

## **Eternal Life Is For Christians And Non Christians Alike**

In his book, "*A History of Christian Missions*", first published in 1964, Bishop Stephen Neill wrote of three world religions standing out from all the others because of their missionary and universal outlook, these three being, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Each, he pointed out, has an identifiable founder.

In each case the founder believed himself the vehicle of a new revelation of significance to all mankind. Each commissioned disciples to go out and to proclaim the message as widely as they could. Each has been taken to have asserted that theirs is the only kind of worship that will be acceptable to God. Indeed, and where Christianity is concerned, it has long been taught that only those brought to a knowledge and love of Jesus Christ will be saved.

It is for this reason that over the last two thousand years, the world has witnessed waves of, at times, quite heroic Christian missionary endeavour; missionaries often at great personal risk to themselves, going to the remotest and least known parts of the world to secure converts and hence bring what were, and are, regarded as 'lost' people, heathens, the hope of eternal life or salvation.

If we were to trace the motivating force behind Christian missionary endeavour down through the centuries we would find it here, in this deep conviction that apart from Christ there is no hope of eternal life. After all, this is what Jesus seemed to say, more than once. As in John's Gospel, Chapter 17, verse 3, reading from The Revised Standard Version, "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent". Missionaries of more modern times, such as William Carey, held - as Bishop Neill points out - strong views as to the exclusive claims of the Christian faith. To them the religions of the heathen were delusions of the devil (see page 264).

It can be said, both of Churches and individuals, that there has been a 'softening' of thinking on this matter in recent times and less of an insistence on Christianity as being the only way possible to salvation and eternal life. Whereas William Carey and others like him might have written of the religions of the heathen as simply being delusions of the devil, generally there is not quite the same willingness to do so today.

We in this country have, for example, become more sensitive to, and more respectful about, the religion and worship of the Aborigines. I believe it is true to say that on the whole we are less inclined to write it off or to want to take it from them than was the case in the past. Still, this idea that a person must come to know Christ and, perhaps, be baptized as well, if he or she is to have eternal life, is still there. And this was brought home to me on reading a circular letter received not long ago, which spoke, of "half of the world's people, more than 2 billion people, who have no chance of eternal life, because they have never heard of Jesus Christ one single time". The letter I refer to called for a redoubling of Christian missionary endeavour. Just think: if these people never hear of Christ or are not reached in time, they have "no chance of eternal life". This was the message.

If you think about this, dispassionately think about it, and take in exactly what is being said, you realise it's pretty tough stuff. It means that through no fault of their own people are denied all chance of eternal life. It might be because of the remoteness of where they live. It might be because of strong tribal traditions and values which have prevented any Christian missionary inroads. It might be a lot of things. Because, for example, a person is born a Hindu, raised a Hindu, and dies a Hindu, never having heard about Jesus Christ, he or she will not know eternal life. It's the same with the Chinese and the Japanese, or most of them, whose countries have largely resisted Christian missionary penetration. Not having heard of Jesus they will not know eternal life. This is what is being said.

No wonder then that some people are wondering and questioning, or why some have come out and disavowed this teaching. Somehow it doesn't seem right to insist that more than half the world's population have no hope of eternal life simply because of some accident of birth they never knew Jesus Christ or were brought into the Christian fold. And it isn't right. The thing is that we have here the product of a misunderstanding of the criteria for salvation. I put it to you that what decides whether a person is saved or not goes deeper than the religion to which he or she belongs, was brought up in, or was converted to. What really matters, and what decides the issue, is his or her willingness, or unwillingness, to abide by what has been taught to them as religious principles, practices and ideals.

You may remember the occasion, spoken of in the Gospels when the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1). And calling to Him a child, (Jesus) put him in the midst of them, and said, 'Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'. In order to be saved, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, in order to have eternal life, we must become like children. This, Jesus said, is the key. This is the deciding factor.

What, we might well ask, did Jesus mean when He said we must become like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven?

I put another question to you: What is the quality we associate most with children, especially little children, and love so much about them? It is their innocence, isn't it? And, when we look more closely at what He said, this is what Jesus was speaking about here. Wherever there is innocence, or a willingness to humble oneself and be led by God (whoever you think God may be or however you think of Him), there you have what is necessary. It is innocence which is the key. It is innocence, and only innocence, which is required.

Wherever people make a genuine effort to follow the teaching and commandments which they believe the god they worship has given them, there you have innocence. And those people will be saved. "Heaven is such", wrote Swedenborg, "that all who live well, from whatever religion, have a place there". (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 330). "Thus everyone can be saved in his own religion, whether Christian, Mohammedan, or Gentile". (*Apocalypse Explained* 1179).

I repeat the point: it is a person's attitude towards God, particularly to what it is thought God has taught and commanded, which determines whether a person is saved or not. Christian or non-Christian, primitive idol worshipper or whatever, where there is this willingness to follow and obey what it is believed God or the deity has taught and commanded there will be salvation.

What we so often fail to recognise is that under Divine Providence different religions are able to meet the particular and different needs of people, one religion being better suited to a particular people than another would be. Islam is spoken of in Swedenborg's theological writings as having been raised up by the Lord as a religion better adapted to the needs of certain peoples and better able, even than Christianity,

to hold those people in religious faith and practices. It really is wonderful to contemplate how the Lord makes use of what we, being Christians, would consider to be inadequate and imperfect, in this way. Then again, we have been too ready to despise and ridicule what has been a most meaningful religious practice when in fact that very thing is better adapted to certain people and their needs than anything we might seek to replace it with.

William Carey, we noted earlier, wrote off heathen religious practices as the delusions of the devil. But that was far too sweeping a generalisation and judgment. If the truth could be known those practices were probably better able to hold those people in religious faith and lead them to salvation than what was introduced to take their place.

Does this mean then that a heathen or non Christian remains such after death and in the spiritual world?

The answer is, no, they don't. The thing is that where there is innocence; where people are trying to live and put into practice a god fearing life, they will be open and receptive to the truth about the Lord when they have it presented to them in the spiritual world. Because of the quality of their lives, and though they were in ignorance here, they will see and understand the truth when it is taught them there. What Jesus said then is, in the final analysis, true. The point is that we don't have to be brought to a knowledge and love of Him in this world. Completely ignorant of Jesus though a man may be in this world yet if he has tried to obey what his religion has taught he will come to know, and will love to know, the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ, in the spiritual world.

Another question you may be asking is whether we should engage in missionary activity at all. After all, if people have the opportunity to learn and to get to know in the spiritual world, does it matter about trying to instruct and enlighten them here?

I put it to you that from what has been said and on the basis of the teaching now revealed and given it is wrong to try to persuade another, or others, to our religious convictions, however wrong we may feel others to be. It is also wrong to destroy what might well be a most meaningful instrument in the Lord's hands with that person, or with those people, which their faith may be, however primitive and different from ours.

At the same time, all truth and enlightenment should lead to greater good and fulfilment. We don't hide a light under a bushel. We tell people insofar as they are willing to listen and insofar as what we have to tell them will, we hope, be the means of bringing them to greater joy, happiness, fulfilment, and usefulness to others. But we don't go beyond that, or we shouldn't do. How can we tell that they are not better off believing as they do and more assured of salvation continuing as they are? Only the Lord can. And we leave it in His hands.

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