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EVANGELISM – NEGLECTED PERSPECTIVE

By Wallace Benn

Christians have traditionally had a great burden for the millions who have never heard, or never responded to, the good news of Christ. Now this concern seems to be disappearing, with less enthusiasm for evangelism both at home and overseas. Why is this so?

Wallace Benn replies

It seems to me that we have lost a belief in the reality of hell. This is a difficult subject to talk about wisely and sensitively, but it is nonetheless crucial. Why, as Christians who believe the Bible, is there a reluctance to take hell seriously? It is true that some in the past have preached this truth in an unloving way, and this has made people loath to mention the subject. But are there any other reasons for this reticence? I would suggest at least three.

Unwillingness to face the facts

When I was a curate in Cheshire, we had a letter from a lady who complained about our churchyard. Not about how it was kept—it was in excellent condition—but about the fact that every time she went shopping it reminded her that she was going to die one day! We, too, want to escape the reality of unpleasant facts.

It is very uncomfortable and challenging to believe that millions are lost—without Christ and without hope. We don't like to face that kind of thing. We would prefer to be universalists—but the Bible forbids it. We may well accept that in our heads, and yet not live as if we believed it. So we need to take James' warning seriously: 'Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says' (James 1:22).

Wishful thinking

a) The advocates of 'conditional immortality' have gained ground increasingly (e.g., Stephen Travis in *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus*, Hodder and Stoughton 1982). This view states that immortality is something experienced by the Christian on condition of faith, whereas those who do not believe simply perish and are annihilated. It is an attractive view, yet when you look at Scripture carefully, it is ultimately a view that is far from impressive (e.g. Mark 9:48). When popularised, it can weaken our understanding of the eternal plight of the lost, and so diminish our missionary concern.

b) What about those who have never heard? Are there not some who, like Naaman and Cornelius, are genuine seekers, who live up to their light but who die without hearing of Christ? Will they not be saved? In an excellent but out-of-print little book, *After Death*, Alec Motyer says that, in this kind of area, 'Our position is a reverent agnosticism'. We don't know. But as he also points out, this agnosticism is not an excuse for not reaching those who have never heard—a theological 'let-out'—but rather an incentive to take seriously what is plainly taught in Scripture: that we have an urgent missionary task ('There is no other name given among men whereby we must be saved').

Listen to some wise words from a new and excellent book by Dick Dowsett (*God, That's Not Fair!*, OMF and STL 1982): 'Even if we agree with such godly men as Professor Anderson [expounding the view that some pagan seekers are saved], whom I greatly respect, we would not be left with a great deal of comfort. . . the average pagan is not really a born again saint without knowing it. The average pagan is a fearfully lost sinner' (p.38).

Is it not also the case that, in the stories of Cornelius and Naaman, God saw to it that they as honest seekers were in fact told the truth, and that Cornelius had no forgiveness of sin until he believed in the name of Christ (Acts 10:43)? We too, like Peter, need to go and tell the good news! We must not allow any 'let-outs' to blunt the urgency of our task.

Unwillingness to understand the character of God and the seriousness with which he views sin

We live in an age which minimises sin and feels deeply uncomfortable with how seriously God takes it. We can even suffer from a very low view of the holiness of God and the gravity of our own sin. This can lead us to ask: 'How could God consign people justly, and in love, to a lost eternity—to eternal punishment? How foolish we are to measure God by our own paltry understanding of what he should and should not do! What we need is a more godlike understanding of the seriousness of sin and the plight of the lost.

To quote Alec Motyer again: 'It is a remarkable providence that the sternest teaching on the eternal state of the lost comes from the lips of Jesus' (*After Death*, p.46). The loving Saviour spoke with seriousness because of his love for the lost—a love that sought and seeks to warn. If we are his followers, must we not seek to take equally seriously his teaching about heaven and hell, and with love in our hearts dedicate ourselves afresh to the great missionary task?

Wallace Benn (at the time of publication) was vicar of Audley, Staffordshire, a Church Society Trust Parish.