

Is it Necessary to Hear the Gospel to be Saved?

By Gary DeLashmutt

The loss of a biblical consensus, coupled with increased awareness and interaction with other religions, has made the assertion that there is only one valid way to God offensive to most people in our culture. Evangelicals must be faithful to scripture by holding that salvation is possible only through Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12). But because Jesus is the sole Savior of humanity, does it follow that one must hear the message of salvation through Christ in order to be eligible for salvation? Evangelicals disagree in their answer to this question. Some assert that all unevangelized people are doomed to God's condemnation. Others claim that unevangelized people can be saved on the basis of general revelation. Others say that unevangelized people can be saved through adherence to their own native religions. Still others remain agnostic about this question, saying that God has not revealed the fate of the unevangelized in scripture. *The following is an argument that people can be saved without hearing the gospel, while providing important qualifications to this answer.*

First, the Bible clearly teaches that God is just. Psalm 89:14 says, "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you." In Genesis 18:25, Abraham rightly asserts "Far be it from you to do such a thing--to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" There are many implications of justice, but one of them is that one is held responsible only for information, which he has received--not for information, which he has not received. Paul upholds this principle with regard to sin in Romans 4:15 when he says, " ... where there is no law there is no transgression."

The Bible also teaches that God gives a significant amount of revelation about himself to the person "without the Bible." Paul declares in Romans 1:18-20 that God has "made it evident" to such people not only that he exists, but also that he has certain attributes: namely, tremendous power and creative intelligence. These attributes have been revealed "through what has been made"--through the order of the external universe. Paul says in Rom. 2:14:15 that people without access to special revelation ("the Gentiles who do not have the Law") also know that God is a morally righteous Being. They know this because of the moral conscience, which he has instilled in each person. These passages make two important points. First, the amount of light is considerable. God reveals to the unevangelized that he is powerful, personal (because he is intelligent and righteous). Man's conscience also convicts him that he has violated God's righteous character (Romans 2:15). Responding to this light properly would mean humbly coming before God asking for mercy. Thus, though the *means* of man's forgiveness is not revealed through general revelation, the *need* for it is revealed. Second, the point of Paul's argument in Romans 1,2 is that these people have been given enough light to be justly condemned. He says they are "without excuse" (Romans 1:20). But it would seem to follow (because of God's justice) that this would also be enough light to be saved—if people respond to it properly.

Another biblical fact is relevant to this question. It is clear that many people before the coming of Jesus were saved. Hebrews 11 lists many Old Testament figures who fit this description. Old Testament Jews had access to special revelation, but they had no clear understanding of God's plan of salvation, because the fact that the Messiah must die for our forgiveness was not clearly revealed (Luke 24:44-47; 1 Peter 1:10-12). Furthermore, some of the Old Testament people who were saved (like Melchizedek and Job) had little or no access to the special revelation coming through Abraham.

We conclude then that if the "person without the Bible" responds properly (as defined above) to the light God has given him, he will be saved by grace through faith. He will be saved only through the death of Christ, because "no man comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). In this way, the unevangelized person today is much like the Jew before the time of Christ: he is justified before God by responding in faith to the light, which he has. With this conclusion, however, we alert the reader to two important qualifications.

QUALIFICATION #1: Does this conclusion mean any unevangelized person who is a devout follower of his culture's religion will be saved? By no means. Most world religions are animistic, polytheistic, or pantheistic. But Romans 1 teaches that the truly open person will recognize that there is one God who is intelligent and personal, and that worshipping other god(s) is therefore an act of willful rebellion. Again, virtually all world religions teach a "works" approach to the deity--that the acceptance of the deity is attained by human effort through good works and/or ritual observance. But Romans 2:14,15 teaches that humans instinctively know that they are morally guilty before God and therefore have no claim on God's acceptance. Therefore, those who are responding properly to God's general revelation will be at odds with crucial elements in their native religious setting. Missionaries have reported many such people who responded quickly to their message of the one true God and his way of salvation.

QUALIFICATION #2: If people can be saved apart from hearing the gospel, will the same percentage of people in an unevangelized culture be saved if the culture is evangelized? This conclusion, if true, would render Christ's commission to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) pointless. This assertion is wrong because there is evidently a general correspondence between the amount of light given and the number of people who repent and are saved. Jesus teaches this principle clearly in Matthew 11:20-24. He says that Tyre, Sidon and Sodom would have repented if they had received the light that Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida had received. This principle is also readily observed in history. While probably some Africans responded properly to the light of general revelation and were thus saved, clearly they were a small minority in unevangelized Africa judging by the paganism which pervaded Africa in the mid 1800's. It is no coincidence that today, after 150 years of missionary activity, almost 50% of Black Africans are evangelical Christians. Therefore, the number of people who get saved through general revelation is probably very small, and this fact preserves the strategic importance of Jesus' mission mandate.

Furthermore, those who get saved by responding to general revelation have less spiritual resources available to them than those who hear and respond to the gospel. They would be like the "disciples" that Paul met in Acts 19:1-6. These men were evidently saved, but did not receive the Holy Spirit until Paul explained the gospel to them. The gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, as well as the other New Covenant ministries of the Holy Spirit, are evidently given only to those who have heard and responded to the message of salvation through Jesus Christ.