

Are the Unevangelized Going to Perdition?

Why should anyone go to Hell? First the sin of Adam, the head of the human race (Genesis 3), has been judicially laid at the feet of all his offspring. Romans 5:12 says “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (NIV). How that sin is transmitted is debated, physically or judicially. Although human genetic structure was probably altered in some way--the Bible says that we are all guilty with Adam’s guilt, even coming out of the womb (Psalm 51:5), which is the judgment of God. A Barna survey found that 74% of Americans reject the idea that they come into the world as sinners¹.

Second, each of us sins individually. All have sinned and fallen short of God’s standards (Romans 3:23), and broken God’s law by sins of commission and omission. The Second Commandment is to love our neighbor as our self (Luke 10:27). The moment I try to selfishly use my neighbor, I break God’s command--a sin of commission. The Great Commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (Luke 10:27). One day we’re going to love something more than God, or love will grow cold, if we haven’t otherwise fractured the Great Commandment by 6 PM. Then we sin by omission—not doing what we should do.

Nobody deserves to go to heaven (“the paradise of God” [Revelation 2:7] or the New Jerusalem described in Rev.21). The reason is God’s decision to punish sin, generically, not only with physical death (Genesis 3:3,19—the first death), but with the second death, described as the “lake of burning sulfur,” (Rev. 20:10), “eternal fire,” “raging fire” (Heb. 10: 27), darkness (Jude 7,13) and “torment” (Luke 16:23). Hell is an expression of God’s justice. We don’t have another chance: “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...” (Heb. 9:27). Once there, one cannot migrate to heaven (Luke 16:26).

There is no reincarnation, or laborious life-long opportunity to improve upon the last earthly pilgrimage, until at last we’re released (moksha) into the godhead, as Hinduism and Buddhism teach. Why? Heb. 10:28 explains, “So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” Salvation history isn’t cyclical, as reincarnation teaches, but linear, culminating with the Christian spending eternity with Christ, and non-Christians having their desire (many of them) to be away from Christ eternally. There is one sacrifice for sin, one judgment, one chance. Life is a one-way trip. We do not have to personally atone for sins by doing better, even if it were possible for a good deed to totally negate a bad deed². A Christian trusts the one sacrifice of the sinless Christ for all personal sin--past, present and future. Christ paid that sin, which merit we receive by trusting the person of Christ for our salvation.

The Bible teaches that we are saved by faith alone, plus nothing, since Christ’s atoning death was completely sufficient to cover and satisfy the justice of God. “If you confess

with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Rom. 10:9). “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Rom. 10:13).

God generally uses human means to communicate this message of salvation. “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? ...And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom. 10:14a, 15a). God does use dreams and visions to convict the lost, if the testimony of many is believed. Of course, evangelists use technologies.

Many of those evangelized reject Christ, trusting some other scheme to compensate for obvious or subtle personal sin. Some try doing “good” (this “good” is like a filthy rag, Isaiah 64:6). Others minimize sin or deny that there is a god to whom we will give account. Or they suppress thoughts of God. Those who do reject Jesus will not spend eternity in heaven (John 3:36; 12:48). We can’t get there by other religions or by sincerity. Jesus said that none come to the Father apart from Him (John 14:6).

Christians who are orthodox agree up to this point. But an estimated 13.2 million unevangelized people die each year³. These will have had no clear explanation of God’s offer of salvation through faith in Christ. What happens to them?

The weight of scripture puts them on the way to perdition. Why? First, nature has already witnessed to them about God. The apostle Paul said that the godless and wicked suppress evidence of God’s “eternal power and divine nature” in creation (Rom. 1:20). They see brown earth and blue sky—not Creation. All of us without Christ are “godless” and our sin makes us “wicked” before God. We can, to a certain extent, know God through His creation (Rom. 1:21). So every unbeliever, not just the really wicked, sins against the knowledge of God found in nature—and is self-condemned. “Men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

Second, we violate our own moral standards, regardless of how simple. These standards are exposed whenever we judge someone’s conduct. Eventually, if not before morning, we will judge someone’s conduct. At that precise point we condemn our self, since we commit the same sin precisely or in kind (Rom. 2:1). You judge a thief—you will steal or covet sometime. You lament a murderer, yet you have hated someone—the moral equivalent (1 John 3:15). We condemn ourselves, regardless of ever seeing a missionary. God uses our own standards by which to judge us. The verdict: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else...” (Rom. 2:1).

A prominent evangelical African American teacher once taught that if someone doesn’t explicitly reject Jesus (such as a Muslim would have to do), God will judge them by another “dispensation” and that, without ever hearing of Christ, they will be saved. The reasoning is that if a person is seeking God, God is obligated to enable that person to find Him, since he who seeks, finds (Luke 11:10). Two problems arise. I get worried

when I hear people teach that if you do “A,” God is “obligated” to do “B.” This is the line we hear about tithing. We cannot obligate God to do anything (see Rom. 11:35-36). Animism is about trying to obligate the unseen world to do our bidding. God is too smart for us.

Second, God says that “There is no one who seeks God.” (Rom. 3:11).” If someone is found seeking God, it is because the Father is drawing that person to Christ (John 6:44), not because that person is seeking God all by herself. I believe in that case that God will somehow complete the good work begun (Phil. 1:6). There is no quicker way to anesthetize missions than to teach that people will go to heaven apart from personal faith in Christ.

Another entire layer upon this issue is predestination. “Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.” (Rom. 9:18). I believe predestination is part of the equation, but the God who elects (Rom. 9) is the same God who shows us that He uses human means--missionaries (Rom. 10). Workers are still needed to evangelize those “being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Now if the unevangelized do go to hell—if they really do—how does that impact my life and resources? How does this impact my spending priorities, and my church’s budget priorities? What percentage of income does your church give directly to cross-cultural ministry/evangelism? Does it matter to us that by mid-2015 there will be about 2.1 billion unevangelized persons on the planet?⁴ Taking care of our own neighborhood isn’t enough. We aren’t to stay in Jerusalem. The finish line isn’t collecting our first Social Security check. It’s to complete all the work God has given us personally to do. Our mandate goes to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8: Matt. 28:18-20).

Jesus, confronting this human harvest, told us to pray to God to thrust out laborers into the harvest field (Luke 10:2). If the unevangelized can be saved apart from Christ, as some otherwise orthodox Christian leaders and scholars tell us—Christ died needlessly. If the unevangelized could still reach heaven, D. James Kennedy facetiously suggests quickly bringing every missionary home, so none could hear, and all could be saved—the opposite of Jesus’ solution. It then becomes the responsibility of the Church to finance those the Father is sending, in a manner worthy of God (3 John 1:6). Are we doing personally and corporately what God wants us to do to evangelize as many as we can on the broad road to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14)? Indignation at the thought that the unevangelized will suffer hell is, I believe, higher morality than God’s, who plainly tells of their destination—the profoundest human tragedy, and reason to go.

Jim Sutherland

¹ “Americans Draw Theological Beliefs From Diverse Points of View,” 10/8/02, Barna Research Online.

² Half of US adults believe we can be saved by good deeds—Barna, 10/8/02

³ David Barrett and Todd M. Johnson. 2001. *World Christian Trends, AD 30-AD 2200*, p. 59.

⁴ Todd M. Johnson, Peter F. Crossing, “Christianity 2014: Independent Christianity and Slum Dwellers,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jan., 2015, p. 29.