



The Final Destiny of the Unevangelised

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Beliefs about the postmortem destiny of the unevangelised can strongly influence pastoral ministry. In innumerable households the wife retains a live faith and active membership of the church, but the husband is either agnostic or an atheist, and his church membership is either non-existent or merely nominal. It is also a fact that men tend to die before their wives. When the minister visits the bereaved widow, what comfort can he bring her? She is apt to reflect upon her husband's lack of faith, and wonder about his final destiny. If she retains a smattering of traditional teaching, she may well believe that an active faith in Christ is the sole passport to heaven, and that her unbelieving and indifferent husband is consigned to eternal damnation.

That traditional views regarding the destiny of the unevangelised are still very much in vogue among church people, recently came to light in a survey conducted by Eric Stoddart.¹ He discovered that a clear majority of Scotland's clergy believe that there will be a Judgment Day at which we will be separated into two categories – the 'saved' and the 'lost'. A similar majority of clergy consider there to be no postmortem opportunities for us to switch from being lost to being saved. The result, in their opinion, will be that some of us will be eternally separated from God. Over a third of clergy believe that this separation will involve eternal mental anguish in hell; more than one fifth hold that this suffering will be an eternal physical torment. Most ministers in Scotland also believe that postmortem evangelisation and conversion is not a valid hope for people who are 'lost'. Stoddart rightly points out that the prospect of loved ones being condemned to everlasting punishment in hell would be almost unbearable for their relatives to contemplate.

It is striking that so little attention has been paid in modern theological and churchly literature to the pastoral and personal consequences of the doctrine of hell and its torments. The subject is referred to by Alan Billings in *Dying and Grieving*² where he mentions an uncomfortable

moment in his ministry as a young Anglican priest, when a very distressed, newly bereaved widow gripped his hand and asked, “Where is my husband now?” The question, as Billings comments, leads on to others – Are the dead anywhere? Do the dead pass straight into the presence of God? Is there a period of purgation and preparation? Are the dead resurrected all together at the end of the age? If so, where are they in the meantime? Billings’s own answer to that question is that when we consider the dead from the standpoint of the world, they are absent. The only way in which they ‘exist’ is in the mind of God. According to Billings, God holds ‘the “blueprint” – the template of each individual’ until they are present again at the final resurrection.

This answer seems profoundly unsatisfactory, as it denies the deceased any opportunity beyond death for conversion and spiritual development, and would offer scant support to the bereaved widow. Many would seek to comfort her here, by saying that she should realise that she is leaving the fate of her loved one in God’s hands. Yet, this would offer small consolation as the traditional criteria for God’s judgment would suggest that her loved one would be found wanting. Every evangelical sermon maintaining that a personal relationship with Christ in this life is vital for salvation reinforces the anxiety in bereaved relatives that their unbelieving loved ones are in mortal danger.

The time is therefore opportune for a fresh examination of eschatology, and, in particular, for the revival of a concept which has attracted a fair degree of support from theologians in various periods of church history – namely, the intermediate state. The intermediate state refers to the interim period between the death of the individual and the final consummation. The idea has its roots in the Old Testament concept of Sheol, and some New Testament passages complement and expand the Old Testament teaching. The principal passages in the New Testament’s synoptic tradition with a bearing on an intermediate state are the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) and our Lord’s conversation with the penitent thief on the Cross (Luke 23:43). The intermediate condition after death is temporary, and lasts only till the Day of Judgment. When that Day comes, and not before, the separation of spirits mentioned by Jesus in Matt 13:25 and Mark 9:43

ff. occurs when some pass to the glory of the world to come, while others go to Gehenna. This is the traditional interpretation, but it has received substantial criticism from some New Testament scholars. It is also unacceptable to theologians like Karl Rahner and T. F. Torrance who believe that temporal categories do not apply after death. Yet, it is difficult to understand how there can be further spiritual growth beyond death if temporal categories are no longer relevant.

One of the strongest supporting texts for the intermediate state occurs in John 14:2 – “In my Father’s house are many resting-places” – if one is able to accept William Temple’s well-known interpretation. Temple describes the resting-places as ‘wayside caravanserais’ – shelters at stages along the road where travellers may rest on the long pilgrimage to perfection.

The biblical evidence for an intermediate state paves the way for consideration of the possibility of posthumous conversion. A number of biblical texts indicate this possibility – the principal ones being 1 Peter 3:18 and 4:6, referring to the descent of Christ to Hades. The symbolic understanding of the descent expresses the retroactive power of Christ’s redemption of sinners who had no faith. The traditional interpretation locates the descent between Christ’s death and resurrection, further confirming belief in an intermediate state when the saving encounter between Christ and the unevangelised would take place. The redemptive efficacy of Christ’s death can then be extended to the unevangelised in all ages as it has eternal significance.

Such a favourable eschatology for the unevangelised received strong support from the Alexandrian school of theology in the third and fourth centuries. Clement of Alexandria shrank from the thought that the eternal fate of human beings is irrevocably sealed at the grave, and so he believed that opportunities for repentance will continue in the life to come. Both Origen and Gregory of Nyssa held a doctrine of hell that is medicinal, remedial and temporary; in their view, every human being passes through the intermediate state for purgation. The experience would literally be hell for the wicked as long as they remain unrepentant, but this need not be a permanent state.

There would appear to be sufficient support in biblical and patristic theology for belief in a hopeful outcome for the unevangelised in the intermediate state. The main foundation for such a departure from traditional views as they occur in Augustinian/Calvinist thought, however, lies in reflection upon the nature of God as revealed in Christ. As he is pre-eminently a god of love and justice, he is not going to debar from salvation those who, by reasons of history or geography, have been prevented in this life from responding positively to Christ. There will be further opportunities beyond death for conversion and spiritual development.

This is a much more positive and promising view of the final destiny of the unevangelised than that to be found in the traditional theology stemming from Augustine and Calvin with its predestinarian basis. It has been greatly encouraged by a recent development in theology centring upon the doctrine of God. This new cluster of ideas is frequently described as ‘opentheism’. It is associated particularly with the transatlantic theologians Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, but many of the ideas had already featured in the work of a number of English philosophers and theologians, notably, J. R. Lucas, Richard Swinburne and Keith Ward. As the name indicates, ‘opentheism’ portrays God as being ‘open’ to relationships of love with human beings. He has created us in such a way that we are free to respond to his love, or to reject it. It belongs to the essence of love in that it does not coerce or manipulate but seeks a free response. There is, therefore, in God’s nature, potential for change, and he is able and willing to change the detail of his plans in response to human actions and prayers.

Opentheists, while upholding the finality of Christ as the sole saviour of humanity, also affirm God’s saving presence in the wider world and in other religions – a theological position known as ‘inclusivism’, similar to Karl Rahner’s belief in ‘anonymous Christians’. Proponents of inclusivism maintain that some of those who never hear the Gospel may nevertheless attain salvation before they die, if they respond to the revelation they do have. The grace of God can assuredly be at work in the great non-Christian religions, and indeed in the lives of

virtuous agnostics and atheists, when they respond to such light as they have received. They are on the right road, heading towards salvation. Common grace available through general revelation, however, is epistemologically inadequate and cannot be a sufficient ground of salvation. Postmortem evangelism is therefore to be preferred to inclusivism.

Proponents of this view believe that people will receive an opportunity after death to hear about Christ, and, indeed to encounter him, and to accept or reject him. They hold that explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation. A number of prominent modern theologians subscribe to this position – among them Gabriel Fackre, Jerry Walls and the Anglicans Richard Swinburne and Keith Ward. The idea of personal fulfilment in Christ in the afterlife, for men and women of different faiths is also suggested from outside the Anglican communion by our own Presbyterian theologian, George Newlands.³ This more hopeful outcome for the destiny of the unevangelised could greatly benefit those who face death with imperfect or non-existent faith, and also their bereaved loved ones.

The possibility of repeated approaches by Christ to the unevangelised in the intermediate state opens up the scenario of ‘second chances’. This is a different question from what happens when an unevangelised person meets Christ in the afterlife for the first time – that would be a ‘first chance’. Consideration, however, must be given to the case of someone who, in this life, made a decision to reject Christ. It could be that his decision was due to inadequate proclamation of the Gospel, or to the experiences of life predisposing him to doubt, or to the prevailing influence of other people militating against faith. Even Christians, in this life, sometimes fail to make an absolute choice, hovering between love of God, and love of themselves. Also, there are those who might have become saintly if they had lived longer.

The idea of a ‘second chance’ goes right back to Marcion and Origen in the early Church, and to Schleiermacher, Dorner, Godet and others in more recent times. The possibility, not simply of a ‘second chance’, but of a whole succession of chances is supported by modern

theologians like Leslie Weatherhead and Frederick Levison. The Jehovah's Witnesses also maintain this view, but it is rejected by many theologians of conservative views. The chief arguments for it are general considerations about divine love and justice, the position defended by texts like John 3:18, 36 that conscious, deliberate unbelief in Jesus is the only legitimate ground for condemnation, and so, those at least, who have never heard of Christ, or have not seriously considered him, ought to have another chance; and texts like Matt 12:32 and 1 Peter 3:18 and 4:6 which can be interpreted as teaching probation after death.

A God of love would surely wish to give his creatures all possible opportunities to become the persons he wants us to be, to return to our life, so that in the light of his grace, and in the power of his mercy, we could put right what had gone wrong, finish what was uncompleted, forgiving trespasses against us and healing hurts. Indeed, it could be said that there can be no maturity without further chances of moral and spiritual growth. As long as a person has the faintest perception of an ideal which is higher than that expressed in his own life, there is the chance of reformation. There can be no such thing as a static soul. Postmortem existence will be something like ascending or descending a ladder. As it is likely that free-will is still possessed by souls after death, there will be many choices still to be made. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) is often quoted to show that the gulf between saved and unsaved cannot be bridged after death, but it has also been used to show that there can be postmortem progress. Even the rich man in his torment showed concern for his brothers, to warn them of their possible fate, whereas at the beginning he had shown no concern for anyone other than himself. The probability that we can make postmortem choices does, of course, imply that there will be sin beyond death – possibly spiritual sins such as pride, jealousy, resentment, etc – and this would be unacceptable to many.

It is also frequently maintained that the possibility of a 'second chance' cuts the nerve of mission, but this objection can be countered, simply by quoting our Lord's commission – 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.' (Mark 16:15). It is also

suggested that if someone knew that he was going to receive a ‘second chance’ of salvation beyond death, this would encourage an attitude of carelessness, and would undercut the sense of urgency associated with seeking salvation. But, if such a person continues to reject salvation on the presumption that he can repent later, he is forming, by that very attitude, a settled disposition to prefer his own will to God’s. At the very least, this may make it much more difficult for him to accept God’s will. Also, an attitude of carelessness in this present life could be true only for ‘the spectator’, for one who stands outside the faith. No-one who has met God in any real sense, could possibly become spiritually indifferent, because a compassionate God leaves the definitive act of final judgment to the parousia. For these reasons, it does not seem to be true that a ‘second chance’ casts doubt on the urgency of the choice we make in this life, or the significance of our earthly life as our time of probation. This life will predispose us in one way or another, and the longer we turn away from God, the more painful the process of our return will be.

The argument in favour of future probation rests on reflection upon the nature of God’s love. The love of God as revealed in the life and death of Christ, as well as in his teaching, emphasises its infinite and resourceful nature. God pursues the sinner like Francis Thompson’s *Hound of Heaven*, searching for the lost soul, as the woman searches for the lost coin, or the shepherd for the lost sheep, or the Father waiting for the prodigal son – and he searches until he finds. There is an immeasurable depth and length to the divine love. To make death the point where this love abandons its pursuit of the soul would seem to be an arbitrary cut-off. The limitless, endless nature of God’s love is fully revealed on Calvary, where God goes to the ultimate of self-sacrifice to save mankind. This is also one of the main lessons contained in our Lord’s descent to hell, where he travelled to the extreme depths of God-forsakenness to redeem mankind. If then, it is true that humans survive death, and continue to exist in an intermediate state, the love of God must surely follow us there, never giving up the purpose of winning all souls to himself. It is encouraging, in this regard, to reflect upon those passages of scripture, which tell us that God accompanies his creatures, even into hell – for example, Ps 139. Indeed, even in

hell, there is the possibility that the caring love of God will finally succeed in converting the soul and translating it to heaven. In such a case, of course, the soul would be, not in the traditional hell of endless, retributive punishment, but rather, in a kind of purgatory, where the loving presence of God would exercise a purificatory, healing influence upon the sinner. The hope would be that the infinitely resourceful love of God which pursues the sinner even into the depths of hell itself, will finally succeed in effecting the salvation of everyone. Nevertheless, the double outcome of final destiny, both salvation and condemnation, which is the dominant emphasis in the New Testament, means that universalism cannot be considered as a dogmatic certainty.

In conclusion, a strong case can be made in the mainline churches for a revision of funeral rites. Ministers are regularly asked to conduct funerals for deceased agnostics without any guidance from the published funeral liturgies of their denomination. They are required to compose their own prayers. The latest compilation of prayers for use at funeral services in the Church of Scotland appears to assume that the deceased are believing Christians.⁴ This is because the eternal destiny of the deceased is unclear, and traditional theological presuppositions about the ‘double outcome’ of heaven and hell should not be expected to undergird appropriate prayers. There ought to be in officially sanctioned funeral rites, optional or alternative prayers for deceased persons who are not Christian believers when they die. Completely secular funerals would not be welcomed by surviving relatives who do have faith. They would prefer a Christian service, but one which does not unthinkingly assume that their deceased loved one is entering heaven straightaway, despite his lack of Christian belief.

More needs to be included in the prayers than a petition to God to grant the dead person ‘rest’ and ‘peace’. Reference should clearly be made to the all-encompassing efficacy of Christ’s death and resurrection. In many cases a prayer referring to sin and forgiveness, mentioning the significance of Christ’s Cross would be appropriate. As well as releasing the deceased to ‘God’s care and keeping’, there should be an expression of hope which would be a particular comfort to mourners. The most obvious shortcoming in existing liturgies is the complete

absence of faith in postmortem growth and spiritual maturation, far less of conversion. If the position outlined in this article corresponds to the truth, the continuing existence of the unevangelised in an intermediate state ought to be one of the prominent facts influencing the content of the prayers. It is time to discard the long-standing prejudice in many Protestant churches against prayers for the dead, which are associated in many minds with the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Liturgical commissions in the churches are unlikely to supply appropriate prayers until their panels on doctrine are prepared to revise traditional theological positions regarding the destiny of the unevangelised.

- ¹ Eric Stoddart, “Hell in Scotland: A Survey of Where the Nation’s Clergy Think Some Might be Heading,” in *Contact* 143 (2004): 14–27.
- ² Alan Billings, *Dying and Grieving: A Guide to Pastoral Ministry* (London: SPCK, 2002), 34.
- ³ George Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 187: “... the uniqueness and finality of Christ is an eschatological affirmation. Though men and women live and die in different faiths, yet they will come, after this life on earth, to see that in eternity Christ is the fullness of the peace of God. This is the position which I myself would favour.”
- ⁴ *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1994), 266.