

ANSWER READY:

RESPONDING TO THE TOUGH OBJECTIONS IN EVANGELISM

JULY 2017 ABF SERIES • KEITH LEWIS



THE PROBLEM OF THE UNREACHED

According to the Joshua Project, billions of people have limited or no access to the Christian gospel (<http://bit.ly/2aLRhxm>; <http://bit.ly/2aJIZt5>):

- 1106 minimally reached people groups
- 1679 formerly/falsey reached people groups
- 6671 unreached people groups, totaling 3.1 billion people, most of whom live in the “10/40 Window”

“What about those who never hear the gospel”—this is a common and concerning question. Personally, I have been rebuked in my experience that those who are most alarmed by the implications of this question are unbelievers, and not me. So, in our evangelistic conversations, in our own private doubts, and in our personal mission, how do we answer this question?

COMMON VIEWS

There are three main categories into which we can organize the many different nuanced views out there (Hansen/Morgan, <http://bit.ly/1F2VI2I>).

1. Exclusivism

- Church Exclusivism** — “There is no salvation outside of the Roman Catholic Church.” This is the historical (pre-Vatican II) view of the RCC.
- Gospel Exclusivism** — “There is no salvation outside of hearing and trusting in the gospel of Jesus Christ.” This is the standard position of the biblical evangelical community (e.g., John Piper).

c. **Special Revelation Exclusivism** — “There is no salvation outside of the Christian gospel, which may in God’s gracious sovereignty come in extraordinary form.” This differs from Gospel Exclusivism, in that it allows for God to work outside our box (i.e., preaching, human evangelists, gospel literature, etc.) in bringing people to Himself, but it recognizes that Scripture doesn’t indicate that this occurs any more, and it makes the content of such special communications subservient to the gospel message. (Note, it seems that God may be doing this very work in many Islamic countries.)

2. **Agnosticism** — “We cannot know the answer to our question.” Some refer to two forms of this approach.

a. **Pessimistic Agnosticism** — These sound like exclusivists, but leave the door open to a theoretical alternative possibility (e.g., Tim Keller—“need to know basis” [Deuteronomy 29:29]; J. I. Packer).

b. **Optimistic Agnosticism** — This view refuses to be universalist, but in dislike of the vision of millions who perish, it holds out hope that there is a way in which most will be saved (e.g., John Stott).

3. **Inclusivism**

a. **General Revelation Inclusivism** — “People may be saved by responding in faith to what they have seen of God in general revelation.” One proponent explains (John Sanders):

[We] affirm the particularity and finality of salvation only in Christ but deny that knowledge of his work is necessary for salvation. That is to say, they hold that the work of Jesus is ontologically necessary for salvation (no one would be saved without it) but not epistemologically necessary (one not need be aware of the work in order to benefit from it). Or in other words, people can receive the gift of salvation without knowing the giver or the precise nature of the gift.

QUESTION: How would you respond biblically? (1) General revelation is insufficient to redeem (Romans 1:18ff). (2) There must be an epistemological choice in salvation (cf. Acts 16:31; John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 10:9; 1 John

1:1-3; 5:12). (3) The Bible stresses the importance of “knowing” Christ in salvation (2 Peter—“true knowledge,” Gk. *epignosis*; Matthew 7:21-23; 10:28-30; John 6:54-56; Romans 6:3-4; “believe into,” Gk. *eis* in Paul’s epistles). (4) Belief in God is not saving knowledge (James 2:19).

Another proponent offers (Terrance Tiessen):

Given the perspective that I have put forward, I grant that the member of another religion may be personally in saving relationship to God, in spite of the fact that their religion, as such, is erroneous and, as a system, is counterproductive for people seeking God. [Note: He insists that other religions are not to be viewed as God’s instrument in their salvation, and he states that other religions are not means of salvation.]

Admittedly, there is a spectrum regarding how people who are saved while in other religious systems continue to relate to that religious system. For example, there are true believers still within the Roman Catholic church. Furthermore, missionaries in the Middle East have categorized six types of Christian Communities in Islamic countries, ranging from those who are absolutely distinct to those who continue to still identify as Muslim (<http://bit.ly/2aLQqg9>). Yet in these cases, the individuals were saved in spite of their false religion, because they came into contact with the truth about Jesus’ gospel. This spectrum is not what Tiessen has in mind. He is actually suggesting that individuals may be saved simply through a genuine involvement in that false religion.

QUESTION: How would you respond biblically? Truth matters (John 17:17; 2 Peter) and is essential to salvation! False religion damns (Matthew 7:13-14; Romans 1:23-25). Furthermore, Cornelius’ piety was not sufficient to save him (Acts 10).

- b. **World Religions Inclusivism** — “People may be saved by responding to God through the elements of truth discovered in their religion.”

- c. **Postmortem Evangelism** — “People may have an opportunity to trust Christ after death” (cf. a Purgatory position from verses like 1 Peter 3:19-20, which is rejected in <http://bit.ly/2aLQhJp>).
 - d. **Universalism** — “Everyone will ultimately be saved” (e.g., Rob Bell).
4. **Pluralism** — “It is a bad question that assumes the ultimate truthfulness of Christianity. Instead, all the major religions are equally valid and truth is relative and personal.” Consider John Hick:

The great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to the Real [the religious ultimate] from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative Soteriological “spaces” within which, or “ways” along which, men and women find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment.

“Historically, the church has primarily taught church exclusivism, gospel exclusivism, special revelation exclusivism, or pessimistic agnosticism. They have typically regarded optimistic agnosticism as problematic, general revelation inclusivism as an error, and world religions inclusivism, postmortem evangelism, universalism, and pluralism as very serious errors.”

BIBLICAL SOLUTION

Question — How is a person saved?

Answer — We are saved only by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

- Our God, alone, saves (Isaiah 43:11; Jonah 2:9).
- Jesus Christ is the only Savior (Matthew 1:21; Luke 2:28-30; 3:6 [Isaiah 40:5]; 19:10; John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; Hebrews 1:1-3).
- No one can be saved apart from hearing the gospel (Romans 10:13-17).

- Let's respond here to the common idea that if a person never hears the gospel, then God will not hold them accountable, and will not send them to hell. First, there is no evidence of that in Scripture. Secondly, if that were true (that those who have never heard the gospel are guaranteed to go to heaven), then the worse thing we could do for their eternal state is to take them the gospel and give them an opportunity to reject it and go to hell.

Question — Is a person condemned for not believing in a Jesus of whom they have never heard?

Answer — No, he is condemned for rejecting the God he does know (Romans 1-2). “The so-called heathen are not condemned for rejecting Jesus, about whom they have heard nothing, but for rejecting the Father, about whom they have heard and seen much” (Storms).

- The first point of the gospel is our need for it, which is due to our ungodliness and unrighteousness that merit the wrath of God (Romans 1:18).
 - So, “the reason for God’s anger is anger against evil. God’s not angry with innocent people; He’s angry with guilty people” (Sproul; cf. Romans 3:9-18).
 - This changes our view of the “fairness” of God in question: “Christ is sent into a world that is already on the way to hell. Christ is sent into the world that is lost, that is guilty of rejecting the Father whom they do know” (Sproul).
 - In fact/reality/actuality, it would “unfair” and “unjust” for God not to punish sin (i.e., “cosmic treason”). In His mercy and grace, He offers a solution (John 3:16; Romans 2:4; 11:32; 2 Peter 3:9)!
- The essence of this human evil is our rejection of God (the Father) and His self-disclosure to us (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:11).
 - *The natural man knows God’s authority through the general revelation of creation (cf. Storms; Romans 1:19-20). They willfully reject this revelation of God (Romans 1:21-23, 25, 28a), and are therefore accountable and condemned (Romans 1:24, 26a, 28, 32).*

- Revelation — Read verses 19-20. “Theologian Robert Dabney put it this way: ‘They who have no Bible may still look up to the moon walking in brightness and the stars watching in obedient order; they may see in the joyous sunbeams the smile of God, and in the fruitful shower the manifestation of his bounty; they hear the rending thunder utter his wrath, and the jubilee of the birds sing his praise; the green hills are swelled with his goodness; the trees of the wood rejoice before him with every quiver of their foliage in the summer air.’ Herman Bavinck put it succinctly in declaring that ‘there is not an atom of the universe in which God’s power and divinity are not revealed’” (quoted in Storms; cf. “This Is My Father’s World,” stanza 2).
- Rejection — This knowledge of God is sufficiently clear (“plain to them” / “shown...to them,” v. 19) and inescapable (“have been clearly perceived,” v. 20), so that man is rendered “without excuse” (v. 20). Sproul writes, “The excuse that is banished, the excuse every pagan hopes in vain to use, the excuse that is exploded by God’s self-revelation in nature is the pretended, vacuous, dishonest appeal to ignorance. No one will be able to approach the judgment seat of God justly pleading, ‘If only I had known you existed, I would surely have served you.’ That excuse is annihilated. No one can lightly claim ‘insufficient’ evidence for not believing in God. ... [The problem] is not a failure to honor what was not known, but a refusal to honor what was clearly known” (*Classical Apologetics*, 46, 51). “The problem is not a lack of evidence. The problem is the innate, natural, moral antipathy of mankind to God. The problem is not that the evidence is not open to mankind. The problem

is that mankind is not open to the evidence” (Storms). This is the moral “futility” and “foolishness” of man (v. 22; Psalm 14:1 – CHARACTER). In his spiritual deadness (Ephesians 2:1-3), he responds wrongly to any spiritual stimuli (cf. Genesis 3:7, 12; Romans 3:10-12), fails to honor God as God (v. 21), and does not approve of having God in his knowledge (v. 28). That this is more than mere ignorance, but rather outright rebellion, is evidenced in this text by the unbeliever’s outright “exchange” of God for an inferior substitute and lie (vv. 23, 25 – CHOICE).

- *The natural man knows God’s character through the inner revelation of conscience—moral awareness and judicial sentiment (cf. Taylor; Romans 2:1-3; 14-16). They willfully reject this revelation of God, and are therefore accountable and condemned.*

Question — What happens to the pagan who responds submissively to general revelation?

Answer — I believe that, in His grace, God will provide him with greater light.

- The invitation of general revelation and conscience is to seek after the God who can be found and who has made Himself known (Acts 17:24-29) and to whom we are accountable now to repent and believe His Son (Acts 17:30-31).
- Scripture suggests that to the one who responds to the light God has already given by seeking more light, God will give more light (cf. Acts 8:26-39; 10:1-48; Psalm 119:130). “If by God’s gracious and sovereign enablement and enlightenment, any unbeliever responds positively to the revelation of God in nature (and conscience), God will take the necessary steps to reach him or her with the good news of Christ whereby they may be saved” (Storms).

Question — Ultimately, what is the practical solution to the plight of those who have not heard about Jesus?

Answer — We are!

- Jesus' disciples, committed to making disciples in the uttermost parts of the earth, are the solution to this problem (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8).
- We are supposed to go and preach that all may hear (cf. Romans 10:13-17).

To be laughed at is no great hardship for me. I can delight in scoffs and jeers. ... But that you should turn from your own mercy, this is my sorrow. Spit on me, but oh repent! Laugh at me, but, oh, believe in my Master! Make my body as the dirt in the streets, but do not damn your own souls. ... If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one person go there unwarned and unprayed for. ... The Holy Spirit will move them by first moving you. If you can rest without their being saved, they will rest, too. But if you are filled with an agony for them, if you cannot bear that they are lost, you will soon find that they are uneasy, too (Spurgeon, quoted in Storms).

God may grant his mercy unilaterally at some point, but I don't have any reason to have much hope in that. I think we have to pay serious attention to the passionate command of Christ to go to the whole world, to every living creature, and tell them of Jesus (Sproul).

- **Matthew 9:35-38** — *“And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’”* (italics added for emphasis)

RESOURCES

John Piper. *Letter to a 12-Year-Old Girl About the Eternal Destiny of Those Who Have Not Heard the Gospel*. <http://bit.ly/1iwGCZw>

R. C. Sproul. *Are those who have never heard of Christ going to hell?* <http://bit.ly/1iwHhtW>

Justin Taylor. *What about Those Who Have Never Heard of Jesus? A Classic Illustration from Francis Schaeffer*. <http://wp.me/p5FX1O-7PI>

Colin Hansen / Christopher Morgan. *What About Those Who Haven't Heard?* <http://bit.ly/1F2VI2I>

Sam Storms. *Bell's Hell and the Destiny of Those Who've Never Heard of Jesus*. <http://wp.me/p1rFBw-1Y3>