

The Unevangelized: Lost or Saved?

By **Malcolm H. Watts**

The world's population nearly doubled between 1970 and 2010. In 1970 it was 3,689 million and in 2010 it was 6,908 million. At the present time the population of China is nearly 1,330, 584,783, that of India is almost 1,214,464,312, followed by Russia with 140,366,561, and Britain with a mere 62,129,818.

Of the total population of the world, 32.29% is nominally Christian, 22.90% is professedly Muslim. Although Muslims often boast of great increases in their numbers, proportionately few actually convert to Islam. Growth is due to high birth rates and low apostasy rates. Christianity has become the most global of religions, with a witness in every country

of the world. However, it is estimated that 41.1% of the world's peoples (that is, 2.84 billion) are unreached with the Christian Gospel, and of the 6,909 languages in the world, 2,252 require a translation of the Scriptures, in whole or in part, and 200 million people are still waiting for the written Word of God.

The world-mission of the Church must therefore be kept continually in view. Every Christian, and every Christian church, ought to have a conviction about preaching the Gospel "to every creature." That this generally is not so, is a sad reflection on the spiritual condition of the Church in these days. The lack of enthusiasm about missionary work should not be allowed to continue among us.

One of the main reasons for this apparent

lack of enthusiasm is the confusion which exists about the state of the heathen. Are the unevangelized heathen on their way to that place so fearfully described in the Bible as "Hell"? It is a terrible thing even to ask the question, but what concerns us here is the answer to it.

Many Ways to God

Some would react strongly even to the suggestion that those who have never heard might be eternally lost, believing that all religions are basically the same. "The several universal religions," writes Professor Hocking, "are already fused together, so to speak, at the top." Such men argue that Christianity dares not claim a monopoly of the divine revelation: in all the religions may be discovered "the footprints of God's redemption" (Professor R. Panikkar). "The Holy Spirit," in the words of Dr. Samuel Shoemaker, "is found in some measure in every religion and we must make common cause with Him there." Indeed, some like Professor E.O. James, are prepared to go even further, and state the matter in this way: "To discover the reality of Christ in all the religions of the world is the essence of the ecumenical approach." This is ecumenism in its final form: no longer "Christian ecumenism," but "ecumenical ecumenism."

Once such a position is adopted, the traditional approach to missionary work must undergo a radical change. There

must be no more attempts to "convert" non-Christians. This must cease at once. Professing Christians must adopt what Johannes Vos once called "the round-table attitude," the basic idea behind it being that "every religion can contribute something to the religious life of man," This finally develops into something known as "plural belonging": "in this case the worshippers affect more than one religious system, and visit temples of different faiths quite freely." (Dr. Bouquet)

The Christian view has always been that the religions of the world have embodied man's thoughts about God, while Christianity embodies God's revelation of himself. And that is the biblical view. Writing to Rome, the metropolis of the Gentile world, the apostle does not argue that divine revelation is to be found in all the religions of heathendom: rather he declares that to Israel was entrusted "the oracles of God" (Rom 3:2 of Heb 1:1,2 where the unique character and divine origin of the Christian Faith is again maintained).

Seekers After Truth

In an attempt to appear somewhat more orthodox, an appeal is sometimes made to Scripture in order to avoid the awful conclusion about the unreached millions. G.H. Lang expressed himself carefully, but went so far as to suggest that God may see ground "to extend the benefit of

redemption to some who had not known of it in this life ... such as in much darkness of mind had at least longed after that type of life to which the cross of Christ affords access by faith."

It is an attractive theory, but where is the biblical warrant for it? There are indeed promises held out to those who "seek" (e.g. Lam 3:25) but that the heathen inquire diligently after God in this way is by no means certain. Surveying the Gentile nations of his day, Paul wrote: "There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God." (Rom 3:11) We do not deny that God has borne testimony to himself in his works so that men ought to "feel after him" (Acts 17:24-27), but we affirm that men choose not to do so, which renders their ignorance of God quite inexcusable.

After-Death Conversion

A view commonly held is that for such persons there may be some kind of "after-death conversion": "Love ... proclaims evermore to the 'spirits in prison'... the glad tidings of reconciliation" (Dr. Plumptre). The Bible does not give even a hint of such a thing.

The verse so wrongly used in this connection is 1 Peter 3:19, which teaches only that Christ, by His Spirit, once spoke through the prophet Noah (2 Pet 2:5; 1 Pet 1:11 Note: -- the Spirit of Christ was "in" such prophets). Through Noah's

preaching that Spirit was "striving" with the ungodly who lived before the Flood (Gen 6:3). Peter tells us that those persons are now shut up in the prison of Hell. This is the obvious meaning of the verse and it should not be used to teach anything else, least of all the unscriptural notion that there is an opportunity of hearing the Gospel beyond the grave.

"It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this (not another chance, but) the judgment." (Heb 9:27 cf. Lk 16:26; 2 Cor 6:2; 2 Pet 2:9)

Judgment Mitigated by Ignorance

In evangelical circles it is sometimes said that the heathen will be judged according to the light which they have. This is true, but it is false to draw from it the conclusion that the heathen will therefore be saved. Dr. D.F. Salmond, in that definitive work *The Christian Doctrine of Immortality*, expressed the view in this way: "We need nothing beyond Paul's broad statement that those who have law shall be judged by law, and that those who are without law shall be judged without law."

The exact wording of the apostle is, however, often overlooked. The Scripture actually says: "As many as have sinned without the law (i.e. without the written revelation) shall also perish without the law." (Rom 2:12) The Judge will do right, and the heathen will be fairly judged, but

they are still to "perish".

The Heathen have Never Heard

Those still wanting to believe that the heathen are spiritually safe maintain that, having never heard the truth, the ignorance of the heathen is not deliberate, and therefore excusable. The validity of this must be questioned at once. A revelation of truth has been given to them, a two-fold revelation, one inside of them, the truth of God being inscribed upon their hearts and there witnessing for righteousness and against sin; and one outside of them, divine truth being conveyed through the works of creation and providence. In the words of the great apostle: "That which may be known of God is manifest in them (i.e. in their consciences); for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (i.e. by his works in nature). (Rom 1:19,20)

Even with this general knowledge of the one supreme God, they refused to yield him that adoration due to him as Creator ("they glorified him not as God"), neither would they render that gratitude due to him as their Benefactor ("neither were thankful") (Rom 1:21). The Bible then traces the downward progress of the human soul. They began by forming their own ideas about the Deity, which were

quite worthless speculations ("they became vain in their imaginations"). In their speculative folly they failed to retain that concept of God which had been revealed in nature and to conscience ("their foolish heart was darkened"). At last they were abandoned to the most debasing conceptions of the Supreme Being (they "changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image" v 23). For which things God judges them. They should know better. They are rejecting divine revelation. Paul says that they "hold the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18 - the word used here means "to hold down, to hold back, to suppress." It is used again in Rom 7:6 where it has the meaning of being 'held down as captives'). The heathen have deliberately obstructed the power of truth in themselves. The inspired apostle declares the verdict of God concerning them: "they are without excuse." (Rom 1:20)

Paul believed in the world-wide message which God had sent out to all peoples: a message which all men have heard: "Have they not heard?" he asks. "Verily," he says, "their sound went out into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world" (i.e. the voice and sound of the works of nature proclaiming everywhere the being and perfections of God. Ps 19:4). "God has manifested Himself to the Gentiles from the beginning," comments John Calvin, "if not by the preaching of men, yet by the witness of his creatures." Idolatry is perpetrated therefore in

defiance of God, incurring guilt and condemnation. "Sirs, why do ye these things?" (Acts 14:15) "We ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device" (Acts 17:29) "And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds." (Acts 19:18)

Idolatry is Simply an Attempt to Reach the Unknown God

The idolatrous condition of the heathen is not, as some would argue, evidence of a search for the true and living God, nor is it piety and reverence imperfectly developed. This idea is entirely false. The first chapter of Romans has already made plain to us that the various forms of human religion do not represent to us the various stages of man's gropings for God. The idolatrous systems of the world are actually states of man's departure from God, and expressions of his desire for other gods rather than the true, living God. The Bible proceeds further in its exposure of heathenism, teaching us that the heathen address their idolatrous devotions, not to the Maker of heaven and earth, but to demons and to devils. Observe carefully the words of Moses when referring to Israel's lapse into heathenish idolatry: "They sacrificed to devils, not to God," he said, "to godswom they knew not, to new gods that came newly up." (Deut 2:17) The reader should carefully study the following scriptures: Lev 17:7 cf. Ex

34:15; 2 Chron 11:15; Ps 106:36,37; 1 Cor 10:20; Rev 9:20. Perhaps we may now understand the severity of God's judgment upon idolatry. Whole nations of idolaters were exterminated in Old Testament times to make way for the worshippers of the one living and true God. "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God." (Ps 9:17; cf. Rev 21:8; 22:15)

"The abominations of the Gentile world ... are not the feeble and obscure utterances of childhood, sincere and honest, but uninstructed ... They are the utterances of alienated hearts, the slanders of malignant and poisoned tongues ... When the Christian man contemplates this spectacle...he hears the unbroken voice of blasphemy and slander ascending from every tongue against that name which angels pronounce with awe... We hear our God traduced and reviled ... We witness unceasing libels on His character... We gaze upon the abominations of a world, which have been introduced by the arch-enemy of God in order to insult and reproach Him." (Dr. James Henley Thornwell)

Unjust and Unfair to Punish Them for Unbelief

A final point made whenever discussion about these things takes place is that the heathen have a right to hear the Gospel, just as the rest of us have heard it, and that if they are denied that right, it is

hardly fair. It seems, to such objectors, that God is partial in his dealings with men. There is however a serious flaw in the reasoning here. Sinners by nature and practice may not justly demand things of God. Fallen men have not a single claim, or the least vestige of a claim, upon God. "By the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation" (Rom 5:18); and, since we are all born of Adam's race, and therefore already subject to condemnation, none of us have any rights before Almighty God. The charge of partiality could only be brought if men and women had some claim to the favour and mercy of God. And this no-one has. God is indebted to no man and, for that reason, he is not obliged to do anything. This is the inspired reasoning of the apostle, when he writes: "Who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?" (Rom 11:35; cf. Job 41:11) All his favours are bestowed in sheer mercy.

This is true of the Gospel itself. It is not deserved. There is not a soul on earth who can advance with a claim on God concerning it. It is entirely unmerited. "The gospel of the grace of God" is the divine description of it (Acts 20:24). We greatly err when we speak of any man being "entitled" to the privilege of hearing the Good News. Men have done nothing at all to deserve the opportunity; and there can be no just ground for complaint if they never hear it. The Gospel, opened up, is "the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19):

from which we must conclude that all have committed sin, broken the holy Law of God, and offended him who is both Maker and Judge. This God, whose Law has been violated and whose government has been cast off, is under no obligation to do anything for any man. True, he sends out his Gospel into the world, and has a hand in directing its course, but it is not on the basis of fairness, but on the basis of sovereign grace to ill-deserving sinners. "God, having raised up His Son Jesus, hath sent Him to bless you (i.e. in the Gospel), in turning away every one of you from his iniquities." (Acts 3:26 cf. 13:26).

However strongly predisposed some Christians may be to hope for the salvation of the unconverted heathen, we believe that such vague hopes rest on no scriptural foundation. It is a false charity to suggest some possible deliverance. In the face of all those who would argue otherwise, we contend that idolatrous ignorance is no security for eternal happiness. Every part of the Word of God - the only authority competent to speak on such matters - affirms that the unevangelized heathen are lost.

What is the Doctrine of God's Infallible Word?

A brief summary of the Bible's teaching on this vital point is as follows:

1. there is no true knowledge of the one and only God apart from his Son (Matt 11:27; 1 Jn 2:23; 5:20);

2. Christ being the sole mediator between God and man, there can be no approach to God except through him and his atonement (Jn 14:6; 1 Tim 2:5; Heb 10:4,12,13);
3. heathenism, being full of falsehood and destitute of God, leads only to disappointment and despair (Eph 4:17 - "vanity" here means "futility");
4. the peoples of the world, outside the Church of Christ, serve Satan, being also enslaved by him (1 Jn 5:19 lit. "lieth in the evil one;" Acts 26:18 - the commission of 'the apostle to the Gentiles');
5. all adherents of pagan religious systems are subject to the wrath of God (Eph 2:2,3; Jn 3:36 - note the force of the word 'abide' here: the wrath of God is upon them even now);
6. a people without the saving revelation of the Gospel are without any hope (Eph 2:12; 1 Thess 4:13);
7. souls must be gathered within the appointed reaping time, or else, like corn in the field, they will tragically fall to the ground and perish (Jn 4:35; cf. Rom 10:12-15);
8. to die in a state of unbelief and impenitence is to die under the guilt and condemnation of our sins (Jn

8:21,24);

9. the unbelieving dead are reserved in Hell awaiting the dreadful Day of Judgment and the eternal punishment which will follow (Rom 2:6,10,11; 2 Pet 2:4,9);
10. if sinners do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, they cannot be saved, for salvation is only in him (Acts 4:12; cf. 1 Jn 4:14).

It was the knowledge of these things which moved the great missionaries of the past. Adoniram Judson, the first missionary to Burma, wrote in a letter dated March 4th 1831, that he could not turn a deaf ear to the plaintive cry of 10,000,000 immortal beings, who were crying to him: "Come and save us, for we are sinking into hell." Moved at the cruel rites and debasing idolatries at Serampore, Henry Martyn felt himself to be "in the neighbourhood of hell." "Millions perishing," he wrote in his journal, "and in the neighbourhood of one who can preach the Gospel to them." That outstanding missionary to the New Hebrides, John G. Paton, wrote in his autobiography: "The wail and claims of the heathen were constantly sounding in my ears. I saw them perishing ..." Hudson Taylor also heard the cry of their need. He felt the crushing burden of responsibility - "these souls, and what eternity must mean for every one of them!"

Christian friends, think on these things.

Think long and hard. Then quietly kneel down and confessing any previous lack of concern, dedicate yourselves afresh to the greatest work on earth - the spread of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.