

WILL THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL BE LOST?

Jim Estabrook and Bert Thompson

[EDITOR'S NOTE: In the November 1999 issue of *Reason & Revelation*, we published the first of several articles by Sam Estabrook, who at the time was serving as our Operations Manager (and who since has been promoted to the position of Manager of Information Systems). In this issue of *R&R*, it is my pleasure to introduce to you Sam's older brother, Jim, who is our dedicated, hard-working General Manager. Since joining us in September 1998, Jim (who turns 28 this month) has become an invaluable part of our work. He is not only an extremely talented, amazingly versatile jack-of-all-trades (who has become my indispensable "right-hand man"), but a serious and careful student of God's Word as well. I have asked Jim to take the lead author's position on this month's feature article. I commend to you both him and his research efforts. Look for more to come from his pen in the future.]

We live on a planet populated by approximately six billion people. **Six billion!** And most of those, it probably would be safe to say, never have been afforded the opportunity of hearing the gospel message about the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. Therefore, obviously, they cannot respond in obedience to that saving message—even though they might be willing to do so if presented with the prospect. What will happen to these people? Will they be lost eternally? Or will God make some kind of "special allowance" so that they can be saved and thereby enjoy eternity in heaven with Him and His Son?

As we examine these kinds of questions, it is vitally important that we remember two points. First, "the Judge of all the Earth" will

"do right" (Genesis 18:25). God is every bit as infinite in His mercy and His grace (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13) as He is in His justice and His severity (Hebrews 10:31). Second, since it is the Word of God that instructs us regarding man's eternal destiny, and since all men eventually will be judged by that Word (John 12:48), it is to God's Word that we must go to find answers to inquiries concerning mankind's ultimate destiny. Fortunately, in His wisdom, God has not left us to our own devices concerning matters that relate to our salvation. As Jeremiah wisely observed: "It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (10:23).

WILL A "LOVING GOD" CONDEMN PEOPLE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL?

There are those who suggest that surely God would not banish from His presence for eternity those who never had an opportunity to hear and obey the gospel message in the first place. Consider the following examples. In his 1909 volume, *Systematic Theology*, A.H. Strong wrote:

Since Christ is the Word of God and the Truth of God, he may be received even by those who have not heard of his manifestation in the flesh.... We have, therefore, the hope that **even among the heathen there may be some...who** under the guidance of the Holy Spirit working through the truth of nature and conscience, **have found the way to life and salvation** (p. 843, emp. added).

Approximately fifty years later, popular evangelical theologian Karl Barth defended such a concept via what he called his "biblical universalism." He wrote: "We have no theological right to set any sort of limits to the lovingkindness of God" (as quoted in Dyrness, 1983, p. 105). In commenting on Barth's viewpoint, apologist Cornelius Van Til wrote:

For Barth, man, as sinner, is, to be sure, under the wrath of God, but this wrath is, itself, a form of the all-overreaching grace of God. **There is no eternal punishment for those who are in Christ [because] there are no men who are not in Christ** (1965, p. 38, emp. added).

Another modern-day evangelical, Neil Punt, invoked Barthian ideas in his book, *Unconditional Good News*, wherein he rejected the idea that sinners actually must believe and obey the gospel in order to be saved because "It is an error to think that there is **anything that must be done** to inherit eternal life" (1980, p. 135, emp. added). In *What the Bible Says about Salvation*, Virgil Warren wrote:

Even some two thousand years after the Great Commission, more people in the world have **not** heard the gospel than **have** heard it. The secret things do belong to God, but Christians and non-Christians alike cannot help wondering about the justice as well as the compassion of a God who assigns to eternal torment people who, for reasons beyond their control, never heard about fellowship with him through Jesus Christ.... **Our opinion is that scripture does not automatically assign**

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the unevangelized to endless hell (1982, pp. 104-105, first emp. in orig., last emp. added).

In their book, *Answers to Tough Questions*, Josh McDowell and Don Stewart stated:

Although the Scriptures never explicitly teach that someone who has never heard of Jesus can be saved, we do not believe that it infers [sic] this. We do believe that every person will have an opportunity to repent, and that God will not exclude anyone because he happened to be born at the wrong place and at the wrong time (1993, p. 137).

Statements such as these certainly could cause some to conclude that God simply will not judge the lost, but instead will deem them worthy of eternal salvation merely (or solely!) because they never had an opportunity in their lifetimes to hear the “good news” made available to humankind through the gospel of Christ. While at first glance such a notion may appear comforting, and may appease our human sensitivities, the truth of the matter is that it has monstrous theological and spiritual implications. Consider these facts.

CHRIST'S GREAT COMMISSION AND MAN'S ALIENATION FROM GOD BECAUSE OF HIS SIN

First—in light of the commands inherent in the Great Commission given by the Lord Himself prior to His ascension back into heaven—how can we entertain any suggestion that the “unevangelized” will be saved? Christ’s instructions were crystal clear: “Go ye therefore, and **make disciples of all the nations**, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: **teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you..**” (Matthew 28:19-20). If the view is correct that the unevangelized peoples of the world will be redeemed without ever having been exposed to (and obeying) the gospel, then potentially we could be doing them great harm if we carry out the Lord’s command and teach them the truth. By introducing them to the gospel, we might well be condemning those who otherwise would have been saved. When R.C. Sproul wrote his book, *Reason to Believe*, he expended considerable effort in explaining why such a position is unscriptural. He prefaced his discussion with the following statements:

The unspoken assumption at this point is that the only damnable offense against God is the rejection of Christ. Since the native is not guilty of this, we ought to let him alone. In fact, letting him alone would be the most helpful thing we could do for him. If we go to the native and inform him of Christ, we place his soul in eternal jeopardy. For now he knows of Christ, and if he refuses to respond to Him, he can no longer claim ignorance as an excuse. Hence, the best service we can render is silence (1981, p. 50).

Ponder the situation of a person who never has the opportunity to hear the gospel. If the ideas expressed in some of the above quotations are correct, then that person **will be saved necessarily**. But what about the person to whom we present the gospel message, and who then, of his or her own personal volition, chooses (for whatever reason) to reject it? Having spurned God’s offer of salvation through His Son, can such a one **then** be saved? Not according to God’s Word!

The writer of the book of Hebrews noted: “For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more a sacrifice for sins” (10:26). In Luke 13:34-35, Christ Himself lamented the rejection of the gospel message by His own Jewish brethren (who had been presented with the gospel message, but had rebuffed it repeatedly).

Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem,...how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her own brood under her wings, and **ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate**: and I say unto you, Ye shall not see me, until ye shall say, “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Luke 13:34-35, emp. added).

Consider, too, the important spiritual principle set forth in Hebrews 6:4-6, which, although admittedly speaking about people who once had accepted Christ as their Savior and then had abandoned their faith in Him, nevertheless mentions those who at one time were “enlightened” about Who He was and the salvation He offered—only to reject both Him and that salvation. Would it not, then (if the views discussed above are correct), be better simply to keep the Word of God “a secret” from the heathen and the unevangelized so that they—as a result of their

ignorance—can be saved and not be put in the position of knowing the gospel message and possibly rejecting it? In their book, *I'm Glad You Asked*, authors Kenneth Boa and Larry Moody correctly observed:

Those who have heard the Gospel and rejected it are doubly guilty—they have rejected not only the Father but also the Son. And the Scriptures are clear about the judgment which awaits those who have refused God's offer of salvation. The wrath of God abides on them (John 3:36; cf. Heb. 2:3; 10:26-31) [1982, p. 160].

Second, those who suggest that the heathen and unevangelized will be saved “as a result of their ignorance” of God's law have failed to realize that **such people are lost, not because they are ignorant of God's law, but because they have sinned against Him.** Almost all humans recognize (albeit begrudgingly, at times) that ignorance of the law does not excuse us from the law's penalties and/or punishments. [“But officer, I didn't **know** the speed limit was 15 miles per hour in the school zone.” “Yes, sir. The courthouse is open 8 to 5, Monday through Friday. You may pay the \$150 speeding citation at any time during those hours. Have a nice day.”] One must distinguish between **knowledge** of a law and the **existence** of a law. If one must **know** the law before he can **transgress** the law, then there would be no such thing as a “sin of ignorance.” Yet the Bible speaks plainly of that very thing (Leviticus 4:2,22, 27; Acts 3:17; 17:30-31). Ignorance of the law is neither a legitimate excuse nor an effective guarantee of salvation.

Paul wrote in Romans 2:12: “For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without the law: and as many as have sinned under the law shall be judged by the law.” In his commentary on the book of Romans, R.C.H. Lenski discussed Paul's statement about those who “perish without the law” when he wrote:

The only difference will be that those without the law will merely perish without the law, while those with law will be judged by means of law—**two routes that lead to the same goal. Justice will be prominent in both instances;** for the Judge will not apply law to those who ended as nothing but sinners without using anything like real law—that would be unfair. **Nor will he need law in the case of these—they merely per-**

ish as the sinners that they are. The only fair thing in the case of others who made law their boast will be that the Judge uses this means when he pronounces judgment on them; and **the fact that this judgment will be one of condemnation is plain: “they did sin”** exactly as those “did sin” of whom Paul just said “they will perish” (1961, p. 158, emp. added).

When people are lost, it is due to their having **sinned against God.** Isaiah wrote:

Behold, Jehovah's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that he will not hear (59:1-2).

Boa and Moody commented:

Sin is a universal human condition (1 Kings 8:46; Ps. 51:5, Romans 3:9,23; 1 John 1:8), and it causes a breach between man and God (Isa. 59:2). Sin leads to death (Romans 6:23), and the wrath of God abides on all who are separate from Christ (John 3:18,36). All have sinned, and those who have not been “justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24) are under divine condemnation (Romans 3:10-20; 5:16-19) and must stand before God in judgment, because apart from Christ we are enemies of God (Romans 5:10).... **People are not lost because they have not heard. They are lost because they are sinners.** We die because of disease, not because of ignorance of the proper cure (1982, p. 147, emp. added).

Man is lost as a result of being afflicted with the horrible “disease” of sin—a condition that, unless treated, always is fatal (Romans 6:23). Because God is depicted within Scripture not only as loving (2 Corinthians 13:11; 1 John 4:7-16) and merciful (James 5:11), but also as holy (Psalm 22:3) and just (Psalm 89:14; Isaiah 45:19; Revelation 16:7), **He cannot (and will not!) overlook sin. It must be (and will be!) punished.** But is there a remedy for this terminal disease known as “sin”? And if so, what is it?

Yes, fortunately there is a remedy for mankind's otherwise lethal condition. He **can** have his sins forgiven. The great Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall

be as wool, **if ye be willing and obedient”** (Isaiah 1:18-19). The key phrase, of course, is “willing and obedient.” But willing to do what? And obedient to what command? To be washed in the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ as God has decreed! The blood of bulls and goats never was able to take away man's sins, no matter how unblemished the sacrificial animal(s) may have been. But the blood of Christ can (Hebrews 10:4-18). **And it is the only thing that will!** The Scriptures speak clearly to this fact when they state that Christ shed His blood on the cross for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3; Romans 5:8-9), and that He is the “lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). Furthermore, it is **only through Christ** that a person can be saved from the wrath of God (cf. Romans 5:1, 8:1, and Hebrews 10:31).

The inspired writers of the New Testament placed great emphasis upon the necessity of being “in Christ.” In the American Standard Version of the Bible, the phrase “in Christ” appears 89 times in 88 verses. The New Testament makes it clear that it is only when a person is “in Christ” that he has “redemption” (Romans 3:24), “eternal life” (Romans 6:23), “every spiritual blessing” (Ephesians 1:3), “forgiveness” (Colossians 1:14), and “salvation” (2 Timothy 2:10). Those who have been baptized “into Christ” (which is how the Bible tells us we get into Christ—Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3-4) will not be condemned (Romans 8:1). What is the logical implication? Those outside of Christ will not have forgiveness, salvation, or eternal life, but will be condemned for their sins. Whether a person has never heard of Christ or whether he simply has heard of Him but not obeyed Him, that person is outside of Christ. According to the apostle Paul, any person who fits into either category will be lost eternally. He said that Jesus will render “vengeance to them that know not God” and to those who “obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thessalonians 1:8). He further described these unbelievers as those “who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

While it is true that knowledge of both God's existence and His “everlasting power and divinity” may be gleaned from the general revelation He has provided of Himself in nature (cf. Romans 1:19-20, Psalm 19:1,

Acts 14:17, and Hebrews 3:4), that revelation is limited, and cannot explain to man what to do to be saved. As impressive, as powerful, and as pervasive as general revelation is, it nevertheless is deficient in and of itself. For many, nature has ceased to be a perspicuous revelation of God. It may have been so before sin entered the world, but even if it were, man's nature now has become so polluted that he steadfastly refuses to read the divine script around him. General revelation simply is not enough. It never was intended to be. It does not afford man the reliable knowledge of the nature of God, of his sin against God, of his need for Jesus Christ as his Savior, and other important spiritual information that he absolutely **must** know in order to be saved. It therefore is inadequate (by itself) as the sole foundation of a person's faith. From nature alone, man never would be able to infer the need for a personal Savior.

That fact—that from nature alone man never would be able to infer the need for a personal Savior—is critically important in the present discussion. As J.I. Packer noted: "The Bible says that God's general revelation, even when correctly grasped, yields knowledge only, **not of grace that restores sinners to fellowship with God**" (1973, p. 115, emp. added). This assessment is correct. If a person does not know that he stands in need of a personal Savior; if he does not know Who that Savior is; if he does not know how to be "willingly obedient" to that Savior; and if he does not know how to appropriate the salvation that comes only through that Savior, then how can he possibly know how to get rid of his sins in order to stand sanctified before God? Jesus Himself said in John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: **no one cometh unto the Father, but by me**" (emp. added). In a discussion of this verse, Gene Burgett noted:

The phrase "no one cometh unto the Father, but by me" is clearly a **universal negative** which states in positive terms, "all men who come to the Father, come by me." If the only ones who come to the Father are those who come by way of Jesus Christ, then it is apparent that all who do **not** know Jesus will be **lost**. There can be no salvation in Buddha, Mohammed, Hari Krishna, or any other name other than the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12) [1993, p. 176, emp. in orig.].

If people could be saved in times past—and can be saved today—without the sacrifice of God's Son (and they cannot—cf. Hebrews 10:4-10 and Acts 4:12), **then why would God have sent Him to Earth in the first place?**

The fact of the matter is, God promised salvation only to those who hear the gospel message (Romans 10:17), believe on His Son (John 3:16), confess Christ's name (Matthew 10:32-33), repent of their sins (Luke 13:3), have those sins remitted through baptism (Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21), and remain faithful (Revelation 2:10). Subsequent to the Day of Pentecost, Peter called upon his listeners to: "Repent ye therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). The word for "blotted out" derives from a Greek word meaning to "wipe out, erase, or obliterate." The New Testament uses the word to refer to "blotting out" the old law (Colossians 2:14) and to "blotting out" a person's name from the Book of Life (Revelation 3:5). One of the great prophetic utterances of the Old Testament was that "their sin will I remember no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).

There was no happy solution to the justice/mercy dilemma. There was no way that God could remain just (since justice demands that the wages of sin be paid) and yet save His Son from death. Christ was abandoned to the cross so that mercy could be extended to sinners who stood condemned (Romans 3:23; 6:23). God could not save sinners by fiat—upon the ground of mere authority alone—without violating His own attribute of divine justice. Paul discussed God's response to this problem in Romans 3:24-26 when he stated that those who are saved are

...justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood...for the showing of his righteousness... that he might himself be just and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus.

Mankind's salvation was no arbitrary arrangement. God did not decide merely to consider men sinners, and then determine to save them via a principle of mercy and grace. Sin had placed men in a state of antagonism toward God that was so severe, men were referred to by inspiration as God's "enemies" (Romans 5:10). Mankind's sin could be forgiven, and men once again could become God's friends, only as a result of the vicarious death of God's Son.

CONCLUSION

Some have suggested that Christians are narrow-minded when they suggest that mankind's salvation can be found **only** in Jesus Christ. Truth, however, is narrow! In addressing this point, Kurt DeHaan wrote:

Would you call a nutritionist narrow-minded if he said that a human can't survive very long without food or water? Is an aerospace engineer pigheaded to propose that the only way to fly to the moon is by spacecraft, not by hang glider? Is it scientific bigotry to say that gasoline can burn but water cannot? Is it mathematical prejudice to claim that two plus two equals four, not three, five, or twenty-two? The issue is a matter of truth, not a matter of bigotry or prejudice (1988, p. 4).

Truth is a precious and priceless commodity—which no doubt explains why the Proverbs writer admonished: "Buy the truth, and sell it not" (23:23). Jesus Himself said: "You shall **know** the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32, emp. added).

But what about sincerity? Does it count for nothing? While sincerity certainly is important in a relationship with God, the fact of the matter is that God does not want just **sincerity**; He wants **obedience**. Saul (who later would be called Paul) was "sincere" in his persecution of Christ's church, and even did what he did to oppose it "in all good conscience" (Acts 23:1; 22:19-20; Galatians 1:13; 1 Corinthians 15:9), yet God struck him blind (Acts 9:3-9). Paul later would admit in his own writings that he was sincere, but **sincerely wrong**. DeHaan observed:

Isn't it enough to be sincere? No, it's not. **Sincerity is important, but it's not an adequate substitute for knowing the truth.** Sincerity doesn't pass a college entrance exam. Sincerity doesn't win an automobile race. Sincerity doesn't repair a broken washing machine. Sincerity won't bake the perfect cake. And sincerity won't pay your rent or mortgage. **Sincerity will not fill the gap when there is a lack of skill or knowledge, nor will all the sincerity in the world transform error into truth** (1988, p. 8, emp. added).

While the Lord certainly wants us to be sincere, He also requires something else, which is why He instructed: "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

The truth of the Lord is narrow, as Jesus made clear in His beautiful Sermon on the Mount (read specifically Matthew 7:13-14). In fact, Christ observed: “Not everyone that saith unto me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Jesus later commented on the attitude of the people of His day when He said: “This people honoreth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men” (Matthew 15:8-9).

Consider, for example, the account related in 2 Samuel 6 about Uzzah. God had given the Israelites explicit instructions about the construction of the Ark of the Covenant (see Exodus 25:10-22). It was to be made of acacia wood and covered with gold. It was to have two gold-covered, acacia-wood rings on each side, through which two gold-covered, acacia-wood staves could be placed in the event that it had to be moved (Exodus 37:1-5). But He also had given the Israelites explicit instructions about the **transportation** of the Ark. It was to be carried only by those from the priestly tribe of Levi, specifically the Kohathites (Numbers 7:9). [The Kohathites descended from Kohath, the second son of Levi; the other two groups were the Gershonites and Merarites (cf. Numbers 3:17ff.). The members of the tribe of Levi also were charged with carrying other items of religious significance, including the altars, lampstand, sanctuary vessels, etc., as-

sociated with the Tabernacle (see Numbers 3:31).] The Ark was to be moved only after it had been appropriately covered by a blue cloth. And the Israelites (even the Kohathites) were commanded—upon penalty of death—never to touch the Ark (Numbers 4:15,19-20).

King David had ignored each of God’s commands in regard to the transportation of the Ark. God had not commanded that the Ark be moved, and it certainly was not being moved in the manner prescribed by His law. The Ark had been placed on an ox cart being tended by two brothers—Uzzah and Ahio (the latter of whom, apparently, was driving the cart). The text says simply: “the oxen stumbled.” Uzzah—no doubt believing that the precious cargo was about to tumble from the cart and be dashed to bits—reached up to steady the Ark. And the moment Uzzah touched the Ark, God struck him dead!

Was Uzzah sincere in his attempt to protect one of the Israelites’ most priceless and treasured possessions? Undoubtedly he was. But his sincerity was for nought **because he disobeyed**. Note specifically the Bible’s statement that “God smote him there **for his error**” (2 Samuel 6:7). God’s commands were explicit; His truth was narrow. Uzzah ignored that truth—and died for having done so.

Will those who never have heard the gospel be lost—even though they might be “sincere”? Indeed they will be! Their separation from God throughout eternity will have been

caused by two factors: (1) they sinned against God; and (2) they had not been taught—and thus were not able to take advantage of—the gospel plan of salvation that was offered to all men as the free gift of God (Romans 5:15-21; 6:23b) to restore them to a covenant relationship with Him.

For those of us who **do know** the truth regarding what men must do to be saved, the burden to share that truth with those who **do not know** it presses down with unrelenting fury. When Philip stood in the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch who had been to Jerusalem to worship, he asked: “Understandest thou what thou readest?” That Ethiopian gentleman’s response still burns in our ears over two thousand years later: “How can I, except some one shall guide me?” (Acts 8:30-31). That is each Christian’s job—to gently guide the lost to “the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17). In 2 Corinthians 4:5-7, Paul wrote:

For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.... But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves.

A chapter earlier, the apostle had reminded those first-century Christians at Corinth: “Ye are...an epistle of Christ...written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in tables that are hearts of flesh” (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).

What a blessed opportunity—and onerous responsibility—to be the “earthen vessel,” the “living epistle,” used by the Lord to bring another soul back into His fold. Realizing that “he who converteth a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:20), and knowing the “goodness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22), dare we countenance failure? No! Speaking on God’s behalf, the prophet Ezekiel warned:

I have made thee a watchman.... Therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, “Thou shalt surely die,” and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; **but his blood will I require at thy hand**. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul (Ezekiel 3:17-19, emp. added).



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Those who never have heard—and thus never have obeyed—the truth of the gospel message **will** be lost! And if we do not do our utmost to get that message to them—so will we! While the unevangelized may be lost, they do not have to **remain** lost. And we may be all that stands between them and an eternity of separation from God.

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By May 15 of each year, Apologetics Press must submit to State and Federal governments (as all non-profit groups must) the appropriate tax-related forms as required by law. For almost twenty years, our financial books have been overseen by a group of professional, Christian CPAs who prepare and submit these forms for us. As has been our policy since the inception of the work, once those forms have been submitted and we have closed out the books for the previous fiscal year, we then make available to our readers a public financial statement. That statement is now ready. If you would like to receive a copy, simply write or call our offices and we will be more than happy to send you one with our compliments.

WHEN DID GOD CREATE ANGELS?

Alden Bass and Bert Thompson

[EDITOR'S NOTE: In the December 2000 issue of *Reason & Revelation*, we published an article by Alden Bass, a young man who served as a summer intern at Apologetics Press during 2000. Alden, who will be attending Yale University this coming fall, is interning for us this summer as well. It is a pleasure to be able to co-author yet another article with him. Look for more of his writings to appear in *R&R* in the near future.]

Angels are a fascinating subject, yet one that rarely is discussed in either church pulpits or religious literature. As a result, on occasion most Christians are left with a gaping void in their knowledge concerning angels, and therefore they frequently turn to the media or other poorly informed sources for answers to their questions about these heavenly creatures. In this day and age, one need not look very far to find a veritable plethora of information on these oft-misunderstood heavenly sentinels. Sadly, most of this "information" is nothing more than speculation, and thus the sincere querist goes away confused about what the Bible actually says concerning angels.

The word "angel" is the translation of the Greek *angelos* and the Hebrew *mal'ak*, meaning "messenger" (Woods, 1986, p. 179; Girdlestone, 1973, p. 41). Thus, the word actually says nothing about the **nature** of the being, but speaks instead to its **function**. The nature of the messenger must be determined from the specific context.

On occasion, the word angel is used of a **human** messenger (as we ordinarily think of that term). Haggai was referred to as "Jehovah's messenger [*mal'ak*]" (Haggai 1:13). God, through Malachi, referred to a priest as "my messenger [*mal'ak*]" (Malachi 2:7). And, John the Baptist also was referred to as a "messenger" [*mal'ak*—3:1]. Matthew (11:10) likewise called John the Baptist a "messenger" (*angelos*).

On the other hand, the word angel often is used to speak of a **spiritual** messenger—that is, one not composed of flesh and blood. In speaking about the word "angel," Guy N. Woods noted:

[T]he term is of varied usage in the Scriptures. Angels are both earthly and heavenly; possessed of flesh, thus men; not of flesh and blood, and hence heavenly beings, and **not** men. Angels of the latter classification are spirits, incorporeal beings, and thus without the characteristics of men in the flesh (1986, pp. 180-181, emp. in orig.).

Indeed, the Bible refers to angels as "spirits" (Hebrews 1:14), and the Scriptures are explicit in their teaching that spirits have neither flesh nor bones (Luke 24:39). We know that these special messengers cannot marry (Matthew 22:30; see also Kaiser, 1992, pp. 33-38). And, since angels are created beings (Nehemiah 9:6; Colossians 1:16; Psalm 148:2,5), while immortal (cf. Luke 20:36), they are not eternal, for only Deity is eternal and therefore worthy of worship (Revelation 22:9). As Douglas Kelly observed, angels "are immortal, but only the Triune God is eternal" (1997, p. 93).

Angels worship and serve God (Isaiah 6:2-3; Revelation 22:8-9), and in ancient times were able to take on the form of humans as they delivered messages for Him (an angel spoke to Hagar to provide instructions from God—Genesis 16:10-12; an angel told Mary that she would bear the Christ-child—Luke 1:26ff.; angels were mentioned by Stephen in his stirring speech recorded in Acts 7:38,53, which referred to Exodus 19:18-25 where God addressed Moses through an angel during the wilderness wanderings). In some way, angels act on behalf of Christians. The writer of the book of Hebrews commented: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?" (1:13-14). Eventually, angels even take the spirits of the righteous dead into a state of happiness (Luke 16:22).

In many ways, angels are completely different from humans. The "sons of God" (as Scripture sometimes refers to them—Job 1:6; 38:7) often surpass the "sons of men." For example, they are stronger (2 Samuel 24:16), more intelligent (Daniel 9:21-22), and swifter (Daniel 9:21) than any mere man. Furthermore, they will accompany Christ at His Second Coming, "rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey

not the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8). These heavenly beings exist to serve and praise their eternal Creator. Realizing their superiority to humans in certain areas, it is all the more amazing that they so fully devote themselves to God’s service while we, who are the apple of God’s eye, often fail to serve and obey Jehovah in even the most menial tasks.

Yet, in some respects we humans can relate to angels because like us, angels are intelligent (Daniel 9:21-22; 10:14; Revelation 19:10) and have emotions (1 Peter 1:12—desirous; Job 38:7—joyful). They also possess free will and the ability to reason (Jude 6; cf. 2 Peter 2:4). We know that, like humans, angels are responsible to some kind of heavenly law, for some sinned (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6), and sin is transgression of law (1 John 3:4). Sadly, whenever they sinned, they were beyond the redemptive plan of God, for the atonement of Christ does not apply to them. The writer of Hebrews stated: “Not to angels doth he give help, but he giveth help to the seed of Abraham” (2:16). Yet while rebellious angels were without a redemptive plan, God prepared one for man (Ephesians 2:8-9; et al.). Little wonder, then, that the psalmist asked: “**Who is man that thou art mindful of him?**” (8:4, emp. added)!

Through the ages, numerous trustworthy and intelligent people have seen angels (cf. Luke 1:11,26ff.; Acts 12:7ff., etc.). Thus, at some point the Lord created them. But when? Truthfully, we have no way of knowing the exact time of their creation since the Holy Spirit has not seen fit to reveal that information to us in God’s Word. In his book, *All the Angels in the Bible*, respected Bible scholar Herbert W. Lockyer observed regarding these heavenly messengers: “But just when, in the mysterious revolutions of eternity, they were called into existence is not a subject of divine revelation” (1995, p. 14). Wayne Jackson noted that there is an “absence of explicit testimony” regarding the creation of angels (1993, p. 208). Both writers are correct. Yet there are some “hints” in Scripture.

For example, we know that angels must have been created **on** or **before** the first day of creation, because Job 38:1-7 makes it clear that “the sons of God [i.e., angels] shouted for joy” when God laid the foundations of the Earth (vss. 6-7). This certainly indicates that the angels were present as eyewitnesses to the creation of the Universe.

Thus, the question then becomes, did the creation of angels occur on day one of the Creation week, or at some point before day one? It is important to remember that angels are messengers, thus necessitating someone to whom they could deliver a message. Jackson has suggested that “...a plausible opinion would be that they were brought into existence at the commencement of the creation week” (1993, p. 208). Why might this be so? Lockyer explained as follows:

The heavens include all that are in them created by God, and among these must be the angels (Genesis 2:1). Among the hosts of heaven the angels are the principal part. They are expressly called “**the heavenly host**” and “**the armies of heaven**” (Luke 2:13) [p. 14, emp. in orig.].

Nehemiah 9:6 also is used to speak to the very point Dr. Lockyer was making.

Thou art Jehovah, even thou alone; **thou hast made...the heaven of heavens, with all their host**, the earth and all things that are thereon, the seas and all that is in them, and thou preservest them all; and **the host of heaven worshippeth thee**.

In commenting on this passage, Hebrew language expert Weston W. Fields wrote:

While the passages in Genesis...mention only the making of the firmament, sun, moon, stars, and animals, it must be carefully marked by the reader that in Nehemiah 9:6 the objects of God’s making include the **heavens**, the **heaven of heavens**, and the **earth**, and **everything contained in and on it**, and the **seas and everything they contain**, as well as the **hosts of heaven** (probably angels) [1976, p. 61, emp. and parenthetical comment in orig.].

If you combine the passages and concepts discussed by Lockyer, Jackson, and Fields, it seems to allow for a “plausible opinion” that the angels “were brought into existence at the commencement of the creation week.”

Some, however, have pointed out what they perceive to be a serious “time problem” inherent in this particular viewpoint. Their suggestion is that if God had created angels on day one of the Creation week, then there would not have been enough time for Satan to rebel against Jehovah and to be cast out of heaven (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6) prior to the events recorded in Genesis 3 (see Gray, 2000, p. 73). But the problem is indeed “perceived” rather than real. How long could it take for the “sons of the evil one” (as Christ referred to

them in Matthew 13:38) to engage in their ruthless spiritual quackery and rebel against their Maker? Adam and Eve accomplished it in a veritable heartbeat (Genesis 3:1ff.). Why would it have taken the devil any longer?

Those who contend that the angels were created **prior** to the first day of the Creation week do not believe that the texts in Genesis 2:1 and Exodus 20:11 are speaking of angelic beings. In his widely used commentary on Genesis, H.C. Leupold wrote in regard to the “host” of Genesis 2:1:

Host may refer to the stars; cf. Neh. 9:6; Deut. 4:19; 17:3; II Kings 17:16, etc. It may refer to angels: I Kings 22:19; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 148:2. Here its connection determines its reference to the things just made. Since the creation account has up to this point said nothing about angels, it will hardly be safe to advance the claim that the angels are meant to be included in this term. The time of the creation of angels is as little fixed by this account as falling on this day as it is assigned to the fourth. We simply know nothing definite as to the time of their creation (1942, 1:101).

In this area, it is best not to be dogmatic regarding the time element involved in the creation of angels. Nevertheless, it is comforting to realize that even if we do not know all that we would like to know about certain matters (the “secret things of God”—Deuteronomy 29:29), we **do** have all the information we need to get to heaven (2 Timothy 3:16).

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APOLOGETICS PRESS ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB—ONE MORE TIME!

In my “Note from the Editor” in the September 1997 issue of *Reason & Revelation* (“Apologetics Press on the World Wide Web”), I introduced to our readers the new Apologetics Press Web site. It was a fledgling first effort, but represented a great start that was full of potential. Then, in my “Note from the Editor” in the February 1999 issue of *R&R* (“Apologetics Press on the World Wide Web—Again!”), I announced a complete redesign of the site, including the addition of new information and services (like our user-friendly Web Store). But, as the adage goes, “That was then; this is now.” As our long-time subscribers know all too well, it is not our nature to “rest on our laurels.” Therefore, it is with a great deal of pleasure (and yes, a little bit of pride) that I announce “Apologetics Press on the World Wide Web—One More Time!” By all means, read on.

For the past several months, we have been working practically non-stop (including a lot of consecutive, 18-hour days for several weeks running!) in an effort to get our newly designed Web site ready for its public unveiling. Now, finally, it is ready. And I would like to use my space in this month’s “Note from the Editor” to unveil it. I think it will be of immense value to almost all of our readers.

Whether or not you have visited our Web site previously, take a few moments to go visit it now. I am confident that you will be favorably impressed with what you see. We have completely revamped the site from top to bottom. For example, you will find every issue of *Reason & Revelation* from 1994 through 2001 (those from 1999-2001 are available in both PDF and html formats). You will find a new section—“Article Reprints”—containing approximately 75 two-color reprints (in a PDF format) of articles from past issues of *R&R* that make great handouts for classes or study sessions, and that are suitable for filing

for future use. You also will find still another new section titled “Bible Bullets” that contains brief, pithy articles on apologetics that are suitable for inclusion in church bulletins, youth newspapers, etc.

Then there is yet another new section titled “Docs’ Dissections,” in which Dr. Brad Harrub (our new Director of Scientific Information) and I choose current “in the news” items from recent issues of science journals and “dissect” the claims contained within them. If you need current, up-to-date information on the latest items being discussed in the scientific and popular-science media, this is the place to go. In addition, you will see a new “Defense Documents” section containing articles that present a more in-depth treatment of a variety of subjects about apologetics (the fossil record, historicity of Genesis, etc.).

Then there is the new “Audio” section, where you can listen to audio tapes on subjects dealing with apologetics. And don’t overlook the new “E-Books” section, where you will find (again, in PDF format) on-line, reproducible copies of some of our books (with more yet to follow in the near future). You also can check the “Speaking Schedules” section to see where Kyle Butt (our Director of Biblical Research), Eric Lyons (our Director of Research), Dr. Harrub, or I will be speaking in the near future. There also is a link to our children’s Web site, www.DiscoveryMagazine.com, which likewise is in the process of being updated and revised (more about that in a future “Note from the Editor”). And last, there is our ever-popular Web Store, which contains every offering from our 2001 catalog, complete with on-line ordering capabilities. Visit us at www.ApologeticsPress.org Plus, bookmark these new sections; we will update them often.

Bert Thompson

