



## **WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL?**

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer  
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No. 2: Hot Potatoes  
Scripture: Romans 1:18-25

Just before our Missions Festival we embarked on a new series called **Hot Potatoes**. The purpose is to look at some of the big questions that people ask about the Christian faith. Today we are going to consider a huge one. It is **WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL?**

This question is really asking, "Is God moral, is he just, is he fair?" This is extremely important because if the God we worship isn't moral then it destroys the whole point of the exercise. That is why we find that many of the objections being raised by the new atheists and others concern this subject of the morality of God.

You hear it in questions like, "Why does God allow suffering? Why doesn't he intervene in situations of injustice? Why can't he just forgive us instead of killing his son?" These are big issues and we need to answer them if we want to help people to come to Christ and grow in their faith.

This question is so significant that theologians and those involved in what is called the philosophy of religion have devoted a huge amount of time and energy to it. In addition to the reputation of God there is a lot at stake like the purpose of evangelism in a pluralistic society and the eternal fate of billions of people.

Let's look at the facts behind the question.

It is conservatively estimated that throughout all of history 75 percent of those who have lived and died have never heard the gospel.

There is also the sobering fact that the overwhelming majority of the human race die in the religion that they were born into.

Some entire civilizations and tribes have disappeared without ever having a missionary witness.

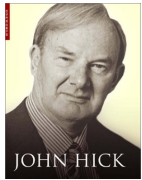
So it is natural to ask is God not concerned for people like that?

Three theories have been proposed to deal with this dilemma. Today I going to present the main ideas and let you decide whether these theories provide reasonable answers. I suspect there will be some you like and others you hate.

So put on your theologian's cap and judge whether they do the job. I am going to call these theories 1, 2 and 3 and at the conclusion you can write the number you favor on your **Welcome Card** and drop it in the offering bag and we will total up the scores by next week.

Theory 1 is **PLURALISM**.

This says that in places where Christianity is not present salvation can be found through other religions.



One of the main proponents of this idea is Professor John Hick. He has written many books on the subject.

Hick asks Christians this challenging question, "Are you morally superior to followers of other religions?"

Think about that. Maybe you say "No. I don't think I am better than other people."

Then Hick would reply that there is no moral advantage to Christianity. Other religions do just as good a job of making people good. As good people can be found in all faiths, salvation can be achieved in all of them.

The pluralist claims that all religions are worshipping the same God which Hick calls "The Real."

Therefore we avoid the problem posed by the question because everyone in history has heard some version of the truth.

Theory 2 is **INCLUSIVISM**.

This says that the salvation that is offered in Jesus Christ is available not only to those who hear his name but to others who are seeking truth.

Ideally people will hear the Christian gospel and respond. But where they cannot, God's Spirit may use other means like appealing to their conscience or speaking through angels. They can be saved by trusting in God under whatever form God is known to them.

Inclusivists claim this is the teaching of the Bible.

After all didn't Paul write that, "**God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.**" (1 Timothy 2:4)

Didn't Peter say, "**The Lord . . . does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**" (2 Peter 3:9) If Jesus is the Savior of the world he will find a way to achieve that universal salvation using any means necessary.

Clark Pinnock is a proponent of this view. He writes that, "God's love for the world is both broad and inclusive."

After all John tells us Christ did not die for our sins only but for the sins of the whole world.

Inclusivism believes that because God is present in the whole world his grace is also at work in some way among all people.

To say that God's Spirit is present everywhere but to deny that he wants to dispense God's grace seems strange. Especially when Ecclesiastes tells us that God has put eternity in the hearts of all people.

That is why when Christians go as ambassadors for Christ to other lands they often discover that the Spirit has gone before them.



Inclusivists pull out some famous names to support their claim. **Pope John Paul the Second** in his first encyclical spoke about the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in non-Christian religions.

**C.S. Lewis** detected God's presence among other faiths.

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis writes, "There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it."



**John Wesley** declared, "We have great reason to hope, although they lived among the heathen, yet many of them were quite of another spirit, being taught of God by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion."

**Sir Norman Anderson**, a past leader in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship taught that people could be saved while being members of other faiths much in the way people were saved in the Old Testament times apart from any Christian confession.



**Charles Ryrie** spoke of a dispensation where God accepted pagans like Job on the basis of faith but without knowledge of either Moses or Christ.

Looking at scripture inclusivists show that in the Old Testament the story of Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek (Genesis 14:17-24) demonstrates that God was at work in a pagan Canaanite priest.

In the New Testament God used a non Christian called Cornelius to teach the Apostle Peter that there is no favoritism in God's dealings with humanity. (Acts 10)

And isn't it true that even the most ardent evangelical who believes that salvation is only through Christ alone recognizes that there are certain classes of people for whom this truth cannot apply?

Children who die in infancy have had no opportunity to respond to Christ even if they are born into a Christian home.

People who are severely mentally handicapped do not have the ability to understand the gospel, even if it is explained to them. Yet most of us believe that although like us they were born in sin, God is merciful and he will not condemn these people through their inability to trust Christ.

Theories 1 and 2 answer the question **what about those who have never heard the gospel** by claiming that people have indeed heard either through their own religion or through the grace of God working in some mysterious way.

Theory 3 is **PARTICULARISM**

This is the oldest tradition in Christian theology.

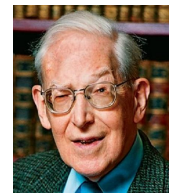
It states that salvation can only come through Jesus Christ for God does not use any other means apart from the death and resurrection of his son.

Therefore the church must carry this message of salvation throughout the whole world until Christ comes again.



**Harold Lindsell** said at the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelism, "God does not reveal himself redemptively through other means than . . . through his children's missionary activity to a lost world."

Other particularists are less dogmatic and believe God could use other means. **J.I. Packer** observed that while the case of Melchizedek, Naaman, Cyrus and the sailors in Jonah's boat offer some basis for optimism, "Many of our questions . . . are left unanswered by the word of God."



Alister McGrath has written extensively on particularism. He points out that it is the constant emphasis of the New Testament.

So we find Peter saying, "**Salvation is found in no one else (that is, Christ), for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.**" (Acts 4:12)

Then Paul and Silas tell the Philippian jailer, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.**" (Acts 16:31)



The familiar words of John 3:16 make the same point, "**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. . . whoever believes in him is not**

**condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." (John 3:16 & 18)**

The Apostle Paul tells the Romans, **"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."** (Romans 1:16)

In other words there is not a different plan of salvation for Jews and another for non-Jews.

Paul goes on to explain exactly what we need to believe when he writes, **"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."** (Romans 10:9)

Particularists point out that religious pluralism is not a new challenge for the church so there is no need to create a new theory for getting the gospel to the world. The reality is that religious pluralism was as much a fact in the first century as it is today.

There have always been a multitude of other religions competing with Christianity. Jesus' explanation to Thomas is still true when the Lord said, **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."** (John 14:6)

You probably have spotted that particularism still leaves the majority of the world's population not having heard the gospel. Yet particularists would point to the positive picture provided by Revelation.

Those saved by Christ will not be few in number for the grace of God is greater than we can imagine.

John describes the scene in heaven. **"There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."** (Rev. 7:9)

Particularists would acknowledge that the cross goes backwards as well as forwards in time.

In other words the death of Jesus covers those who put their faith in God in the centuries before Jesus was born. Hebrews assures us that those who went before us are not penalized or prevented from enjoying the saving reality of the gospel.

It was not their fault to have lived too soon.

God's grace reached them as well.

That is why Abraham was justified by faith without knowing Jesus and why Paul can hold Abraham up as a model believer for all of us even though Abraham never heard the gospel.

So these are three theories that have been put forward to try and grapple with this question **what about those who have never heard the gospel?**

Which one do you think is right?

Put down 1, 2 or 3 on your **Welcome Card**.

Having looked at three theories now let's look at **THREE FACTS** that impact this vital discussion on how we reach the whole world for Christ.

The first is the **LOSTNESS OF HUMANITY**.

The Bible makes it clear that God created us to have an intimate relationship with him.

Tragically that friendship was broken by the fall in the Garden of Eden.

As a consequence we have been lost ever since.

Think of that word "lost".

What picture does it conjure up in your mind?

Think of a lost child.

The concern it raises in an entire community.

The agony it produces in a parent's heart.

"Lost" speaks of hopelessness, disappointment and tragedy.

This is why rejecting Jesus is so serious.

Sin not only makes us sick it caused us to die.

Paul explains to the Ephesians, **"You were dead in your transgressions and sins." (Ephesians 2:1)**

The consequence is that we are, **"Separate from Christ . . . without hope and without God in the world." (Ephesians 2:12)**

As a result we are utterly incapable of helping ourselves and so Paul can say, **"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12)**

That is a description of everyone's condition without Christ. Our situation is utterly perilous.

The Bible makes it clear that lost people don't get a free pass. God does not say "because you had not heard the gospel I will overlook your sin."

If he did then missions would be a mistake for the missionary would tell people about Christ.

Some would reject the gospel and so come under a condemnation they would not have experienced had the missionary stayed at home. The fact is there is no such thing as an innocent person. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Fact 2 is **THE GOODNESS OF GOD**

This question **what about those who have never heard the gospel** insinuates that God is not fair and therefore not good.

But the testimony of scripture is that God is utterly good.

So the Psalmist offers this challenge, **"Taste and see that the Lord is good."**  
(Psalm 34:8)

Jesus informs the rich young ruler, **"No one is good except God alone."**  
(Mark 10:17)

Maybe the goodness of God is the word you need to hear today. Let it ring through your soul. God is good.

Sometimes we pass through a dark valley of circumstances where it appears that God is not good.

But that is just because we do not see the whole picture.

We do not yet comprehend the good plan of God.

If we did we would acknowledge with David, **"You are good, O Lord."**  
(Psalm 25:7)

So how is God's goodness shown to the lost?

Paul tells us in Romans chapter 1 that God reveals himself to every person in a multitude of ways.

First he reveals himself through **creation**.

Paul writes, **"Since the creation of world God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what he has made."** (Romans 1:20)

If we look around us we see the beauty of creation and that points us to the creator.

We see the goodness of creation and that points to the goodness of God.

Then God reveals himself to us in our **conscience**.

The reason we have a concept of right and wrong is because God put it there.

It is the result of being made in his likeness.

Then God reveals himself through **culture**.

The structures of society and the rich diversity of human beings reveal a God of order and justice.

Even the multiplicity of religions in the world reveal our hunger for the divine. As these religions cannot all be true because they contradict one another our intellect should drive us on a search for truth.

Yet the appalling tragedy is that despite this three-fold witness of natural revelation we ignore God and turn our back on him which is why Paul tells us, **"Men are without excuse."** (Romans 1:20)

So in his goodness God sent Christ as his divine revelation and we at least have received it here in America. Yet many of us spurn Jesus and reject the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The goodness of God is also seen in his judgment.

That will be perfect. Abraham asks, **"Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25)**

The answer is a resounding YES.

No one will be able to shout "unfair" when they hear God's judgment.

Rather we will affirm that, **"God's judgment is right." (2 Thessalonians 1:5)**

So what are the implications of God's goodness for those who have never heard the gospel?

God will only judge us according to the light we have received. A person who had never heard about Christ will not be judged for rejecting him.

They will be judged based on the knowledge of God they have received through creation, conscience and culture. But the tragic testimony of scripture is that many people do reject the light that God has given them.

Thankfully, not all do.

The magi were pagan astrologers but they followed the light they saw in the night sky and it led them to Jesus.

The lists of great heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 indicate that although these men and women had not heard the gospel they were saved by responding in faith to the God who had revealed himself to them.

The good news is that all who cast themselves on God's mercy will receive it.

Fact 3 is **THE GREAT NEED FOR WITNESSES.**

As most people will not respond to the general revelation of creation we must give them the special revelation of Christ who tells his church, **"You will be my witnesses." (Luke 1:8)**

Think of what a witness is.

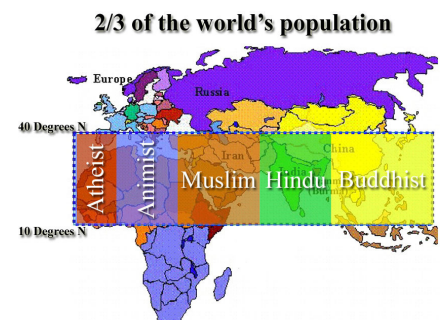
A witness is a person who has seen or heard or knows some truth. We who know about Christ are to declare it.

It is because there is a great need for witnesses that missions and evangelism are a top priority at Autumn Ridge. That is why we just had two weeks for our Missions Festival with the appropriate theme, "Until the whole world knows."

We will witness until the job is done.

Our task is to translate the scriptures into all 2,000 languages on the planet.

Our job is to invade the 10/40 Window which represents the poorest part of the world spiritually, economically, educational and medically.



The lostness of humanity explains why Jesus' final words to his disciples were, **"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."** (Mark 16:15)

It is why Paul having explained the terrible lostness of humanity asks, **"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?"** (Romans 10:14-15)

That is why we are glad that a number of witnesses have gone out from Autumn Ridge to explain what they know about Christ to those who have not heard. It is why we pray for many more to go.

Those of us who stay behind have the responsibility to share the good news here and also support by our prayers and giving those who go to other lands.

It is appropriate to ask "What about those who have never heard the gospel?"

But we have heard the gospel.

We not only have the general revelation of creation we have the special revelation of Christ.

Of all people we are without excuse.

Jesus Christ came for us. He died on the cross and rose again that we can be saved.

He calls us to join his great cause of taking the life transforming gospel throughout the earth.