

HELL – A PRIME MOTIVE FOR EVANGELISM

By John Cheeseman

‘There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved’ – so says the apostle Peter in Acts 4,12. The only way that an individual can receive forgiveness of sins and the sure hope of life with God in eternity is through the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord Himself says ‘I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me’. (John 14 v.6). And yet, in spite of such uncompromising statements, there has been a certain amount of questioning and hesitation in recent years over the eternal state and fate of non-Christians – not least amongst evangelicals. This contrasts very much with the thinking of our evangelical forefathers, for whom there was no doubt at all that those outside of Christ were heading for nothing less than hell and destruction.

CRUCIAL

This is a matter which is crucial to the whole subject of mission and evangelism. I believe that one of the reasons why Christian missions have lost their impetus in recent years is the fact that evangelical Christians have become uncertain on this very issue and this uncertainty has led to an undoubted lessening of concern for those who don’t know Christ.

It even affects our preaching of the gospel. Few Christians today ever talk about being ‘saved’. They talk instead about being ‘committed’. The word ‘saved’ conveys the idea of man being rescued from some kind of desperate plight. But the present-day ‘committed’ is far less definite. When you hear the gospel presented today, very often there is a much greater emphasis on the fact that it brings peace of mind and fulfilment, instead of salvation from sin and destruction. I’m not saying, of course, that the gospel doesn’t bring peace of mind and fulfilment, but if we study the preaching of the apostles in the book of Acts, we find that the main emphasis there is on the basic issues of life and death which are at stake.

The Bible doesn’t beat around the bush. It uses crisp definitions and unambiguous expressions. It draws a sharp line between good and evil, light and darkness, children of God and children of Satan, the righteous and the wicked, the saved and the lost, heaven and hell. There are no intermediate, grey compromises. The question is – are we prepared to take God at His word? To put it bluntly – do we really believe that non-Christians are going to hell?

PROBLEMS

Let me mention two problems which are often raised in this connection. First of all, there is the problem of those who die without ever hearing the gospel. Are we to believe that they are all lost and destined for hell? From my reading of the New Testament, I can see very little hope for such people. At the end of the day, we are all sinners in the sight of a holy God, irrespective of whether we have actually heard the gospel, and ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom. 6 v.23). There is a parable of Jesus which throws some light on this question of the unevangelised. It is the parable of the two servants in Luke ch.12. We’re told in that parable that the servant who knew his master’s will, but did not act accordingly, will receive a severe beating; whereas the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. The interesting thing here is that both servants were punished – both were beaten – but one was treated more harshly than the other. The Bible does seem to teach that just as there will be rewards in heaven, so there will be degrees of

punishment in hell. After all didn't Jesus say to the unbelieving city of Capernaum, which refused to respond to His teaching – 'It shall be more tolerable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom than for you' (Matthew 11 v.24)? And so, in response to the question – 'what about those who have never heard the gospel?', the Bible seems to say that they will be condemned because they are guilty sinners who fall short of God's perfect standards. However this condemnation will be less severe than those who have heard the gospel. The second problem concerns the nature of hell itself. Granted that Christ taught the existence of hell, using a number of terrifying images, are we necessarily to believe that the punishment will be everlasting in its duration? Some evangelicals today are advocating the doctrine of annihilation as the final destiny of the unsaved. They would interpret in this light phrases like 'eternal destruction' (2 Thess. 1 v. 9).

ETERNAL

Against this line of thinking one has to say that it does less than justice to the Biblical revelation. Jesus spoke of the unquenchable fire, the undying worm and the weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mark 9 v. 48); Matthew 8 v. 12). In Matthew 25 v.46, He uses precisely the same adjective in the same sentence when speaking of 'eternal' life and 'eternal' punishment. If we are not to believe that the punishment in hell will be everlasting in duration, why should we believe that the joy of heaven will be everlasting in duration? I must confess I have not yet met an 'annihilationist' who wants to deny the latter!

In conclusion, I do not find it at all surprising that many evangelicals today are half-hearted in their approach to mission. There is an incipient universalism in our midst which has the effect of weakening our zeal for evangelism. When Hudson Taylor was a young missionary, he lay on his bed, sleepless, gazing at a map of China on his wall and with anguish he repeated to himself these words, that had burned into his soul – 'a million a month in China passing to a Christless eternity'. As a result, Hudson Taylor was a man, whom God used to evangelise a nation. May God give us a similar vision of souls perishing without a knowledge of Christ.

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