

The Man on the Island: Facing the Truth About those who Never Hear the Gospel

by *Russell D. Moore*

“What about a man on an island?” Fifteen year-old Timothy interjected this question in the middle of a youth Bible study on the topic of missions. “What about a man who has been stranded on a deserted island from the day he was born and he’s never seen another person,” he continued, to the sounds of nervous coughs and aluminum folding chairs shifting on the tile floor. “He’s never seen a Bible and never heard of Jesus. What will happen to him when he dies?”

What indeed will happen to him when he dies? A question about an imaginary sojourner on a hypothetical island represents far more than the speculative question of a curious teenager. Instead, the destiny of the man on the island points to one of the most perilous theological fault-lines in contemporary evangelicalism. While post-Vatican II Catholicism and mainline Protestantism long ago moved past such questions toward an embrace of various forms of religious pluralism, conservative evangelicals remained, until recently, resolute in their contention that salvation comes only through explicit faith in Christ. A new stream of reformist evangelicals, however, has offered hope for the man on the island either in some form of religious inclusivism or in a post-mortem opportunity for evangelization. [1] Some of this movement’s scholars have dismissed a recent evangelical document on the nature of the gospel precisely because the statement affirms that explicit faith in Christ is necessary for salvation. [2]

Perhaps more crucial to the debate than the arguments of the theologians is the shift in attitude of many conservative evangelical churchgoers. Increasingly, pop evangelicalism is inclined to consign the man on the island to a place in the new heavens and the new earth without giving it a second thought. After all, what else could be fair? This shift brings with it commanding implications. A church’s viewpoint on the eternal destination of those who never hear the gospel throws a searchlight on their understanding of the nature of sin, the content of the gospel and the task of global missions. The next generation of American evangelicals must grapple with this question, or see conservative Protestantism severed from the Great Commission mandate of the historic church.

What Does He Know? The Unevangelized and the Revelation of God

The theological queasiness of many evangelicals on the question of the destiny of the unevangelized stems, at least in part, from a blurring of the doctrine of revelation. Is the man on the island really ignorant of the Creator and the demands of His law? This is a good question, and arises from a biblical impulse. God does not arbitrarily assign guilt to those ignorant of His demands. Where there is no revelation of the law, the Spirit says, there is no sin (Rom 5:13). But is this the case with the man on the island? It seems that this issue of the guilt of the “ignorant” is precisely the question the apostle Paul addresses in the opening chapters of his letter to the churches at Rome.

The apostle John asserts that the divine Logos “enlightens every man” (John 1:9) with the ability to receive revelation and to grasp cognitively the truths set forth by His Creator. [3] Far from an

apology for inclusivism, however, the Scripture portrays this revelation-mediating Logos as the very same light-bearing Messiah who elicits universal revulsion from unregenerate humans (John 3:19). The apostle Paul contends that God has not hidden Himself from anyone, but inundates everyone, including the unevangelized, with a constant and unwavering revelation in the created order (Rom. 1:18-20) and in the human conscience (Rom. 2:14-16). Nonetheless, this revelation is universally suppressed as every human heart, left on its own, clamors for idols of mind or matter (Rom. 1:22-23). This, the apostle writes, leaves him “without excuse” (Rom 1:20). The man on the island, he contends, is like a father in denial about the obvious drug addiction of his teenage son, or an elderly smoker ignoring the ominous signs of that persistent cough. He wants to believe the unreal so much that he convinces himself that all is well. The man on the island, just like all sinners, does not want there to be a God to whom he will be held accountable. And so he “suppresses the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18 NASB), convincing himself all along that “there is no God” (Ps 53:1).

As much as contemporary evangelicals would be comforted to embrace the Enlightenment idea of the “noble savage” who is oblivious to the existence of God and His just commandments, Scripture confronts us with a very different picture. The man on the island is not entirely ignorant. Instead, he is so haunted day and night by the Creator who shows Himself in the star-filled expanse, the intricately-ordered sand beach and his own persistently accusing conscience that he is “without excuse” for his refusal to glorify and worship his God (Rom. 1:21).

What Has He Done? The Unevangelized and the Guilt of Sin

Contemporary attempts to muddy the waters on the question of the destiny of the unevangelized uncover a disturbing downgrade in the church’s understanding of the nature of sin. The idea that God may sentence the man on the island to everlasting punishment seems unjust to many evangelical moderns because they no longer recognize the biblical teachings on the holiness of God and the depravity of fallen humanity. The persistent “fairness” question is in one sense appropriate since God has revealed Himself to be just and impartial. And yet the “fairness” plea from our pews unconsciously reveals just what we think about the seriousness of human sin and the holiness of our covenant God.

The impact of some aspects of contemporary evangelical methodology plays a role in this debate. For a generation or more, evangelical churchgoers have heard from their pulpits that unbelievers face not the wrath of God, but “separation” from Him. Those in the pews hear that sinners are not sent to hell on the basis of their violation of God’s law, but that sinners send themselves to hell on the basis of their rejection of the gospel. This understating is at least partly right. Those who reject the Christ are said in Scripture to have “trampled under foot the Son of God” (Heb. 10:29). Nonetheless, the unregenerate sinner stands before God guilty not only due to one isolated act of decision, but because of an entire life of rebellion against God. The sinner will be judged at the holy tribunal of God, not based merely on the absence of faith, but based on the “deeds done in the body” (2 Cor. 5:10), namely his own refusal to abide by the law etched inextricably on his heart.

The Scripture does not speak of the man on the island as an innocent bystander to the tragic human story. At the dawn of creation, he, along with the rest of humanity, was represented by Adam and is in covenant union with his first father (Rom. 5:12-21). [4] The man on the island identifies himself as a willful co-conspirator with Adam by constant mutiny against God (Ps. 51:5). The biblical witness is unmistakably clear that no one is exempted from sin (Rom. 3:9-18) and no sin is ignored by the justice of God (Mark 4:22). Indeed, every funeral service seems to echo Yahweh’s words in the primeval garden: “In the day you eat of it, you will surely die” (Gen. 3:17). The man on the

island may be physically separated from the rest of humanity, but he is still a participant in the worldwide, centuries-long revolt against God. His sole hope is to be united in faith to the Messiah whose sin-bearing sacrifice was found acceptable in the sight of God.

The insistence of some in evangelical churches that this is “unfair” of God betrays a dangerously faulty understanding of grace. [5] God does not owe that man on the island (or the author of this article) a means of salvation. Indeed, He has provided no redemption for fallen angels (Heb. 2:16). The man on the island (and the author of this article) owes to the Creator perfect and unwavering obedience and wholehearted love. Since rebellious human hearts rather delight in sin, every human being – including the man on the island (and the author of this article) – deserves everlasting, conscious punishment for treason against an infinitely holy God. It is sheer graciousness through which God has indeed provided salvation for the man on the island—through the atonement of the Messiah Himself, an offer that is entrusted to the missionary mandate of His pilgrim church.

What Does He Matter? The Unevangelized and the Great Commission Mandate

The equivocation with which many approach this issue reflects a withering of evangelical teaching on the biblical plan of salvation. Those who believe that conversion is simply the cavalier desire to avoid hell are understandably confused about why a man on an island who has never heard of Jesus would find himself facing the wrath of God at the instant of death. The biblical message of salvation, however, is not a message of sincere but generic spirituality. In the New Testament, the gospel requires a conscious acknowledgement of—and trust in—the crucified and risen Jesus. Jesus enraged His hearers not because they were troubled by a call to sincerity, but because He tied entrance into the kingdom of God to belief in Him as Lord and Christ (John 6:40). Virtually all evangelicals acknowledge that Jesus is “the Way, the Truth and the Life” and that “no man comes to the Father” except through Him (John 14:6). But some speculate that the man on the island may come through the Way of faith without consciously realizing that Jesus has provided it. Nothing could be more alien to the preaching of Jesus and the apostles. Jesus compared the salvation He provides to Moses’ lifting up of a bronze serpent in the wilderness. Even as the Israelites who were to be healed from the serpent bites were required to look consciously to the emblem, so those who are to be rescued from the clutches of the Serpent of Eden must look in faith to this particular One who was sacrificed outside the gates of Jerusalem.

After the ascension of Christ, it would have been quite uncomplicated for apostolic preaching to call for Jews to hope in the future messianic empire, consistent with Old Testament prophecy. The apostles could even have warned their contemporaries that their good works could not save them and they must trust in the righteousness of this unnamed Messiah to rescue them. Would not many more converts have come to faith? Instead, the apostles refused to call for generic sincerity or even faith in a generic Christ. They insistently proclaimed that the only way of escape for their hearers was belief in “this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36).

Those who point to Old Testament believers as evidence that conscious faith in Jesus is not necessary for salvation are mistaken both about the nature of Old Testament belief and about the progressive nature of redemptive history. The New Testament contends that old covenant believers trusted in the coming messianic redemption on the basis of the revelation given to them by God (Heb. 11:26, for example). Even more significantly, the New Testament asserts that a cosmic shift has occurred in the flow of history with the coming of Christ. The “end of the ages” has come upon us. [6] With the advent of the One who has “exegeted” the very nature of God (John 1:18), God now commands all people everywhere (pagan Athenian philosophers as well as the man on the island) to repent and

believe, not just in some generic conception of God, but in the name of the One whom He has raised from the dead and through whom He will judge the cosmos (Acts 17:30-31). This is precisely because of the Christocentric nature of redemption itself. Jesus is not simply a means to some greater end. Instead, the entire purposes of God are so that Jesus may be exalted as “the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29, ESV). The mystery of God hidden for ages past, which has now come to light in the gospel, is that the Father purposes to “sum up all things in Christ” (Eph 1:10 NASB). Thus, the confession of Jesus as Lord is not simply a means of the gospel—it is the eschatological goal of the gospel (Phil 2:9-11). Therefore, the early Christians did not hesitate to disturb their Jewish neighbors from their synagogue worship and to confront God-fearing Gentiles with the scandalous particularity of the accomplished work of Christ Jesus.

But what if, one may ask, the man on the island acknowledges the Creator God revealed in general revelation, and is convicted by the Spirit of sin—a sin uncovered by the law written on his heart. What then if this man throws himself on the mercy of God for forgiveness? Some otherwise very conservative evangelical theologians have left open this as a possibility, though they caution that we do not know how often, if ever, this happens. [7] This question, however, is misleading. It is something akin to asking what if an individual never sins and perfectly obeys God, would he still need salvation through Christ. Such a situation simply does not exist. The heart must believe, Paul writes to the Romans, in the historical fact of the resurrection while the mouth must confess the sovereignty of this particular individual, Jesus of Nazareth (Rom. 10:9-10). The apostle anticipates the question of the man on the island and answers it decisively: “How will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?” (Rom. 10:14) God calls sinners to Himself by His Spirit through the preaching of the gospel of Christ. This passage ends with the boldest of mission thrusts. Since faith “comes from hearing” (Rom. 10:17) and since there are those who do not hear, God graciously sends messengers of His glorious gospel.

As Ronald Nash notes, evangelical objections to the exclusivity of the gospel often serves as a “romantic” comfort for those who “could sleep better if there were less urgency or no urgency in getting the gospel to the unevangelized.” [8] Sentimentalism, however, replaces true affections with a fleeting wave of synthetic emotions. Sentimental compassion for a hypothetical man on an island is an amazingly easy endeavor for evangelicals in carpeted, air-conditioned Bible study classrooms. A Spirit-inflamed burden for real men and real women on real islands might be more costly, perhaps requiring even the tossing aside of DVDs and SUVs to cross the globe with the gospel for those who will never otherwise hear it. Could it be that if more young Timothys were to lose sleep over the destiny of this man on the island that God might raise up a missionary force unparalleled in the history of the Christian church to call millions to faith in Christ?

Conclusion

The question of the man on the island’s eternal destination is settled ultimately not by a consensus gained in a youth Bible study or in a breakout session of the Evangelical Theological Society, but in the words God has revealed to us in the Bible. The issue is no trivial matter since it encapsulates both the content of the gospel and the task of the Great Commission.

This question was not a matter of mere speculation to the apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ since they too had to wrestle with the destiny of the man of the island who had never heard the name of Jesus. And for the sake of those who were “separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the

world” (Eph. 2:12, NASB), they refused to reassure themselves with a manufactured sense of hope for the unevangelized. Instead they endured horrifying persecution to take the gospel to the Gentiles. In short, a North American Christian who ponders whether God is “unfair” to the man on the island should go to the nearest mirror. There he will find a graciously redeemed “man on the island” staring back at him.

[1] John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

[2] Roger E. Olson, “Theology for the Post-Graham Era,” and Gabriel Fackre, “Ecumenical Admonitions,” *Christian Century*, 25 August-1 September 1999, 816-9. Also, see the letter to the editor on this topic submitted by a group of self-professed evangelicals including Nicholas Wolterstorff, Nancy Murphy and Cornelius Plantinga, “An Evangelical Consensus?,” *Christianity Today*, 4 October 1999, 15.

[3] For a discussion of Logos Christology in relation to the doctrine of revelation, seek Gordon Clark, *The Johannine Logos* (Jefferson, Md.: Trinity Foundation, 1989) and Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999): 164-247.

[4] For a discussion of the Adamic roots of original sin, see John Murray, “The Fall of Man,” in John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 67-76.

[5] For a treatment of the “fairness” of God at this point, see Carl F. H. Henry, “Is It Fair?” *Through No Fault of Their Own?: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991): 245-56.

[6] For a full-orbed treatment of the implications of an “already/not yet” understanding of the “last days” in which new covenant believers live, see George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

[7] See, for instance, Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved? The Destiny of Those Who Do Not Hear of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 143-58.

[8] Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994): 163.

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