

PREACH TO EVERY PERSON

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Moving on, let us consider the words of the Lord Jesus that we find in Mark 16:15. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to each person." (Or, "As you go throughout the world preach . . .") Once again the words are directed to His disciples. The strategic effect is transparent—if we really do preach to each person then each one will have had his opportunity to know Jesus as Savior and Lord of life. The problem does not lie in understanding this command, it lies in **believing** it.

A Growing Neo-universalism

God has allowed me to minister in many churches around Brazil, churches from more than twenty denominations. I have verified something alarming. Many believers, and even pastors and leaders, simply do not think that it is necessary to preach the Gospel to every person in the world. There is a growing 'neo-universalism' in that country. A certain pastor expressed the idea very well, some years ago now: "A God who is loving, just and good could never condemn an innocent Indian." (In those days the Brazilian government had placed severe limitations upon the activity of foreign missionaries with reference to indigenous peoples and I was traveling around the country challenging the Brazilian believers to get involved in that type of ministry.) That pastor could not have cared less; there was no need to worry about the salvation of the 'Indian'—God would work something out.

We are face to face with a hypothesis that carries with it very serious consequences. You do not need to be a prophet to see that such a hypothesis simply destroys any sense of urgency, any real concern about the spiritual destiny of the persons and peoples that have never heard of Jesus. Surely—if God is going to work something out then He is going to take care of the problem and we can forget about it. Obviously any solution that God provides must be adequate. If the 'Indian' is innocent and therefore may not be condemned then God will have to save him (because the human spirit is immortal and only has two possible destinies: to be with God, which is life eternal, or to be separated from Him, which is eternal condemnation). If there exists an 'innocence' which results in salvation we must revise our soteriology, for in that event there would be more than one way to achieve eternal life.

But really, our **Lord**, Christ Jesus, commanded us to make disciples in **all** ethnic nations. Are we going to obey or not? He commanded us to preach the Gospel to **each** person, going throughout the whole world. Are we going to obey or not? If someone decides that there is no need to obey, and even rejects the very terms of the commands, he should be consistent and stop presenting himself as a servant of Christ! Any doubts? Well, I know we are not going to dispose of the problem in this way; people are not always consistent. So, let us take a closer look at the neo-universalist hypothesis.

No One Is 'Innocent'

It seems to me that the debate hinges on the question of innocence. It is because the 'Indian' (for example) is 'innocent' that God should not condemn him. But how shall we define that 'innocence'? I will use an indigenous people as an example because I have personal experience with them. I lived in a village of the Apurinã people, in the middle of the Amazon jungle, for a total of 24 months. I believe my observations will be valid for any unreached ethnic group around the world. So what is 'innocence'?

There are many who doubt the mental, and even moral, capacity of so-called 'primitive' peoples. I have heard the opinion expressed that 'the language of the Indian' is a very rudimentary something with about 300 vocabulary items. They are completely mistaken. People who belong to 'primitive' societies are just as intelligent as any one else. There is no lack of evidence to that end—for instance, language. An English verb may have up to five different inflections, variations in the internal structure of the word. Certain irregular Portuguese verbs may have up to 66 such inflections. An Apurinã verb, with its three relative orders of prefixes and fourteen relative orders of suffixes (I have isolated some 60 affixes that occur in those orders, but there are others), if every mathematically possible combination did actually occur (there are a few co-occurrence restrictions), may have upwards of twenty million different inflections. Yes, that is what I said, twenty million; and those are the possible variations within **one word!**

I wish you could have been in our little palm leaf house in the village and listen to the men discussing the pros and cons of the Gospel, evaluating the implications in terms of their own belief system—it was a convincing demonstration of their ability to reason. Be not deceived, the members of 'primitive' societies are just as much human beings as we are, created in the image and likeness of God. In short, we may not define 'innocence' in terms of lack of intelligence, reasoning ability or moral capacity. Or at least, if we did, none of the indigenous peoples of the world would fit the definition.

Most of the indigenous groups of South America, and the world (so far as I know), practice some form of animism or spiritism. Their religion revolves around the effort to pacify the demons, the evil spirits that they hold responsible for the assorted ills that overtake them. (I understand that the numerous ethnic groups in Africa and Asia that have converted to Islam are still dealing with the demons—of necessity.) They know that good spirit beings also exist, but they deliberately worship the bad. What they do is not brainless superstition. Their attitude is both reasonable and intelligent, given the reality that they have to live with. They most certainly are bothered by the spirits, which do indeed exist and attack human beings. Since they do not know of any benevolent power that is greater than the demons to which they can appeal for help or, in the case of those who do believe in a Creator who is good but lost contact with Him in the distant past and despair of getting His ear, they take the only viable option that seems to be left. They try for a dialog with the spirits to see if things will improve, at least a little.

Now then, someone who is consciously, deliberately worshipping evil spirits, and by extension Satan (they know the demons have a boss), leaving the good spirits and the Creator Himself to one side, is not 'innocent'. No way.

Then there is the conscience that the Creator places in each human being (Romans 2:14-16). Don Richardson, in his book *Eternity in their Hearts*, makes an important contribution on this subject. He argues that not only individuals but whole cultures have features, like memories of the distant past, that prepare the people for the coming of the Gospel and sort of predispose them to receive it. He gives a good number of interesting examples.

And there is the light furnished by the creation, which should move every rational being to bow before the Creator (Romans 1:18-20), because the whole cognitive process of the human being is based on the principle of cause and effect. We observe an effect and try to isolate the cause that produced it; logic requires that the cause must be equal to or greater than the effect that it produced, or else it could not have produced it. I must confess that I do not understand the scientists who profess to be materialists; all scientific experimentation is also based on this principle—it seems to me that they are inconsistent.

I conclude that there is only one definition of 'innocence' that could possibly stand the light of day: ignorance, the lack of information. That is to say, a just God could not condemn a person who never heard of Jesus Christ. But there is a slight problem—God does not accept it. Romans 1:18-20 makes clear that every rational being has the light of the creation, and God will demand an accounting of that light: "so that they are without excuse" (see also Psalm 19:1-4). Romans 3:10-12 is more than clear: before God no one is 'innocent'!! According to Isaiah 64:6 even our "righteousnesses" look like "filthy rags" to God.

God Is Just

However, God is just. He recognizes the difference between a little light and lots of light. "There is no partiality with God: whoever has sinned without law will also perish without law, and whoever has sinned under the law will be judged by the law" (Romans 2:11-12). Although everyone has the light of the creation it cannot compare with the light of God's written revelation. Luke 12:47-48 refers to the judgment seat of Christ, not to the judgment of the lost, but it also shows clearly that God recognizes degrees of responsibility. However, please note that those without the law will "perish" and the servants who did not know "will be beaten", albeit less.

Now let us go to the final judgment of the unbelievers, the great white throne that is described in Revelation 20:11-15.

"I saw a great white throne and the one who was sitting on it, from whose face the earth and the sky fled away; and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened (another book also was opened, the

Book of Life). And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to their deeds. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and each one was judged according to his deeds. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death—the lake of fire; and whoever was not found written in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire."

I would like to note in passing that I do not expect to appear before the white throne, but if I were to do so and be judged on the basis of my deeds I would certainly wind up in the Lake. That is because no one can be saved by his deeds (see Isaiah 64:6, Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 3:20 and 23, among other passages—I am referring to salvation, not rewards). I will not wind up in the Lake because by the grace of God my name is written in the Book of Life. Thank you, Lord Jesus! But I would like to imagine that we will be able to watch that judgment. Let us suppose that someone from an unreached people has his turn as we look on.

As he gets the drift he protests: "But God, how could you!? No one ever came to our village, or to our people to tell about Jesus. All of us were born, lived and died without ever hearing the Gospel of Christ, even once. How can you judge me?" Obviously what follows is mere speculation, but I imagine that God's response might go something like this: "Yes, I know. You never heard and it is a disgrace. Down through the centuries I kept telling my professed servants to go, but no one ever did and you never heard. I am more sorry than I can say! But I want you to know that I will not judge you on the basis of a Gospel that you never heard. I will indeed judge you, but **on the basis of your deeds.**" Twice our text repeats the phrase, "according to his deeds".

Now then, how can we arrive at a fair evaluation of someone's deeds? We must take account of the context in which he lived. We should know what he was thinking, what pressures he was feeling. Every people has law, moral code, norms of conduct. Their moral code will presumably be inferior to the Biblical standard, but they have one. They understand that some things are good while others are bad. So, God will judge the person within the context of his own culture, of the law and moral code that he knew, recognized and embraced. And He will prove that even within his own context the person did not measure up (and do not forget that the light of creation and conscience will also be required). Before the great white throne no defendant will be able to say that God is unjust.

No, my friends, let no one be deceived! The 'Indian' who never heard the Gospel is condemned. Before God no one is 'innocent'.

The Neo-universalist Hypothesis

However, the influence of that 'neo-universalist' idea upon many people is so strong that prudence calls for a little further analysis. I will start with the only definition of 'innocence' that is possibly valid, ignorance. That is, a just God could not condemn someone who never heard. Well then, on that basis the neo-universalist 'Christian' has a Jesus that is a monster and a god that is a fool. (I am well aware that such language may shock the reader's sensibilities, but I use it on purpose as a pale reflection of how God Himself must feel about that hypothesis.)

Of course. If God cannot condemn someone who never heard (according to the hypothesis) then such a person will have to be saved (recall that there are only two possible destinies for the human spirit). But in that case the Gospel of Christ becomes a message of condemnation rather than salvation, a message of death rather than life. That is because as long as someone has not heard, he is saved (according to the hypothesis), but as soon as he hears, if he does not receive it, he is condemned. Then to be a preacher of the Gospel becomes a terrible thing, because you will be destroying people's 'innocence'! And Jesus would have to be some type of ogre, because He **commands** us to preach to every person, thereby condemning multitudes that would otherwise be saved (according to the hypothesis). Can you imagine it?

And God would have to be a 'fool', because to send the Son to take on human form and suffer all that He did would be simply unnecessary (according to the hypothesis). God should have stayed up in Heaven, not said or done anything, because then everyone down here would remain in perfect ignorance, of necessity, and therefore would have to be saved. Obviously neither is God a 'fool' nor is Jesus a 'monster'. The neo-universalist hypothesis is false.

(Isn't it strange how people consider themselves to be more wise and just than the Creator? The Bible says that God created man in His own image and likeness, but from then till now it seems that man has done his best to return the favor. For example, the neo-universalist: not liking the Bible's God, he dreams up a god more to his taste, a god without unpleasant surprises, a god of his sort and size. It should be obvious that any god that we create will of necessity be less than we are, and therefore completely worthless.)

Conclusion

To conclude, we must take Mark 16:15 seriously. The Gospel of Christ is the only solution for all people. Since God accepts no one as 'innocent' it is altogether necessary to preach to each one. But someone is sure to raise the question: what happens if someone responds adequately to the light of the creation? Theoretically it is possible, but in practice it is extremely difficult because of the pressure that his culture exerts upon a person. As it says in 1 John 5:19, the whole world "is under the control of the evil one"—the cultures of the world are under heavy satanic influence. As already explained, in general it is precisely the cultures of the unreached ethnic groups that revolve around the demons. In other words, a person born within such a culture is 'programmed' with that world view from his earliest days, and so it becomes almost impossible for him to reflect freely upon the creation and reach an appropriate conclusion, submitting to the Creator.

Once again we face a question about God's justice. How could He create a race that He knew very well would fall under Satan's domination with the result that people would be programmed by their cultures in a way that would leave them virtually incapable of reacting correctly to the creation, the price for this being to spend eternity in the Lake of Fire? How could He?! I do not know. God does not explain. When God does not explain something like this, we have two options: accept or reject, rebel against Him or bow before Him. Certain matters pertain to the Sovereignty of God, and whoever among us is wise will leave them there! Is that not what Deuteronomy 29:29 declares? "The secret things belong to the LORD our God." We have neither the right to understand everything nor the responsibility to explain everything. That seems to me to be the central message of the book of Job: all said and done God did not explain, He did not resolve Job's perplexity. What He said in essence was: "I am big and you are small; I am the Creator and you are not competent to argue with me" (chapters 38 to 41). And that was the end of the discussion. Job came out well because he humbled himself and shut his mouth (Job 40:3-5, 42:1-6).

Whenever we intrude our humanistic ideas into a question like this, it is to demonstrate yet again the idolatrous bent of our hearts. Consider the case of a baby that dies: does it go to heaven or to hell? The Bible does not say; it remains silent about this question. The point of Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:14-15 and Luke 18:16-17 is not that all and only children will be saved, but that we must receive the kingdom in the way that a child would or does. A child is unaffected, a child is a literalist, a child trusts implicitly (until hard experience teaches him otherwise). But we cannot stand the idea that a baby should be condemned, so we declare that it will go to heaven. Really? Have you ever stopped to think through the implications?

If a baby is born 'saved' but later on does not submit to Christ, does he 'lose his salvation'? The fact is that most people never trust in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, and so will go to hell. Would it not be better to kill a baby while he was still 'saved' rather than let him grow up and become condemned? To allow someone to go to hell when we could certainly prevent it (by killing him while still a baby) would seem to be terribly perverse! What kind of sadist would do something like that?! What do you think? Should we kill all babies? Obviously that suggestion is absurd! It is equally clear that God Himself would not tolerate such a 'solution', because He forbids murder. It is more likely that killing a baby will not guarantee his salvation because it is doubtful that anyone is born 'saved'. In fact, Romans 5:12 and Psalms 51:5 may be understood to mean that we are born sinners. If death is "the wage for sin" (Romans 6:23), what is a baby that dies being paid for? Be that as it may, my whole purpose here has been to demonstrate that our humanism does not solve the problem. All said and done we must turn the question over to the **sovereignty of God**.

However, I am fully convinced that we can trust our God—He knows what He is doing and one day, when we are glorified, we will understand. Just look at what is placed right in the middle of the ten commandments, that which was engraved on the tablets of stone: "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, and showing mercy to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:5-6, compare

Deuteronomy. 7:9)! Have you ever thought about that? It means that God's mercy is at least 250 times greater than His punishing! There have scarcely been 300 generations since Adam—God's mercy is virtually inexhaustible. We can trust the justice of our God, my friend.

Two or three cases in the history of modern missions have come to my attention where God worked a miracle to ensure that someone who was responding appropriately to the light of creation should hear the Gospel of Christ. The case of Cornelius (Acts 10) could almost be a Biblical example, but he was surrounded by Jews and presumably had added light. (Personally, I suppose it is precisely in this way that God takes care of the occasional instance where someone reacts correctly to the creation. He moves heaven and earth, if necessary, to furnish the added light of the Gospel.) Even so, we should never base our missionary strategy on occasional exceptions. Certainly Jesus, God the Son, would know that such instances could occur, but as He gave His commands He did not even mention the possibility. As He elaborated His missionary strategies the Lord Jesus ordered us to preach the Gospel **to every person**. Are we going to obey?

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