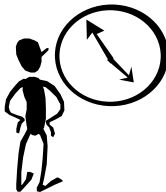


### Inside this issue:

<i>Are We Condemning Those Who Never Heard the Gospel?</i>	1
<i>Biblical Depth and Beauty</i>	3
<i>By Any Other Name</i>	6
Duty Rosters	7
Announcements & For the Record	8



### Time of Assembly



#### **Sunday:**

Bible Study 4:00 p.m.

Worship 5:00 p.m.

#### **Wednesday:**

Bible Study 7:00 p. m.

## Are We Condemning Those Who Never Heard the Gospel?

By Matthew W. Bassford

I received the following question:

"I heard one yesterday I've been pondering. The man said that unless you believe in God you will be lost. So what about all those people who have never had the opportunity? I have him some answers but I'd be interested to hear what you think."

I've run into this one before too. The argument goes like this. If we claim that only those who believe in Jesus Christ can be saved from their sins, we are implicitly condemning everyone who never has heard the gospel (say, for instance, a tribesman in the remotest Amazon basin).

If that's the case, then God is being unfair. After all, those people never had a chance. They are unavoidably lost. As a result, we should conclude that people who have never heard the gospel are somehow saved, perhaps by being good people.

### KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Although the argument has considerable appeal (who wants to think of the poor tribesman being lost without ever having heard of Jesus?), there are several problems with it. First, it doesn't account for our universal knowledge of God. As Paul says in Acts 17:26-27, God created us with an inherent impulse to seek Him. Man is an essentially religious animal, and though some may stifle their religious yearnings, they still exist. Similarly, Paul argues in Romans 1:19-20 and Acts 14:17 that God has given us plenty of evidence for His existence, both in the creation itself and in the gifts that He showers on everyone.

Everybody, then, has a yearning for God. Everybody

has all the evidence they need to embark on a search for His will. What's more, an honest search for God will always succeed. "*Seek, and you will find,*" Jesus says in Matthew 7:7.

I believe this is true for the Amazonian tribesman too. If he really wants to find God, God will make Himself available. Far be it from me to deny the awesome potential of providence in such a situation! If he doesn't want to find God, that's his fault, not God's.

## CULPABILITY FOR SIN

Second, it doesn't account for our culpability for our own sin. Nobody is required to sin and be lost. We all choose to do so. It's true for us; it's true for the tribesman who (in the language of Romans 1) knows God but refuses to honor Him. We all have a moral sense, and we all violate that moral sense. As a result, the tribesman is no less guilty than we are.

In punishing guilty sinners, wherever they may be found, God isn't being unfair. Indeed, exactly the opposite is true. As Paul writes in Romans 2:9-11, "*There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.*" When someone who chooses to do evil receives the just punishment for that evil, they have nothing to complain about, regardless of where they live.

Similarly, when God allows us to hear the gospel, He isn't being just. He isn't giving us a fair shake. He's being merciful. He's giving us an opportunity that none of us even come close to deserving. If God is merciful to some and not to others, those who have not received mercy still can't complain. They had their opportunity to please God, and they blew it, not because anybody made them, but because they wanted to. No sinner is entitled to sympathy.

## IS THE GOSPEL THE PROBLEM?

Third, this argument makes the gospel into the problem rather than the solution. To illustrate this, let's return to our hypothetical tribesman. He's being a "good person" in the way that so many people claim to be today, and because he hasn't heard the gospel, presumably, he's safe from condemnation.

However, if a missionary shows up and preaches the gospel to him, his chances of eternal life have diminished. He was 100 percent safe before he heard the word, but now, he's only going to be safe if he obeys it. Sadly, not all "good people" do obey. Indeed, many disobey because they trust in their own goodness. What's more, even if he does obey, he has to live as a faithful disciple of Jesus, which is considerably more difficult than being a "good person." In my experience, people tend to grade their own goodness on a curve.

In short, what was supposed to be the good news has been very bad news for our tribesman! Before, he wasn't accountable to anybody. Now, he's accountable to Jesus, who demands his whole life.

If this is the nature of the gospel, rather than making sure that as many people hear it as possible, we ought to bury it as deeply as we can. What Paul said of the Law of Moses is also true of the word of Christ: though supposed to bring life, it brings only death. The best thing the human race could do would be to forget that Jesus ever existed. That way, we could all be safe in our sinful ignorance.

## DANGEROUS HYPOTHETICALS

Finally, I think it's worth exploring the spiritual problems that lie behind hypotheticals like this. It functions similarly to the what-ifs surrounding baptism:

- "What if a tree falls on the guy who's on his way to get baptized?"
- "What if somebody believes in the middle of the desert, and they don't have enough water for immersion?"

These are always pure hypotheticals. Nobody asks about these situations when they're in them. Nobody, in fact, has any evidence that these things have ever happened.

Instead, people who are not in these situations ask about them in order to provide justification for disobedience to the gospel in the situation they are in. The one who asks about tree accidents and deserts doesn't want to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. The one who asks about the tribesman doesn't want to be saved at all. They offer these questions to provide intellectual cover for their hardheartedness.

The question should never be, "What about Random Imaginary Person?" The question should be, "What about me?" What, in my circumstances, must I do to make my life right with God? The Bible answers to this question are not always easy, but they are always clear. God is calling. It's up to us to listen.

---

## Biblical Depth and Beauty

By Doy Moyer

I have been a Bible student for the greater part of my life. I have been preaching the gospel for nearly 30 years now. I have been teaching courses at a collegiate level for over a dozen of those years. I don't say any of this to brag, as none of that proves a thing. I say it to make a confession. There are days when, during my Bible study, I think to myself, "Where have I been? Why didn't I see that before? How could I have been so blind here?" In other words, I feel like I'm just now finally waking up sometimes to the depth and beauty of Scripture. The truth is, I've been feeling this way for ... well a long time. The more I study, the more I feel it.

There is a depth and beauty to Scripture that can easily be missed, depending on

how we are reading it and what our goals are when we read. I'll be reading along and a line from a well-known movie hits me:

"You're not thinking fourth-dimensionally!" Yeah, I have a real problem with that.

We might have a tendency to read the Bible in some strict linear fashion. We read from Genesis to Revelation and tell the story, and this is necessary. Yet how often do we read while failing to make connections between passages and concepts? We may see a flat-line story without seeing the layers of connections of ideas that are interwoven throughout. The Bible is not just a linear story. It is an interwoven tapestry filled with layers and webs of beautiful patterns. If a written text can be said to be 3-D, Scripture is that! We need to put our glasses on so we can see its depth leaping off the pages. It's there if we'll see it.

Scripture is filled with relationships of concepts. Types and antitypes, shadows and substance, are staples of understanding the importance of connections. For example, "For Christ our Passover has been sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7) is a beautiful statement of pattern and connection. The book of Hebrews is filled with it and cannot be understood without seeing this. The Book of Revelation's connections back to the Old Testament are grand and exploding with meaning. The way that the New Testament quotes the Old Testament adds a depth that we might easily miss (e.g., "Out of Egypt I have called My Son," Matt 2:15); it is certainly a challenging study. Over and over, we find fulfillment of both prophecy and concept. The biblical story is told many ways and through many images, from the Garden, to the Exodus, the Temple, the holy city of Jerusalem and more, finding masterful fulfillment in Christ. There is a great joy of discovery when we see these connections and begin understanding the depth at which these connections are made. This is one reason why Bible study should never become cold, lifeless, or boring. If we are bored with Bible study, we haven't turned our minds on yet.

I believe that the beauty and depth of Scripture is part of God's inspiration. Failing to see some of this depth is part of the reason, I am convinced, that people end up rejecting Scripture. People might take passages, read them flatly, and conclude some kind of contradiction or problem, when, in reality, they are missing the depth of what the passages are teaching because they draw hasty conclusions without putting much thought into it.

For example, many times I see a critic of Scripture, in somewhat of a mocking tone, try to discount the Bible by making some flippant remark how ridiculous it is to follow the Bible when it contains commands about not mixing fabrics together. If they know where the reference is, they seldom know anything about the context of the passage, the covenants, or the greater issues involved. They see a flat-line order that sounds silly on the surface, and they run with that impression.

"You are to keep My statutes. You shall not breed together two kinds of your

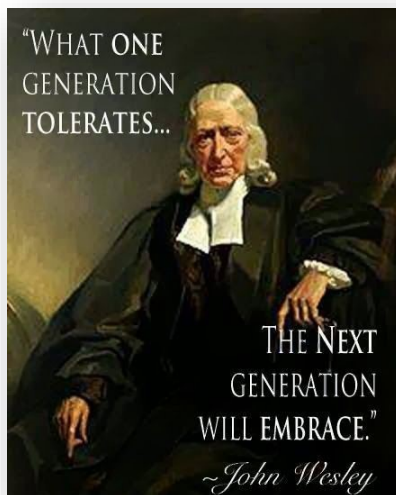
cattle; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor wear a garment upon you of two kinds of material mixed together." (Lev 19:19)

Reading it flatly, and without further consideration, one can think how senseless this sounds. If we even read Leviticus, how often would we skim over a passage like this and just think, "That's weird, but, oh well, that's part of the Law"? We must think deeper. One of the points that is easily missed is that God was teaching an overall culture of holiness and pure-minded devotion. One of the ways that He got people to think about that was through physical and visible reminders, even in their daily, mundane activities. Through engaging in actions that forced their minds toward the ideas of cleanness, holiness, not mixing with the unholy, pagan people of the land, they would be more inclined to remember how important it was to remain faithful always. Not mixing materials was a daily reminder, even in the way they constructed and wore their clothes, to stay pure, unmixed with sin, and faithful to God. It would be like our putting Bible sticky notes on mirrors and refrigerators as reminders that no matter where we are or what we are doing, we are to be holy and pure. Being a child of God encompasses all areas of life, including how business is conducted, how work is done, and how we do our mundane activities. There may even be more, but the point is that a passage like this, flatly read, is boring and silly. Seen in its greater context and message, it is brilliantly reminding God's people how overarching holiness was to be in their lives. It wasn't so much about the fabric as much as it was about the lesson derived from the process and the action. I even find it intriguing that this comes on the heels of the second-greatest commandment.

Of course, there are cautions. We don't want to overdo it. I'm not saying that one has to be some super intellect to study and understand. Nor am I arguing that we should try to see phantom connections or start allegorizing everything. Not at all. Scripture makes the connections, shows the contexts, and leads us to draw the conclusions. Our task is to see them, not to invent things for the sake of novelty.

Bible study is to be a careful undertaking, not a hasty effort at proof-texting that requires little thought or sound exegesis. Such hasty efforts lead not only to poor understanding and bad interpretation, they can lead to rejection of Scripture altogether. Flat-line Bible reading contributes to flat-line spirituality. If people are bored with Scripture, they'll be bored with their "religion."

Let's open our eyes and see the beauty and the depth of God's word, and prepare to be amazed!



---

# By Any Other Name

By Glenn Hamilton

Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman told of a distinguished minister, Dr. Howard from Australia, who preached very strongly on the subject of sin. After the meeting, someone remarked "Dr. Howard, you shouldn't talk as openly as you do about man's guilt and corruption as it may offend someone. And if our boys and girls hear you discussing that subject, they will more easily become sinners. Call it a "mistake" if you will, an "error in judgment", but do not speak so plainly about SIN."

Dr. Howard took a small bottle down from a shelf and showing it to the visitor said, "You see that label? It says 'STRYCHNINE' - and underneath in BOLD, red letters the word 'POISON.' Do you know, man, what you are asking me to do? You are suggesting that I CHANGE THE LABEL!! Suppose I do, and paste over it the words, 'Essence of Peppermint' don't you see what might happen? Someone would use it, not knowing the danger involved, and would certainly die. So it is, too, with this matter of sin. The Milder you make your LABEL; the more DANGEROUS you make the POISON!"

How often do well-meaning Christians fall into this trap. We want people to like us and accept us, so do not dare talk about sin as sin. We watch TV and see politicians dance around questions of sin. We may sit back and snicker and say, "Why doesn't he just say it is sin?" But then we go off to the office and perform the same dance. What did you say when friends and co-workers asked your opinion of the gay-marriages occurring in San Francisco and other areas. Did you say it is "illegal," "a bad choice," "a question for the courts," or some other non-committal answer? Or did you just come out and say, "Homosexuality is a sin, making a marriage out of it does nothing to change its sinfulness." God clearly labels homosexuality as a sin (Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Do we dare change the label? So why do we compromise the truth? Perhaps we are afraid of being labeled as "intolerant" or "bigoted." Such a reputation could result in not being promoted or even being fired. Perhaps telling the truth would mean we would lose a friendship.

Fear of upsetting people has often led God's spokesmen to "soften" the message. Consider God's response to such label changing:

*"It is definitely because they have misled My people by saying, 'Peace!' when there is no peace. And when anyone builds a wall, behold, they plaster it over with whitewash; so tell those who plaster it over with whitewash, that it will fall. A flooding rain will come, and you, O hailstones, will fall; and a violent wind will break out. Behold, when the wall has fallen, will you not be asked, 'Where is the plaster with which you plastered it?'" Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, "I will make a violent wind break out in My wrath. There will also be in My anger a flooding rain and hailstones to consume it in wrath. So I will tear down the wall which you plastered over with whitewash and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation is laid bare; and when it falls, you will be consumed in its midst. And you will know that I am the LORD. Thus I will spend My wrath on the wall and on those who have plastered it over with whitewash; and I will say to you, 'The wall is gone and its plasterers are gone, along with the prophets of Israel who prophesy to Jerusalem, and who see visions of peace for her when there is no peace,'" declares the Lord GOD." (Ezekiel 13:10-16)*

Changing labels and even covering up the sin will not change the sin, and it won't change the consequences. "For the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23a). Trying to change the label which God has placed on certain activities will only lead to more deaths, including your own (cf. Ezekiel 33:7-9). Now what will you say when the topic at work, school, or home turns to sinful activities? The pressure will always be there to make some comment that shows you accept and/or tolerate sinful actions.

It has been said that, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." And it is certainly true that a sin by any other name smells just as rotten.