

SOLID GROUND

from Stand to Reason

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The Christian claim of exclusivity has been a stumbling block for ages and now more than ever. Is it fair? Is it just? Is it true?

Dear Friend,

“Mr. Koukl, I want to get in a pointed comment here.” The talk-show host hesitated, dramatizing the moment for his radio audience. “We were talking about the person in Southeast Asia,” he continued, “the pagan or Buddhist or anyone who has never heard of western Christianity. Father Kidney said, according to his [Roman Catholic] faith, that person may be saved if he is honest and follows his religion. Do you believe that, or do you believe he is damned?”

Inside I winced. The question was phrased so bluntly that my answer was bound to offend. In fact, it even offended me.

“No, I don’t believe he will be saved without the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

THE DESPICABLE DOCTRINE

This challenge has nipped at the heels of Christian apologists for ages, causing some to limp through their witness with shrugs and apologies or lash back with “narrow” dogma.

It is the most taxing objection I face and also the most odious to others, a true stumbling block, foolishness. At face value, it’s a bit much in a postmodern culture even to the committed believer.

To non-Christians, it’s a despicable doctrine. If hearing the name of Jesus is a requirement for salvation, entire cultures would be consigned to perdition, reducing the Almighty to a petty racist. Is that fair? Is it just?

Rabbi Weiss voiced the opinion of the Reformed Jews that evening on the radio:

I would have to state very squarely...we don’t accept that at all. We believe that the Almighty would have to be a very cruel, very unfeeling God that would make it necessary for so many millions of his children who are not in contact and who never have been in contact with anybody to spread the good news, to be damned eternally.

Even C.S. Lewis drew the circle wider than most Evangelicals would feel comfortable with. He distinguished between those who aggressively evade the Son of God and those who reject Him out of “honest ignorance or honest error.”

Of the latter, Lewis says, “If their intentions were as good as I suppose them to have been...I hope and believe that the skill and mercy of God will remedy the evils which their ignorance, left to itself, would naturally produce.”¹

THE COMMON DENOMINATOR

Is it possible that the Bible lends support to this idea? Paul argues against works salvation by appealing to a single common denominator of the redeemed

GUARD THE TREASURE

QUICK SUMMARY:

- The most taxing objection to the biblical message of salvation that I face is: What about the good, sincere person who has never heard about Jesus?
- This question presumes that general revelation is adequate to save, that many people ignorant of Christ are basically good, and that God counts sincerity as a substitute for holiness. The Bible teaches none of these ideas.
- The common denominator of the redeemed of every age is faith, a genuine, active trust in God’s mercy.
- The specific *object* of that trust has been progressively revealed. Jesus is the perfect expression of God’s mercy, the purest object of faith.
- Man’s problem is not ignorance, but a natural impulse to suppress the truth and run from the God who seeks him. Therefore, God must intervene in grace to “call” men to Himself.
- When God calls, He always provides the content necessary to respond with faith in Jesus, no matter how remote or isolated the seeker may be.
- No one is lost for rejecting a Jesus he’s never heard of, but rather for rejecting the Father whose voice is heard everywhere.



of every age. God justified New Testament believers the same way He justified Old Testament believers – by faith.

If there is this continuity of salvation, and Old Testament believers had never heard of Jesus, then there has to be a different common denominator marking those accepted and justified by God other than knowing the name of the Savior.

What of Melchizedek, a priest of El Elyon (a Canaanite name for God Most High)?² Or Rahab, a heathen hooker who knew only that the Hebrew God was “God in heaven above and on the earth beneath”?³

Peter tells Cornelius that “...God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him” (Acts 10:34-35). Lydia was simply a “worshipper of God” whose heart the Lord opened to respond to Paul’s message (Acts 16:14).

Doesn’t it make sense that, as Rabbi Weiss argued, “...all human beings, as long as they are decent, as long as they uphold the fundamental commandments...are promised a place in the world to come”?

Some New Testament texts seem to indicate this. Paul writes “[God] will render to every man according to his deeds...For there is no partiality with God” (Romans 2:6, 11). Jesus Himself states, “An hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29).

Bruce Demarest asks, “Could it be that on the basis of the general knowledge of God that all possess, a person, out of a deep sense of need, might throw himself on the mercy of God and be accepted?”⁴

This is the question. How do we answer it?

WHAT MUST I DO?

Fundamentally, the question of salvation is a question about criteria. With the Philippian jailer, we ask, “What must I do to be saved?” How do we know what God wants?

I put this question to a group of Christians. Their answer: God must reveal Himself. For example, He’s revealed “His eternal power and divine nature...through what has been made” (Romans 1:20).

“Is the issue of salvation, though, a question of *who* God is – His attributes – or of what God *wants* – His desires?”

They thought for a minute. “What He wants,” they agreed finally.

“Look at Betty at the end of the table. We can know some general things about her by observation. But how can we know her desires?”

Their response was immediate, “She has to tell us.”

The same is true with God. He reveals something of *His nature* through the created order. But we cannot know *His desires* – specifically, what we must do to be saved – unless He tells us. Only when God speaks can we move beyond vague inference to specifics.⁵

The fact that God has spoken is foundational to the Christian message. We don’t have to guess what He wants. He’s told us, and when God speaks, His Word puts an end to speculation.

So far, two things seem obvious. First, the issue is not whether we worship God our way, but whether we worship God *His* way, according to His desires. Two, we cannot know what that is unless He tells us.

Jesus said we must worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:23). Paul and Peter both emphasize “true knowledge” of God;⁶ John records that Jesus is the “true light” and “true vine” (John 1:9, 15:1). Indeed, the first of the Ten Commandments demands fidelity to the only true God.

THE PROBLEM OF SINCERITY

Most people in the world worship something beyond themselves. Some kind of god is the object of their religious attention and – with complete sincerity – they pay obeisance. But why assume this is enough? Has God said that mere sincerity is adequate? No, the Bible seems to say just the opposite.

In his sermon on Mars Hill, Paul argues that worshiping in ignorance is not adequate (Acts 17:23). Later, he makes the point clear when he pours out his heart to the Romans regarding his brethren, the Jews: “I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge” (Romans 10:2).

Zeal needs to be based on truth, not sincerity. Canaanites worshipping Molech did so zealously, but Molech was a non-god, an idol. Zeal is not an adequate defense. In fact, it can have disastrous results if not wedded to right knowledge (Canaanite “worship” included child sacrifice).

THE PROBLEM OF GOODNESS

What of the good person, though? Surely, God will not reject him? Even the Scriptures claim as much.

Granted, if a man keeps God’s law, he’ll have no problem with God. Paul and Jesus both affirm this. However, the next question is vital: Where is such a man?

Poll people on the definition of “basically good” and you’ll notice something interesting. Virtually everyone thinks he’s a good person. Invariably, when we’re left to decide what’s really bad, we always come out fairly clean in the analysis. Our standards are generous because our self-interests are involved. The temptation to cover our own tracks is strong.

When measured by God's standards, though, the picture is much different. Even when Jesus reduced all God's commands to two simple maxims – love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself – our lives are still moral disasters.

Where is the good Buddhist, the good Hindu, or the good Muslim? Where is the good Christian, for that matter? They just don't exist. Every mouth is closed. God's absolute standards silence every claim to self-righteousness making the whole world accountable to God (Romans 3:19).

MAN ON THE RUN

This is a critical point, one misunderstood by many Christians: *People are not ultimately condemned for their rejection of Christ. They are punished for breaking God's law.* True, disbelief keeps them from the antidote, the cross, sealing their doom (Jesus' point in John 3:18). However, when the books are finally opened at the last judgment, men are judged by their *deeds*, and everyone so judged perishes because they are each guilty (Revelation 20:11-15).

We err in assuming that many would turn to God if they had the chance. People reject the light given them not out of ignorance, but out of willful suppression of truth (Romans 1:18-19). When left to himself, man runs *from* God not *towards* Him. Whether there's a wholesale rejection of the entire Gospel in its clarity or a refusal on the more basic level of general revelation – God's witness in nature – man is equally at fault.

The heathen who's worshipping an idol in the jungle has already exchanged the truth for a lie. He's not only under judgment for lawlessness (as all men are); he's rejected the Father (general revelation) before he's even heard of the Son. If someone tunes you out before you tell her the whole story, you're not obliged to go further. In fact, she wouldn't listen to you if you did.

Even so, God wants none to perish and labors to bring people into the kingdom (1 Timothy 2:4). Peter counts the delay of Christ's return not as slowness, but as patience so the guilty would repent rather than perish (2 Peter 3:9).

Note, if sinful man doesn't seek God, but instead runs from Him, then God must make the first move to block man's retreat. This means that no "heathen in Africa" begins a genuine search unless God has first moved in him to do so (John 6:44).

If God has to turn our heads, at least in some measure, before we can respond to the Gospel, then God must supply specific information as part of the process. God will not supernaturally pull us to Him, then deny us the information needed to respond to His call.

The act of calling and the revelation necessary for a response to the call are inseparable parts of the rescue plan.

If God does the first, He provides the second, either through a human messenger or through direct supernatural communication.

FORMING AN ANSWER

So far we've covered critical ground. First, God only punishes those who are guilty. He owes no one a pardon. If He offers pardon to some and withholds mercy from others, God is not unjust to punish the guilty. Second, guilty people don't seek God; they run from Him. Third, God takes the initiative to pursue us out of love.

With all these elements in place, we can construct a response to our initial challenge.

For anyone to come to God he must come on God's terms, details only God can tell us. The continuity of salvation, the common denominator through all ages, has been man's expression of active faith in the mercy and the promise of God. All past believers – Abraham, Melchizedek, Rahab – demonstrated this redemptive trust. The specific content of this revelation, however, has grown through time. Abraham knew a little, David knew more, the prophets still more. The apostles (and you and I through their word) were the best informed of all.

We don't know what the content was for Melchizedek, Job, or Jethro. We do know what God has revealed for us today: the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the final statement, the perfect expression of God's mercy, the purest object of faith. Today, Jesus is the acid test of what anyone really thinks of the Father (John 5:37-38).

God can give this information in two ways. It's certainly possible that in isolated situations He communicates directly as He did with Abraham. In that case, though, the God revealed will be the true God, not Buddha, Allah, Krishna, Rah, Zeus, or Mother Earth. In short, the God the heathen discovers through direct revelation will be the Lord Jesus.

Usually, however, the message of the true Savior comes on the lips of a preacher bearing the good news (Romans 10:14-15). When God touches someone's heart to seek Him, He will move heaven and earth to bring that person the message.

Biblical examples abound. Rahab responded to her rudimentary knowledge of the God of Israel and God brought the Jewish spies right to her door (Joshua 2:1). Phillip "preached Jesus" to the Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah on the road to Gaza (Acts 8:26-39). Peter brought "the words by which you will be saved" to the household of Cornelius, the God-fearer (Acts 10:23-48, 11:14). The Lord opened Lydia's heart "to respond to the things spoken by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Each was given specifics in response to their seeking.

In *Death of a Guru*, Rabindranath Maharaj tells his story. Rabi was a young Yogi, a Guru and a member of the

Brahman caste. He'd experienced astral travel to other planets, had psychedelic experiences, and received yogic visions. Deep meditation led to higher and higher states of consciousness.

Rabi discovered, though, that each step closer to his Hindu gods was a step farther from the true God he sought in his heart. When confronted with the utter emptiness of life and the shallowness of religion, he cried out, "I want to know the true God, the Creator of the universe!"⁷ God responded by bringing the Gospel to him through the witness of a young woman named Molli.

THE REAL ISSUE

Christians can be confident of this: Anyone seeking God in truth will find Him and be accepted by Him. Yet the Bible teaches that the "heathen" of any land – even ours – will seek his Creator only if God has already moved in his heart to do so. And God will finish the job, always providing the details necessary to complete the work of faith.

This, however, isn't the real issue for man on the street. When he faces God, there will be no discussion about the heathen who never heard. Instead, the question will be: What about those who *have* heard? What about him? Did he bend his knee and ask Jesus for forgiveness?

God does not condemn anyone for rejecting a Jesus he's never heard of. Men are held accountable for their own moral crimes against God, and for rejecting the Father, whose voice is heard everywhere.

Your partner for the truth,



Gregory Koukl
President, Stand to Reason



PUTTING YOUR KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

- Assure challengers that no one is lost for rejecting a Jesus he's never heard of. God will judge each person by the light given him and the life he has lived.
- Point out, though, that this is not good news. God's fingerprints are everywhere, and we all know we consistently fail to live as we ought, so none of us has an excuse.
- God can reach any person in any circumstance. He is not limited by geography, technology, language, or culture. Anyone seeking the true God on His terms will be found by Him. The God they find will not be the false gods of competing religions, but Jesus Himself.
- Don't let questions about the unevangelized distract from the most important issue: What will each of *us* do with the message we've heard?

¹ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 110.

² Genesis 14:18-20.

³ Joshua 2:11.

⁴ Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 260
See Calvin, *Corpus Reformatiorum*, vol. XXIV, pp.301-9; vol. XXV, p. 267; vol. XLIX, pp. 307-8.

⁵ Knowing God's moral desires – the law written on our hearts – would be an exception.

⁶ Colossians 2:2, 3:10; 2 Peter 1:3, 8.

⁷ Majaraj, Rabindranath R., *Death of a Guru* (Philadelphia & New York: A.J. Holman, 1977), 122.

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- 28 Bethany Church, Sierra Madre, CA Topic: TBD Contact: (626) 355-1403

APRIL

- 21-23 Worldview Conference, Redmond, WA Contact: (425) 556-5905
- 29 Stand for Truth Banquet, Union City, CA Topic: TBD Contact: shawn@standfortruthministries.org

Steve Wagner

MARCH

- 12 Long Beach Community Church, Topic: "How Should I Respond to Global Injustice?" 6 pm service
Contact: LeslieLWickman@apu.edu

APRIL

- 22 Oregon Right to Life Annual Conference; 8 am – 4 pm; Contact: (503) 463-8563

Brett Kunkle

JULY

- 10 South Bay Evangelical Christian Church, 7:30 pm; Contact: (310) 265--0240

APRIL

- 20-23 New Covenant Community Church college group events; Contact: Loren Pankratz (559) 298-0688

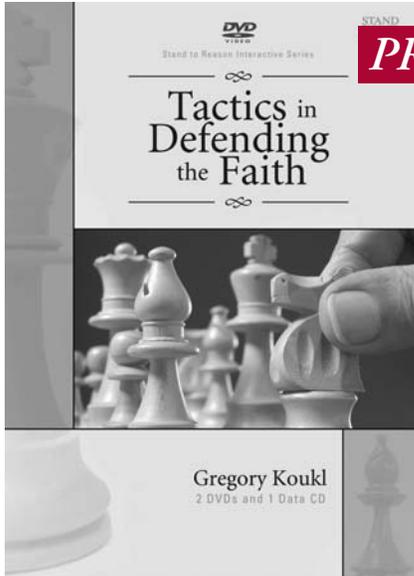
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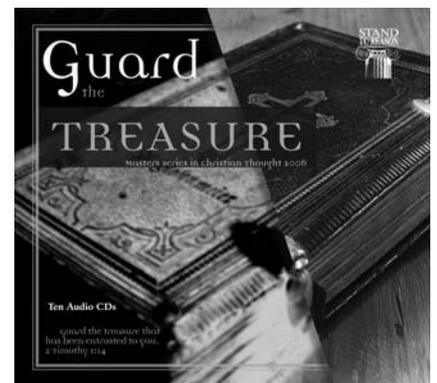
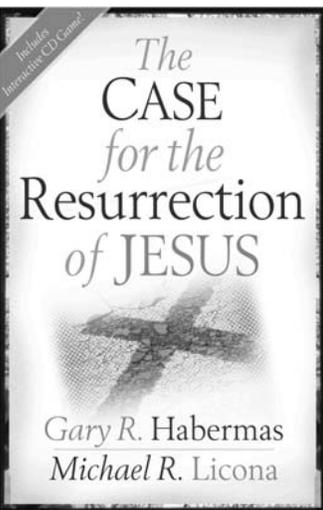


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