

Saving Faith
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March 11, 2003
Thousand Oaks, CA

Editor's Note: the following question was the springboard for an essay written by John. Jan Antonsson

John,

Something I have been curious about for a long time concerns the message preached by mainstream Christian missionaries. Maybe you can help me. I don't know in this age of modern high tech communication just how many people on earth have never come into contact with the Christian religion to any degree at all.

Possibly there are some that have not. But surely at some time in the past there must have been many. My question has to do with the "gospel" message preached to these people by mainstream Christian missionaries.

And that question is... Is the preaching of the traditional doctrine of hell, as endless torment, necessary for the "gospel" to be understood by those who receive the message?

In other words, do the missionaries preach the hell doctrine before introducing the recipients to the "gospel" doctrine of "salvation?" It seems that without the basic understanding of the hell doctrine, the traditional Christian message would not be particularly relevant. Get my point?

Later,
Doug (not his real name)

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A thought or two re: your question. First of all, it would appear that God does not limit Himself to a perfect or, even what might at least be considered, a clear presentation of the gospel in order to initiate someone into the first, primitive level of "saving faith."

Whatever element of gospel might be in a message, though diluted and/or distorted by the messenger's misconception of the nature of God, if it moves a person to begin to trust in the love of God for their soul's welfare (however the threat to it might be understood or misunderstood), some measure of light has pierced the darkness of that soul, since, to some degree, that one has come to know and believe the love of God, which seems to be St. John's understanding of the essential Spirit-inspired response to the gospel.

Certainly we know that, what is called, "saving faith" is not a mere intellectual assent to historical facts about Christ, but is really constituted by a deep inward surrender to the wooing of the Spirit as He communicates the Father's love, as demonstrated in Christ Jesus. This might occur when one is minimally informed as to the historic facts of the gospel.

If I recall correctly, your background is Church of Christ (please do correct me if I'm wrong), so you might find the following bit of information interesting about Christian missionaries concerning the posture they have to assume when they come back to the states and their words are scrutinized by the powers that be in their particular denomination or missionary organization.

My friend, Harry Robert Fox, also the friend of Jan and Lenny Antonsson, was raised in Japan as a child of missionary parents sent by the Church of Christ. He later returned to that land as an adult to serve as a missionary himself for many years, and he shared with us that on the mission field, they were so hungry for fellowship that when they were given the opportunity to join with other missionaries from other churches for conferences featuring such missionary greats as E. Stanley Jones and Norman Grubb, they felt free to be open to an explanation of the gospel with a much greater understanding of the grace of God.

According to Harry, upon hearing Jones, it was obvious, reading between the lines, that he was a Christian universalist.

Having read a number of things from Jones, I concur with Harry. His whole theology of the kingdom of God (he was called the apostle of

the Kingdom) was rife with implications of ultimate reconciliation. Harry says that it was through Jones that his eyes were first opened to the nature and universal scope of the grace of God.

So, often, on the missionary field, you'll find a message being shared that is much less tainted by the eternal torment, escape-hell, get-to-heaven form of evangelism. But this leads me to comment on what I think is an undeniable observation. It seems that in His sovereignty, God has chosen to provide an introduction to His grace in Christ, as far as mass evangelism is concerned, through those whose understanding of the gospel is crude and essentially legalistic.

I can't help but observe that, at least for now, the Lord arranges for many to go through a long season of having religiosity mixed in with the primitive faith, until a day when, having experienced that dichotomy, their reception of the gospel in its pure form causes them to be more deeply impacted because of the stark contrast.

Now, apart from the spin put on the gospel by its messengers, we must factor in the inferences drawn by the hearer as the message may be distorted through his cultural, intellectual and emotional filters. Much depends upon the baggage which he brings into the process.

May we expect to see a different dispensation than what I've described above? Yes, I believe so. And I think that as the messenger becomes one with the message, or better still, becomes the message itself, that is, he is a living, walking, breathing embodiment of the Spirit of Jesus Christ glorified; that will make for the essential change of dispensation.

We can, as the Spirit enlightens us, see in the early preaching of Peter and Stephen, recorded in the Book of Acts, a seed-form of the pure gospel of the grace of God. But this pure, apostolic proclamation was dressed in Jewish clothes. There was a great deal of concession to the Jewish mentality in the form that it was presented. The pure substance was there, but it lent itself to a necessary acculturation for God's purpose in that day and for that people.

That form is not, in the divine mind, set in concrete. What form it will take in the days to come is stuff for cutting edge dialogue in my opinion. In fact, I believe that there are many today that are being confronted in a deep inward way by Jesus Christ in His resurrected, glorified state, as the Life-giving Spirit without out any knowledge of the "historical Christ" at all.

When they finally, in God's timing, get to hear of Christ "as He is," they will recognize Him as that inner influence that had all the while been persuading them that love was the ultimate Reality of all things.

Be they Buddhist, Muslim, Jew or whatever; God does not respect those religious barriers, but reveals Himself to whom He chooses, and however He chooses. They may not at first attach the name of Jesus of Nazareth to what they are experiencing, but that will follow. After all, there are many who attach the name of Jesus to experiences that are religiously demonic, and yet think that they are God's elect.

Much blessing to you, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you,