does or not), they are implicitly exercising faith in Christ, though they have not heard His name. In the final glory, all present will glorify the Lamb for their redemption. But there must be safeguards against the dangers of unwarranted inferences from this.

At once two primary questions may arise as to what is involved in belief in God: first, what knowledge of God is required for Him to be an object of faith? And second, what is the nature of the faith exercised and how may it be identified? To the first question I think we would have to say as a broad principle that faith's object would be God, but understood only to the extent that He had revealed Himself to the subjectivity of the believer. And faith would be the response which is appropriate to the light given by God. Surely faith must include a certain minimum conception of the object believed in, although this may be, in important respects, an involuntary distortion of the reality that God is. And faith should be the commitment of the whole man, mind, heart and will, to what is perceived. There are two main channels of expression of such a commitment: one, in forms of worship, and another, in the obedient moral behavior which is conditioned by insight into the presumed requirements of the deity, or even deities, conceived in the believer's mind.

It will be recalled that Peter brought the gospel to Cornelius and his household.

It is said that Cornelius, an Italian Gentile, was devout, feared God, gave liberal alms and prayed to God constantly (Acts 10:1f). He responded to the gospel and received the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of Peter's message he said: "I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right (or worketh righteousness) is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34 f). Now it appears that this statement, taken at face value, would indicate not only that such men as Cornelius were acceptable as prospects to receive the gospel and believe in the Christ preached, but also those of corresponding faith and virtue were acceptable who in their day were beyond the geographical reach of the gospel. These, like Abraham, would be accounted righteous by faith, their virtue showing the genuineness of their faith, even though their understanding might need further clarification as Cornelius's did, and probably vastly more. In Cornelius's case, he had a certain light concerning God, to whom he responded well, and, being where he was, God led him on to the light of the fulness of Christ. Others of like earnest spirit may not have been so fortunately situated.

Let us consider the light given in pre-Christian times on the basis of which men could respond. We have revelation given to men such as Noah and Abraham who were justified by faith. And outside of the special line of elect people we have a man like Melchisedek, with whose God Abraham's is identified. Of course special revelation was continued through Israel, and response varied, but it is clear that those who believed were accepted by God. Furthermore, although certain outstanding human agents were made aware by God that His Chosen One was to come, it is exceedingly unlikely that many of the devout in ancient Israel consciously grounded their hope of eternal salvation on faith in the sacrifice of Him who would be Jesus the Lord.

At hand for all men, Paul writes in the first two chapters of Romans, was a revelation of God in nature. External nature testified to God's eternal power and deity, so that in turning from this knowledge to their wickedness men were without excuse (Rom. 1:18-20). Also there was nature's internal witness to God in the conscience (Rom. 2:14 f). In both of these sources Paul finds a witness that is spiritual and moral through and through, and that calls for a faith response that is perforce moral. Even though men turned from this witness, it seems clear that in God's mind it was intended to induce in men a saving response; just as the Mosaic law in its broadest total aspect, though *in itself* unable to save, was an opportunity for the Jews to manifest a saving response through their disposition trustingly to obey God. As far as the non-Christian religions are concerned, I would tend to agree with Nygren,¹ who, interpreting Paul, sees them not as a revelation of God, but of the corruption and falsehood of man. When Paul was commissioned by Christ he was sent to the Gentiles to turn them "from darkness to light,"—presumably from both religious and moral darkness. Even so, I doubt not that some sought by God and seeking Him in the midst of the sinful distortion, may well have responded to some elements of light, and been moved to rise to faith.

In the Old Testament we are told of God's concern for the Gentiles, not only in the covenant promises to Abraham, but also in the call to Jonah to preach to Nineveh. This he did with such telling effect that the people of Nineveh "believed God," and, since God apparently saw their repentance to be genuine, He spared them from the intended judgment. To the words, they "believed God," certainly in the case of some there could well have been added the further words, "and God reckoned it to them for righteousness."

When Paul writes the letter to the Romans he does so with the Gentile and Jewish record in retrospect. He appraises them against the background of light and opportunity which they knew. In general both had come terribly short. The Gentiles had

rejected light, although in the Mars Hill speech to the Greeks, Paul declared that God had to an extent overlooked the ignorance represented by their idolatry until the gospel should come (Acts 17:30). The Jews had not kept God's law. Both Jews and Gentiles were under condemnation.

At this point the question may be asked: how perfect a conformity to what is known to be right is to be expected from men? It is the witness of Scripture that all men sin and come short of God's will, and this is true of Christian believers both before and after their initial salvation. Salvation is all by grace through faith. Thus, if it is said that the Gentiles could not be saved by keeping the light of nature and conscience, certainly it must also be said that the Jews were not saved by keeping the law. Nor is the Christian saved by perfect conformity to the Sermon on the Mount or by living a perfect life of love.

How then is saving faith in God manifested? To this we may reply, by the disposition to do God's will as known. This will express itself at root in two ways, both of which are informed by the spirit of dependence. One, as already indicated, there will be an effort at godly behavior as understood. And two, there will be penitence and dependence upon the deity for mercy and acceptance, together with the offering of whatever expressions of reparation appear called for, because of an honest awareness of failure to conform perfectly to the acknowledged standards. This attitude therefore excludes that pride of heart which is so fatal in the Pharisaic type of mind.

I am convinced that these factors lie back of Paul's elliptical expression of the conditions of salvation in Romans 2:6-10. God, he writes,

will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; . . . glory and honor and peace to every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.

On a purely verbal basis this seems to contradict everything Paul says about salvation being of faith, not works, though we may, indeed, note the word "give" in connection with the bestowal of eternal life. One does not have to go to the book of James to find verbal variance with Paul's insistence on faith to save. But how do we explain this language? In the light of the whole argument of Romans it is evident that Paul is speaking of works of faith. For Paul, too, apparently, faith which does not produce works is dead. Faith will 'do good.'

But no one is able to conform to God's goodness absolutely. And I am persuaded that Paul speaks both absolutely and relatively on the subject of man's doing in these first three chapters of Romans. Absolutely, all have sinned, none does good, and therefore all are guilty and under condemnation. This is Paul's central argument. But relatively there are some who have responded well to God. I think Paul contemplates a certain kind of Jew who in the apostle's words, does good, and an exceptional Gentile who does the same. Thus, he says of such a Gentile in contrast to a Jewish law-breaker: "Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep (or fill) the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law" (Rom. 2:27). The value in such well-doing by Jew or Gentile lies in its evidencing a faith that may be reckoned for righteousness (cf. v. 26). Thus far on the situation up to the coming of Christ.

When we consider the Christian era, it is evident at once that where Christ is adequately presented and knowable in God's sight, men must believe in Him with mind and heart to be saved. Their understanding may be quite rudimentary at their first faith, but it must be genuine faith in Jesus Christ the Lord.

When, however, men are in an area where the Christian witness has not reached

them through no fault of their own, they are in a situation equivalent to theirs who lived before the advent of Christ. The same principles would apply to both.

Let us take a reported specific example. About two generations ago there was a noted Japanese Christian evangelist, a convert from Buddhism, named Paul Kanomari. He told of the devotion of his mother who died without ever having heard of Jesus Christ. Her religious piety was deep and genuine. Mr. Kanomari said that she used to rise earlier in the morning than she otherwise needed to do, and for a long time she would pour out her heart to Buddha. This represented all she knew of God. He said he expected to meet his mother in heaven. Now if the facts are as stated, I can easily credit this view. Because Buddha or Buddhism saved her? No indeed. Jesus Christ would be her Saviour, because of her believing response to God to the extent that He had revealed Himself in the total context of her existence. Thus to believe was an implicit faith in the eternal Christ whose sacrifice has eternal validity, whether for Abraham, David, Melchizedek, believing Ninevites, or Paul Kanomari's mother.

But if it were granted in principle that there is room for such an acceptable faith-response, how wide-spread at best might there be such a response? How could the reality of such a faith-response be appraised as effective for salvation? Here again, we are on tenuous ground. God is and must be the ultimate judge; He alone determines who is acceptable to Himself in this relation. Here, so far as human observation is concerned, the proverb, "By their fruits ye shall know them," has relevance.

Two questions may be introduced. One is: even where the gospel is preached, how *great* a faith is necessary to save a man — to let him be the recipient of the divine mercy? This is quite distinct from the question of how great a faith is necessary to bring a person to an advanced position of spiritual maturity. The answer to the first question may well be: a little, tentative faith might save. On the second point, however, it requires a strong and growing faith—"from faith to faith"—to enable one to mature so as to possess a strong spiritual integrity.

Quality of product is a combination of insight and believing response. Possible combinations include: a low level of insight and low response; high insight and low level of insight and low response; high insight and low response; low insight and high response; and high level of insight with a high level of response. This combination of high insight and high response is the one which brings a high level of personal spiritual integrity in any area or culture. Apprehension of the clear light of the Christian revelation, coupled with the highest level of continuously believing response, produces the highest levels of Christlike personality.

Now I suspect that some may have followed this train of reasoning with mounting alarm. There are, obviously, dreadful dangers in the advocacy of a position that apart from hearing of Christ, a pagan might be saved. For immediately the natural man begins to draw unwarranted inferences. Scripture says very little on the subject, doubtless to avoid the danger of such wrong inferences. Let us see what some of these are.

1. If it is allowed that a believing response to light, with attendant salvation, is possible under the conditions we have presented, the tacit inference may be drawn that the pagans do, by and large, respond to light. But this is false. The testimony of the book of Romans is that pagans in general turned from the light they had, and corrupted themselves further in so doing. Christ came to the Jews who had received the word of God, but, it is said of Him that He came to seek and to save that which is lost (Luke 19:10). They had not responded well to light. Even in America today, after the light of the gospel has been available from early colonial times, the Church is still seeking to evangelize the vast numbers of impenitent.

2. Some know the Scriptures teach that to reject the claims of Christ is to be lost. Hence, it may be argued that if the heathen have responded to the light available to them prior to the coming of the gospel, and then through their rejection of Christ they are rejected by God and lost, it would be better not to go to them with the gospel. This reasoning, we must assert, is also false. The treatment of Christ is the test of whether a man's faith previous to hearing the gospel is saving or not. Jesus taught, "Every one who is of the truth hears my voice" (John 18:37). If any were true believers in God they would receive the witness of the Holy Spirit to Christ, as Abraham would have done had he been present in Christ's day (John 8:39,56). And if a man who has never been stirred to faith by the avenues heretofore open to him hears the truth of the gospel, he well may be stirred to faith in Christ by the glorious hope offered to him.

3. Again, one may reason that if hope is provided by what non-Christians have without the gospel, we do not need to send missionaries. We confess that such reasoning leads to a cheaper conclusion. But it must be solemnly affirmed that any view of the possibilities and prospects of pagans that makes it unnecessary for the Church to obey the Great Commission must be wrong. Christ commanded His people to make disciples of all nations, that repentance and remission of sins in His name should be preached to all nations. His command was not an arbitrary one. It is grounded on a necessity inhering in the nature of God, the condition of man, and the structure of the saving provision. It was given at a time when God knew that mankind was ready for the gospel, and the gospel was prepared for mankind. The summons to repent anticipated that men needed to repent, that many would repent, and many did and continued to do so.

Cutting through all theoretical possibilities and specious reasoning is the clear declaration of the New Testament that the normal channel of salvation in our time is through Jesus Christ consciously received as the sole Savior of men. The Christian Church dare not rest easily about the fate of anyone who has not made such a commitment with all the evidence of good faith. As Shedd long ago pointed out,¹ this is the regular way for the economy of salvation to proceed. God may operate in extraordinary ways, as it pleases Him, to bring those influences at His disposal for the salvation of men who have lived beyond the places reached by the preaching of the gospel of Christ. But we are bound by the imperatives made known to us in the Christian era.

In so far as it is given God's servants to do so, there are just two objective factors at their disposal by which to appraise the condition of any man relative to salvation. One is the faith professed; the other is the related behavior in evidence. John, in his first letter, succinctly states the obligation as follows: "This is (God's) commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us" (I John 3:23). And what God has joined together let no man put asunder.

We are persuaded that God is rich in mercy, and that He exercises His saving grace to the utmost extent, consistent with that freedom to reject His gracious offers which He bestowed upon men when He created them persons. God is not limited in His saving operations to the presentation of the full historic gospel to men at all times and places on earth, although this gospel is the supreme inducement to faith. It appears that sufficient revelation of God has been available to every man to provide a basis for a penitent and believing response to God. Unhappily, many appear to have misused their freedom so as to thwart His saving purpose for them. But where a believing response has been exercised, God counts it to the man for righteousness and salvation; and this salvation has its ultimate ground in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the work of the Cross (cf. Heb. 9:15).

Perhaps the final word should be one of caution. One needs to be wary of speaking carelessly about the hope we have allowed, for there are many who are unable to hold it in proper perspective. In any case, sufficient has been said to show that one need not hold any man is lost because of his birth in time or circumstances over which he had no control. Nor does any Scripturally normative conception of God require or even properly allow for such a position.

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NOTES

1. W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1950), pp. 247-249.
2. Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949), p. 108.
3. William G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886), pp. 114 and context.



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