

THE UNEVANGELIZED AND INTERPERSONALISM

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The unevangelized have a frame of reference by which they can approximate God's intentions for human behavior. They experience relationships with other persons (ethics) and can read from that how broken friendship is overcome (salvation). The "noble pagan" can practice the Golden Rule (The Second Great Commandment) and "grope" after God to find him (Acts 17:27) since deity must be superior and personal (The First Great Commandment). So the unevangelized can be accountable and judged in relation to their limited perspective.

Romans 2:11-16 identifies conscience as an alternative frame of reference. Conscience is a personal characteristic that can function in the absence of revelation (law). God evaluates the unevangelized by how they act relative to where their conscience properly leads them. God judges them by the light that they have.

If the unevangelized keep the ordinances, ritual matters (circumcision, *e.g.*) based on positive commandments can be regarded as done. From the standpoint of motives, they would have done them had they known. The kind of people who do the interpersonal and moral aspects of the Law have an attitude that would do the formal ones if they knew to do them. Jesus seems to have said as much even of Tyre and Sidon and Sodom (Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 10:13-16). That is the way people treat each other; they do not blame other people for doing or not doing what they cannot know. They make judgment by heart, motive, and attitude. The idea has been called "implicit faith": the unevangelized may have believed had they heard. The fact that they would have obeyed shows in the fact that many do when they are told. We can speak of their doing the dynamic equivalent of the formal aspects of the faith.

The times of ignorance God overlooks (Acts 17:30). He judges by the heart. Paul said of giving that it is acceptable as people have, not as they do not have (2 Corinthians 8:11-12) if the willingness is there. God's judgment of the unevangelized (beyond matters where conscience has properly led them) reduces to attitude in place of content. Judgment moves from a quantitative base (knowledge, works) to a qualitative one—one appropriate to an interpersonal system. People can distinguish subjective from objective, can honor intention in place of being right, and can operate in qualitative as well as quantitative terms.

1 John 4:7 makes the striking statement that "*he who loves is begotten by God.*" The text does not say, "*He that is begotten by God loves.*" Integrating that statement with Romans 2 and Acts 17 may imply that it is not how much we know, but how much we care—at least relative to that wherein conscience properly leads. John, however, may be supplying a litmus test for defining Christians against Gnostics, where salvation was not from sinful behavior but from

undesirable nature. Those who love are Christians; those who do not love are not Christians. Whether some non-Christians love would then fall outside his frame of reference.

John's comment raises the question, too, as to whether loving behavior occurs outside the circle of Christian faith—including the unevangelized. Love fulfills the Law (Romans 13:10). Luther said, "*Love God and do what you please.*" What God is really after is people caring about one another and acting accordingly. What does the Lord require of us but to do justly, love kindness, and walk humbly before him (Micah 6:8; Deuteronomy 30:15)?

The question that remains is whether only Christians can love. Traditional theology implicitly says "no" by its doctrines of natural depravity, no salvation outside the church, the necessity of Holy Spirit supernatural regeneration, and so on. Those outside the circle of faith supposedly have even their apparently good behavior tainted with self-centered motivation; so their good acts are evil from a motivational standpoint. Such claims can be no more than guesses made to maintain consistency with viewpoints already taken. No scriptural comment requires such claims about the unevangelized, and experience seems hard put to justify egocentrism in all noble and selfless behavior by non-Christians. What will we say of the life quality of all quasi-Christian groups, all Jews, or all those in eastern religions? We can darken their motives, we can affirm they are Christian equivalents, or we can suppose the possibility of genuine love outside the faith. If those who love are begotten by God and if given people are in fact loving, should we entertain the option that they are "begotten by God"? That does not mean we have no obligation to teach them the way of the Lord more perfectly (Acts 18:26).

With the unevangelized or erroneously evangelized, it is not what they cannot do (learn about the true God and his Son Jesus Christ), but what they can do—the "mark of the Christian" (a loving disposition; cp. again 2 Corinthians 8:11-12). Perhaps, though they do not know about Christ in fact, they nevertheless know Christ in principle, or in "spirit." They are doing naturally the things of the Law (Romans 2:14). In this respect they seem comparable to people in the patriarchal dispensation. The same goes for those in the Mosaic dispensation. God figures all salvation in relation to Christ (Acts 4:12).

In all this, we preserve the principle of salvation by faith vs. works by remembering that loving behavior on the part of the unevangelized serves as a condition for relationship to God, not a cause of it (merit) since no one—with or without law—lives perfectly by any standard they adopt.

The previous comments about 1 John 4:7 makes (1) a theological observation: those who love are begotten by God whether inside or outside the circle of Christian faith. Another possibility exists that makes (2) a hermeneutical observation: biblical language sometimes does not distinguish primary proof from confirmatory evidence. Another possible example of not distinguishing primary and confirmatory evidence is 1 John 4:2: "*Every spirit that confesses that*

Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.” If the statement in 4:7 was really meant to address a confirmatory observation, then the passage falls out of the discussion about the unevangelized elect as postulated above.

Certain comparisons seem natural between God’s fatherhood toward us and our parenting toward children. At the risk of allegorizing a comparison, we offer three observations based on the fact that human parenting like divine leadership takes place primarily within the all-encompassing category of personal relationship.

1. The unevangelized are comparable to progressive revelation in the patriarchal and Jewish periods. We do not require our children to believe and behave in ways we have not told them about, nor do we punish them for what they do not know.

2. We do not infer that it is better to leave the unevangelized alone because they now have less to be responsible for and run less risk of damnation. We do not withhold things from our children that they should know for their greater happiness just so they can have more things to disobey with impunity.

3. We do not have to say that the unevangelized are lost in God’s eyes before there is a need to save them. First, people do not have to be lost before they need to be saved by Christ. Second, we do not withhold from our children new responsibilities and information just because they may balk at additional duties. It is appropriate that our children develop. (We take readiness into consideration.) In fact, they may rebel and alienate themselves over new responsibility even though previously they were obedient children. The same holds true for the unevangelized.

Leaving open the possibility in theory that God may choose to save unevangelized people does not imply that he will save them all or that there would be no more saved through “unevangelism.” Likewise, it does not imply that they are saved some other way than through Christ. Furthermore, we do not infer that missions has no urgency. The motive of missions is the glory of God and the welfare of man. We simply do not assume that only those that know about Christ can be saved by Christ. All salvation is figured through Christ including salvation in the patriarchal (1 Peter 4:6) and Mosaic periods (Hebrews 9:15), who did not know about him. Their situation seems comparable to people after Christ who have not heard about him.

The intention here is not to get caught up in speculations about unrevealed matters—like how God will render judgment on the vast majority who have never heard of Christ. Our concern is to use sanctified imagination to remove a stumbling block to belief based on the idea that a holy loving God would not consign to eternal hell those who had no chance of knowing him or his Son. If the real situation is some other way than the one hypothesized above, well and good. But those reasonings do at least remove a supposed problem in the case of the unevangelized when we speak of their needing salvation through Christ alone.